

WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE ?

Because It Can Help Employers Compassionately Plan for Returning to the Office

July 27, 2021

By Sunita Sah, PhD, KPMG Professor of Management Studies, University of Cambridge

After a year of social distancing, mask wearing and – for millions – working from home, many employers are eager to bring their staff back to the office. But for many, the prospect of readjusting to in-person work is a daunting one.

[A recent survey](#) found that out of 4,553 office workers in five different countries, every single person reported feeling anxious about the idea of returning to in-person work.

Employers face a conflict of interest. On the one hand, they want to look after their employees' health and reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission. While on the other, they're motivated by financial incentives to justify expensive office rents and have their employees physically on hand for meetings and discussions or to simply monitor their working time.



Credit: [Glenn D'Hondt](#)

But putting pressure on employees to return to the office might be creating more anxiety. For those surveyed, the top causes of return-to-work stress included being exposed to COVID-19, the loss of work flexibility, the added commute, having to wear a mask while in the office, and a need for childcare.

“Putting pressure on employees to return to the office might be creating more anxiety.”

[behavior](#). When people aren't wasting hours in traffic, the free time unlocked from commutes can lead to more rested, happier, healthier and productive employees.

What's worrying, though, is that 56% of respondents in the recent study reported that their organization hadn't asked for their opinions about return-to-work policies and procedures. Such a breakdown in communication between employees and employers could create anxiety for those employees who don't want, or are not yet ready, to return to their physical workplaces. They may worry that voicing their concerns to return to work will signal distrust in their managers' decision to reopen for in-person work.

I've studied advice-giving and advice-taking for over a decade and found that people getting advice often struggle to

signal distrust to their advisor. People often feel anxiety to express disagreement with or defy an advisor, a boss, manager, leader or authority figure. Rejecting advice makes employees anxious because it can insinuate that they think the other person is incompetent, biased or even corrupt.

I call this distinct type of anxiety [insinuation anxiety](#). It arises when people worry that not complying with another person's wishes may be interpreted as a signal of distrust.

Insinuation anxiety

Across a [series of studies](#) investigating this type of anxiety, my collaborators and I found that patients frequently follow medical advice, even if they believe their doctor to have a conflict of interest.

“People often feel anxiety to express disagreement with or defy an advisor, a boss, manager, leader or authority figure.”

Imagine someone's trying to sell you some advice, an opinion or a product, and the seller says: “I have a conflict of interest. I recommend you follow my advice, but I should let you know that I get paid more if you follow my advice.” You might think such a disclosure would decrease trust and compliance with such advice – after all there's now some uncertainty as to the quality of that advice.

However, I found that although conflict of interest disclosures do indeed decrease trust in advice—arguably the “correct” response to such disclosures—they can also counterintuitively increase compliance with that distrusted advice.

Why? Because the other person now feels greater pressure to comply with advice they do not trust, as rejecting it insinuates that the other person has been corrupted by the conflict of interest and is untrustworthy. People are reluctant to signal distrust in another person. Insinuation anxiety persists regardless of the size of the conflict of interest, but it can be reduced if people can make their decisions in private, away from the pressure of their advisor or employer.

As employees navigate the shift back to in-person work, employers should consider the role of insinuation anxiety increasing pressure on their workers to reluctantly comply with new in-person work policies. If employees feel unable to express their discomfort or choose more flexible working options, organizations may end up [losing their best talent](#) to workplaces with more open communication and flexibility.



SUNITA SAH, PhD, researches institutional corruption, ethical decision-making, bias, transparency, improving decisions, influence and advice – in particular how people alter their behavior as a result of conflicts of interest and disclosure policies. Dr. Sah holds a PhD and MS in Organizational Behavior from Carnegie Mellon University, an MBA with Distinction from London Business School, an MB ChB (UK equivalent to the US MD) in Medicine and Surgery, and a BSc (Hons) in Psychology from the University of Edinburgh. In addition to her research work, Dr. Sah recently served as a Commissioner on the National Commission of Forensic Science, and is a member of the editorial board of the journal *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*. Prior to joining Cornell University, Dr. Sah held academic positions at Georgetown, Duke and Harvard Universities. Before entering academia, Dr. Sah worked as a Medical Doctor for the UK's National Health Service, before going on to be Senior Consultant and European Marketing Director at IMS Health Consulting, and then Managing Director [CEO] of Organisational Dynamics Ltd.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the original article, [“Mental health: pressure to return to the office could be making employees more anxious.”](#)



@COSSADC • #WhySocialScience

www.whysocialscience.com • www.cossa.org