

Refusing to Return to the Office

Many leaders who had hoped to bring workers back en masse are facing a backlash—particularly from parents.

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The preparations have been long and expensive, with companies spending months remodeling work areas and updating safety protocols to get their offices ready for returning workers. The hope for corporate leaders: coax a nice-sized group of workers back as the leaves change color and the temperatures cool.

But for some firms, hope is all they have to show for the effort. While some workers are coming back, most remain too worried about the ongoing pandemic to risk exposure. And experts say a lot of the resistance is coming from parents, who are still struggling with back-to-school issues. “It’s telling how people don’t want to come back to the office, whether they are parents or not,” says [Esther Colwill](#), president of Korn Ferry’s [Global Technology Industries](#) practice.

A recent Korn Ferry poll of 1,000 professionals found that 53% expected to be back in their offices by year’s end. Already, some big-name finance and retail firms have swayed people back and plan for many more to return. But in a recent survey of 15 major employers that collectively employ about 2.6 million people, more than half said they already had decided to postpone their back-to-work plans, apparently in part because workers were refusing to come in.

It has put leaders in a tough place. Besides having billions of dollars tied up in leases and other real estate costs, many organizations generally worry whether all work can be converted into “home work”—and if remote work is stalling creativity and production. “Executives I’m talking to are getting concerned about a drop in sophistication and a rise in complacency,” says [Dennis Carey](#), vice chair and coleader of Korn Ferry’s [Board and CEO Services](#) practice. Getting people back into their traditional workplace, according to these executives, could keep this lack of productivity from getting worse or becoming permanent.

Of course, employees have plenty of reason to fear for their health and safety, or another upheaval in their work-life balance. That’s particularly true for working parents, who feel the timing couldn’t be worse to be asked back. After all, many

schools are still ironing out if they will teach classes in-person or remotely, or embrace a hybrid approach.

There's anxiety with all the approaches. Many parents are loath to leave their kids at home alone during the day, even if they're supposed to be doing schoolwork, while others worry about their kids getting infected at school. "You could wind up with hundreds of people sick and shutting the school back down in a few weeks," Colwill says, and then working parents would be stuck in a situation similar to the one in spring.

Experts suggest that leaders expressly talk about the decision to reopen the office and, importantly, why open the office now. At the same time, leaders need to explain the features and procedures they've added to the office to help employees feel safe and lessen their risk to the virus, says [Mark Royal](#), a senior director for [Korn Ferry Advisory](#).

Leaders should also sound out employees to determine the biggest concerns about coming back to the office. If using public transportation is a worry, perhaps the company can subsidize parking costs. Extra childcare benefits or allowing a parent to hire someone to watch the kids at home may also make some workers more comfortable about returning to the office.

For now, some firms are merely asking for volunteers to come back, if they are comfortable with that. Carey says one manufacturer he works with rejiggered entire shifts, asking for volunteers who wanted to work at times that were most convenient given their home situation. So far it's worked well, he says, improving the firm's productivity while still allowing the company to establish and maintain effective social distancing rules at the office. "They're creatively reutilizing the workday," he says.

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