



# If we rebuild, will they come back?

Understanding how trust considerations influence workplace return intentions

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# Moving from respond to recover—and taking the leap of trust

**B**USINESS LEADERS ARE working hard to redesign, reorganize, and rebuild office spaces and work processes to ensure safety and compliance with new norms and regulations and to enable overall productivity once workers return to the office. But as organizations develop these comprehensive plans to make their office spaces work, questions linger: How likely is it that workers even want to return? What should business leaders expect? How should workers' intentions inform back-to-the-workplace plans?

Firms have good reason to be concerned about workers' likelihood of returning, as existing

research shows that fewer than a third (32%) believe they are highly likely to do so.<sup>1</sup> Hesitancy to return may be driven largely by a lack of trust—toward the employer,<sup>2</sup> toward colleagues, and toward others they are likely to interact with at the workplace.<sup>3</sup> Thus, as firms rethink and rebuild their office spaces, leaders should put the same level of effort into building or reestablishing trust with their workers. Trust is important not only in the short term but also in the longer term, as it is needed not only to get the workforce back into the workplace but also serves as a strong driver of workplace motivation and productivity.





# Charting the path back based on understanding both where workers were and where they are now

WHILE FIRMS HAVE been busily rethinking and rebuilding their workplaces, their recently displaced workforces have concurrently been rethinking and reworking where they get their work done and developing new routines and habits along the way—some which they may prefer to the old way of doing things.

To better understand not only workers' interest in returning to the workplace, but also help chart the ideal path forward, we used focus groups to gather information about workers' pre-COVID-19 workplace experience and satisfaction, their experience transitioning out of the office, their

current work experience and satisfaction, and return intentions and key drivers. Overall, the workers we interviewed have proven to be incredibly resilient, creative, and resourceful in establishing new remote-working routines—which for many appear to be more effective than they had ever imagined. Coupling these findings with insights from organizational and behavioral science, and in particular, literature related to trust, we set out to provide leaders with insights and guidance regarding not only the factors that are likely to increase the likelihood of workers returning, but also insights into what this return could and should likely look like.

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## DEFINING TRUST

Trust is defined as “our willingness to be vulnerable to the actions of others because we believe they have good intentions and will behave well toward us.”<sup>4</sup> We are willing to put our trust in others because we have faith that they have our best interests at heart, will not abuse us, and will safeguard our interests—and that doing so will result in a better outcome for all.

Trust is not a static, unchanging force that flows toward organizations from their stakeholders. Both trusting and being trustworthy require organizations and their leaders to make conscious, daily choices to invest in relationships that result in mutual value. Trust is a *tangible exchange of value*, and it is *actionable* and *human* across many dimensions.<sup>5</sup>

Leaders can build and maintain trust by acting with *competence and intent*. *Competence* refers to the ability to execute; to follow through on what you say you will do. *Intent* refers to the meaning behind a business leader's actions, taking decisive action from a place of genuine empathy and true care for stakeholders' wants and needs.

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# Yesterday's workplace

## Comradery, comforts, control, and commute

**A**S COMPANIES START to rethink and rebuild, it's useful for them to understand what worked for employees in their prior workplace as well as which aspects of it needed improvement. Our research identified four key factors that defined the workplace experience, for better or worse: comradery, comforts, control, and commute.

*The best part of going into work was seeing and catching up with other people—not just office colleagues—but other friends who worked nearby.<sup>6</sup>*

**Comradery.** Not surprisingly, our focus group participants indicated that colleagues or other people they interacted with throughout the day were a key positive component of their office experience. This finding is corroborated by external findings that suggest just having people in proximity can be beneficial whether it be for guidance, coffee breaks, or just joking around.<sup>7</sup>

*One of my favorite parts of being in the office? Our head partner bringing in coffee, fruit, and bagels.*

*In the office, my three monitors and other gadgets made certain parts of my job so much easier.*

**Comforts.** While a few workers we interviewed indicated they missed some of the technological tools they had access to in the office, it was more the case that our focus group participants mentioned missing the seemingly little things—not

the big things—from their office experience that added a “fun factor” to the day, such as the occasional chocolates, pastries, or birthday cakes, which allowed for an occasional “guilty pleasure.” It seemed that these personal touches—that not only demonstrate care for the workers but have a way of bringing them informally, yet collectively together—go a long way in improving the worker workplace experience.

*Once I got into my office, I could close the door and just focus and get my job done with no interruptions.*

**Control.** For many, especially those with kids or roommates, the office offered a sense of calm and control over their day and fewer distractions than at home.

*What do I miss most? Walking to the office. I would do this with my wife, who worked nearby.*

*What don't I miss? Easy: Taking rapid transit!*

**Commute.** Travel to and from the office appears to be the most polarizing aspect of the work experience, with some valuing it and others despising it. While business leaders could argue this shouldn't be considered part of the workplace experience, workers did not talk about their workplace experience or satisfaction without the commute coming up. To them these two are inextricably intertwined. Without the need to go into the office, there would be no commute.

# Transition and current state of affairs

Gadget grabbing, habit building, and colleague-closeness shifts

*As soon as that movie celebrity and his wife got it, that's when the virus became real ... that's when I started bringing things home from the office.*

**Transition? What transition?** When we asked about the “transition” out of the office, in many cases, what we got back was a laugh. The need to transition out of the office due to this unprecedented pandemic event came swiftly. However, during the days leading up to their offices closing, many were cognizant of the signals being sent by leadership, their communities, and cities and states, and started working on their own exit plans, taking some of their work home.

*The first one-and-a-half weeks were really hard, but after three weeks, I came to enjoy it.*

*Prior to the pandemic, my mother and I both lived alone. So that neither of us would have to go through this alone, I moved in with her.*

## **Working from home ... and making it work.**

As mentioned, just as firms had to respond quickly to the pandemic, so too have workers. And they have been rethinking and reworking the way they get their work done in their new virtual setting. Workers have proven not only extremely resilient, but also creative, by not only repurposing the dining room tables for new home offices but taking video calls from garages and laundry rooms to gain some silence (and an opportunity to focus) during the workday.

*Initially, the biggest thing I missed was my walk to and from the office. But then I told myself, why not make the walk in the morning anyway. Now, my walk is still the best part of my day, plus I don't have to carry my heavy bag!*

**Not just new work routines, but new lifestyle habits and rituals.** For many, working out of the office has afforded the opportunity to rethink not just how they get their work done, but also how they live their lives in terms of habits, routines, and rituals. Many, like our respondent quoted above, have found a way to coopt old behavior (walking to and from the office) to something not inextricably tied to the office (now just a general morning walk ritual).

*Before, I felt more connected to the organization than my geographically dispersed teammates. Now, I feel more connected to my actual teammates ...*

**Workforce engagement is still there—just with different colleagues.** Our workers are people—they have an innate need to connect with others.<sup>8</sup> Once again, our resilient and creative workers have found new routes and workarounds, this time forging new or deeper relationships with colleagues, or have renavigated how to nurture existing ones. As one worker noted, what she has lost by not having face-to-face interaction with colleagues at the office, she has made up for by strengthening her relationships with her geographically dispersed teammates.



# Return intention drivers

## Vaccinations, sanitation, transportation, and inclinations

CURRENT RESEARCH SUGGESTS less than a third (32%) of workers are highly likely to return when their office reopens.<sup>9</sup> Given this, we asked our focus group respondents about the factors that play into their decision to return. While the professionals we interviewed believed that their organization cared about their well-being, the key factors mentioned were the state of vaccines, office cleanliness (e.g., sanitation, janitorial and mechanical systems), and transportation—both external transportation (the commute) and within the office (how will they get to their floor and office space). And while return intentions largely boil down to safety, where our workers also varied between each other had to do with both their personal thresholds for what makes for a safe work environment and their personal interest in abandoning their once new, but now old, virtual work routines and habits that they have now grown accustomed to and perhaps fond of.

*Let's face it, isn't it the case that some of us won't be returning until there is a vaccine ... or pill of some sort?*

**Vaccinations:** Some workers—particularly those living with or caring for at-risk family members (e.g., the elderly or the immunocompromised)—brought up the issue of a vaccine or pill most often, whereas some younger workers did not bring this up at all.

*I need to take my computer back in to get fixed, but I just keep thinking about all the doorknob handles I would have to touch—even to put it in the locker they are suggesting.*

**Sanitation and ventilation:** A safe environment to return to includes cleanliness—both in terms of what workers can see and what goes on behind the scenes—and ventilation systems. This is consistent with other Deloitte research that explored which safety measures are table stakes for returning to work. The most important factors identified were regular cleaning of equipment and shared spaces by a cleaning service (64% of survey respondents) and regular spraying/fogging to disinfect shared spaces (60%).<sup>10</sup>

*You would be hard pressed to get on public transportation right now.*

**Transportation—to and from work.** Not surprisingly, a safe commute to and from the workplace seems to be a major concern, particularly for those in big cities who rely on public transportation. Indeed, recent research suggests that over a third of workers (34%) who previously took public transportation intend to find new ways to commute to work—when they do come back.<sup>11</sup>

*I am very nervous about elevators. How is this going to work? How long will we have to wait? We have two stairwells—they should make one for just going up, and one just for going down.*

*I'm not so worried about the people on my floor— ... it's those on other floors and in other departments I'm worried about.*

**Transportation—inside the workplace.** Workers also have questions about how they will

make it through the building once they are in the office, with elevators being a major area of concern: How many will be allowed to use one at a time? How will usage be monitored? What about stairwells? Hallways, and interactions with other colleagues are other points to consider. Indeed, recent Deloitte research has suggested that 60% of Americans don't trust others to social distance, which has implications for the workforce.<sup>12</sup>

*On a risk aversion scale, you can put me at the top ... given that I am primary caregiver for my mom – as well as myself. I am likely to be the last one to step back into the office.*

**Personal inclinations:** Internal thresholds. While nearly all workers value safety<sup>13</sup> and may express similar recurring themes for conditions that could help them decide on their return to office, not all possess the same penchant for returning—the bars for safety may be different for each individual. A recent article from Deloitte Digital suggests there are three distinct human mindsets with different levels of risk aversion, perceptions of safety, and circles of trust:<sup>14</sup>

- **Protectors:** Have the least amount of trust in others and maintain a small inner circle
- **Pragmatists:** Have a low amount of trust in the general public, but have a larger inner circle of people they trust
- **Prevailers:** Trust the public the most and feel comfortable with expanding their inner circle<sup>15</sup>

*I have a lot of roommates, so I take a lot of my video calls from the garage or in the laundry room.*

**Personal inclinations: Lifestyle factors.** Each worker had a different home environment and lifestyle prior to the pandemic, which has now translated into different work environments as well. For some, getting back to the office will be a welcome relief from the chaos or discomfort of working from home. For others, working from home has opened their eyes to not only a new way of working but also a new way of living. Thus, companies are no longer competing only with other companies to create a desirable workplace; they are also competing with workers' new home environments. Whichever the case, it's important employers demonstrate their humane intent in order to inspire the workforce in solving the challenges that come with new ways of working. Employees are 1.6x more likely to go above and beyond what is expected of their work and 1.5x to take on additional responsibility when their employer demonstrates humanity.<sup>16</sup>

**For others, working from home has opened their eyes to not only a new way of working but also a new way of living.**

# Reentry strategies built on a foundation of trust

Competence and care, calibration, communication, and collaboration

**G**IVEN THAT WORKERS are dealing with the pandemic in different ways and have different mindsets and challenges, how can organizations create both an environment of trust and provide a back-to-office experience that meets everyone's needs?

*We've had two medical doctors on our team calls explaining how the virus spreads and how things are likely going to work when we return to the office.*

**Competence.** While some things are out of businesses' control, there are still many others that are in the control of leaders—providing a sanitized work environment, respecting employees' different needs and concerns, communicating transparently, and infusing their actions in these areas with purpose and integrity.<sup>17</sup> Competence is a key component of trust, and organizations should communicate and demonstrate competence in areas they can control. Additionally, earning trust through competence and supporting capabilities can positively influence behaviors. Workers are 2.4x more likely to show up to work on time and 1.9x more likely to go out of their way to optimize how their work gets done when they believe their employer is capable.<sup>18</sup> One way in which organizations can highlight their competence is by crafting a COVID-19 response based on guidance from trusted authorities and emphasizing this in communications to customers, the workforce, and partners.

*Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care.*

— Teddy Roosevelt.<sup>19</sup>

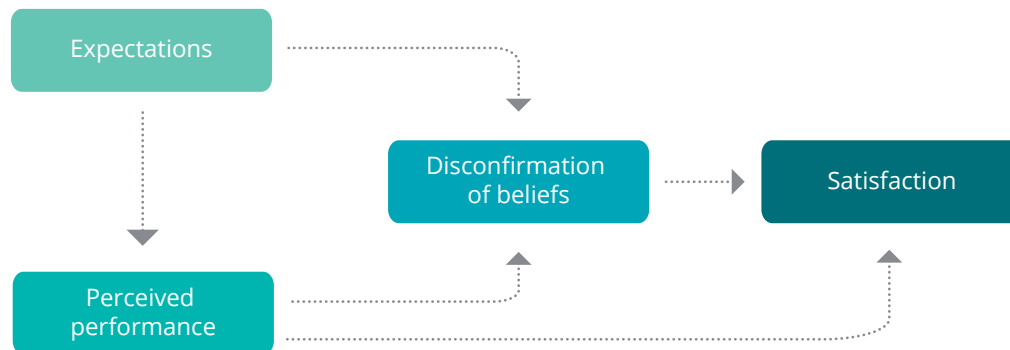
**Care.** Beyond competence, another critical dimension of building trust is proving to others that you have their best interest in mind.<sup>20</sup> Thus, while it is important to demonstrate competence, a treasure trove of well-cited information could potentially be discounted or ignored if workers don't believe the company genuinely cares about the well-being of its workers. Such care is also important to maintain worker satisfaction when facing difficult choices. When provided a safe environment, workers are over 1.7x more likely to be satisfied with their compensation and benefits when they believe their employer acts humanely and transparently.<sup>21</sup> To demonstrate care and sincere intentions, businesses should lead with not just safety plans but also empathy. They should demonstrate an understanding of the struggle everyone is facing during reopening as well as take ownership of safety precautions to enable workers to relax and trust the business to honor and uphold their health needs.

*What will things look like? Unsure. Probably pretty much the same.*

**Calibrate expectations.** When asked about what the workplace would look like when it was ready for them to return, workers, for the most part, were unsure of what to expect. In such a situation, while it may be tempting for organizations to want to overpromise, behavioral theory suggests this is not a good strategy. Specifically, the *expectancy*



FIGURE 1

**Expectancy disconfirmation model**

Source: Adapted from Richard L. Oliver, "A cognitive model of the antecedents and consequences of satisfaction decisions," *Journal of Marketing Research* 17, no. 4 (1980), pp. 460–9.

*disconfirmation theory* suggests that satisfaction level is derived from the gap between the expectations set and actual performance (figure 1).<sup>22</sup> Thus, while overpromising on what to expect in the new office might entice workers to make at least one return visit, not delivering on the promises could make subsequent future visits unlikely and kindle not only a dislike for the work environment, but more importantly, a lack of trust.

Perhaps even more challenging for firms is that they are not only competing with the expectations they are currently setting for the return experience, but also against the bar they set before the pandemic.<sup>23</sup> Thus, firms have a triple challenge: setting expectations correctly, competing with new home offices, and competing with memories of the prior work environment.

*The monthly calls with leadership have been helpful in instilling trust in leadership. My wife noted that her firm doesn't do anything like that.*

*I don't fault the firm for how we "transitioned" out; I still trust them ... this was unprecedented.*

**Communicate clearly and transparently.**

Deloitte's recent consumer industry safety and cleanliness survey has revealed that to be more comfortable in a work environment, workers typically desire frequent and relevant communication, specifically around the precautions taken for their health. They want agency to access information, make decisions for themselves, and engage in a digital experience.<sup>24</sup>

It is also important to communicate commitment to worker well-being and experience. Deloitte Consulting LLP's Rosemary Williams who has supported crisis communications working for and now consulting to multiple US government agencies notes, "[I]n times of heightened or prolonged stress such as the COVID-19 pandemic, you simply cannot overcommunicate. The stakes

are higher, timelines shorter, and messages increasingly challenging. It is critical that an organization's leadership understand what is motivating and driving their workers to ensure their messaging is internalized and trusted by communicating with authenticity, transparency, empathy and logic." Survey employees to understand their desire for frequency, content, and transparency. Message overload can be prevented by using an "opt-in" system that meets each employee's specific communication needs.

It is equally important to back up words with visible daily evidence that the organization is capable and executing against a plan to provide a safe work environment. For example, more than 80% of workers indicate visible cleaning in the workplace is very or somewhat important to them.<sup>25</sup> This suggests that providing off-hours office-cleaning services, as in the past, may not be enough. Providing them during traditional office hours along with technology-based safety precautions such as preentry health screenings can help alleviate workers' anxiety.

As the challenges and debates surrounding bringing students back to the classroom have made it obvious, there is no easy fix for bringing people back to work. Firms should acknowledge these complexities and explain how they are trying to control what is within their control—but also show that they are cognizant of what is outside of their control.

*I definitely intend to go back ... but it likely won't be to the same amount as before ... just for certain situations.*

*Little did I know how much I would like working from home ... who knew it could be this way!*

**Collaboration and creativity.** Redesigning the workplace or at least the plans for worker return

should be a collaborative cocreation between leaders and workers. This means giving the worker agency to take safety actions themselves and decisions about when, for what reasons, and how often to return to the workplace. It also means giving them agency to create new enticements that make returning to the office a compelling opportunity.

Don't be afraid to experiment and problem-solve. For example, one of the most frequent concerns from our focus group was the lack of cleanliness in public transportation systems. Businesses cannot influence the sanitation of public spaces, but they can help workers find workarounds. Possible strategies to consider might include providing temporary parking subsidies, company car allowances, private bus services, or leasing smaller office spaces in suburban locations closer to where many workers live. Real estate developers are also contributing to these ideas and support systems.<sup>26</sup>

Workers have formed new habits, and some have fallen in love with their new home offices. Work and habits have solidified during their time away from the office. If the goal of an organization is to make coming back to the office compelling for workers, companies need to work with employees to identify ways to provide more upside to the office experience. One benefit of the office experience that all our focus group members noted is the human connection. Over time, even "protectors" will likely miss these connections. While the home environment has exceeded many expectations, feedback from our focus groups, backed by recent research, indicates that home doesn't allow for the same office connections and video calls don't seem to always fill the void.<sup>27</sup> Organizations can make a return to the office an opportunity to reestablish these all-important connections. For some, this may mean coming into the office periodically, but even infrequent visits may provide some benefits for workers and organizations.

# Parting “reentry” thoughts

*... Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.*

— Reinhold Niebuhr

Embarking on the journey back to the office during this pandemic requires that ever-elusive blend of serenity, courage, and wisdom.<sup>28</sup> For some, the return is a positive and the safety concerns can be addressed and managed. For others, a return is out of the question for a multitude of health and safety reasons. For all in between, there are questions and uncertainties that continue to ebb and flow.

Business leaders cannot control the pandemic and other forces beyond their sphere of influence—nor should they try to. And workers understand that a lot of what is going on is outside of the control of the company. Another factor out of leaders’ control is workers’ enthusiasm to come back to the workplace. As we noted, some are nervous due to safety reasons and some have created new environments they value. However, it is also refreshing to note that it is often the little things in the workplace that matter more to workers than the big things—that make the office fun, special, and positive.

Just as workplaces have evolved, so have workers. Thus, in many respects, we will never “return” to the office in which we worked. The exit in March could be compared to a revolution. The journey back will, in contrast, be more of an evolution. Even for those that return first, there will be a transition to acceptance and engagement. The pandemic has changed everyone in different ways based on the organization’s circumstances and their own. This opens opportunities for organizations and employees to work in new ways with the potential to be more effective than before. For that potential to be realized, organizations will need to engender trust among their workers, and workers will need to engender trust between each other.

All who do make the journey back to the office, be it sooner or later, are placing their trust in their organization to make the work environment as safe as it can be. The good news is that there may be an existing wellspring of trust that leaders and close colleagues will do what they can to protect one another. Now is the time for organizations to commit to earn and build on that trust and meet this responsibility with competence and intent.

**It is also refreshing to note that it is often the little things in the workplace that matter more to workers than the big things—that make the office fun, special, and positive.**



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