

The impact of reverse culture shock, or re-entry on our return to work

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I don't know if you've been feeling this way too, but lately I've been a bit anxious to "go back to normal" or pre-pandemic life. Sometimes I can't tell if it's just nervous excitement, general uneasiness, or a combination of both. It's a feeling that I've had before many times, having had the privilege to live in Europe for extended periods of time, adjusting to a different culture, and then later returning back to the US. While I know both its familiarity and its stages, I also know that "reverse culture shock" is real and can cause a range of emotional and social challenges from isolation and withdrawal, to feeling a lack of belonging in either culture, and sometimes even depression if left unaddressed.

As we begin to emerge from the global pandemic and return to the workplace, reverse culture shock or re-entry will be a common issue for many employees. Once thought to only apply to living abroad, it's defined as the emotional and psychological distress of returning to the "home" culture. I argue that it also applies to the world's workers who will be, and are being, asked to return to pre-covid working environments.

The events of the pandemic, and the strategies created to keep the workday productive and flowing, have changed the very fabric of the pre-covid workplace. The workplace and its employees have fundamentally changed, especially for employees' perception of where and how they do work. Employees have adapted to a whole new workplace culture: the home workplace. Now, they will need to re-adapt to personal schedules, daily routines, commutes, picking up kids from daycare or school, childcare, and running errands. The routines created in the last 18 months from home and on a flexible timetable will now be jammed back into a traditional 9-5 workday. Their expectations about what works and what is not OK for them have evolved.

Reverse culture shock is divided into four stages:

1. Honeymoon: People feel excited to get out and return to pre-pandemic life.
2. Frustration: People are confronted by the workplace and daily routines that they perhaps didn't like to begin with, and any trauma surrounding work may be reactivated even just by thinking about the return.
3. Readjustment: Employees begin the process of deciding what new beliefs or priorities they want to keep and which of the old beliefs or priorities they want to release. This could lead to people leaving their jobs because it lacks alignment with their newfound, newly adjusted values.
4. Adaptation / Integration: People integrate their new and old beliefs and priorities to design an improved version of the ideal workplace - a better new normal. This could be seen as organizational adaptation, or finding an employer that meets the new criteria.

While not every employee will experience reverse culture shock, the effects on those who do can cause many challenges for organizations. Criticism and judgement about how return-to-

work policies will be implemented could frustrate employees and lead to their projection of discontentment onto leadership and other colleagues. Tensions that exist between new perspectives developed while working from home and the original workplace can exacerbate existing silos and office politics. Workers who already felt marginalized for their gender, race or sexual orientation may feel the divide deepen. The sheer exhaustion of re-adjusting to old workplace routines, not to mention managing logistical tasks, could prove to be an accelerant to burnout. Finally, resistance to returning to the traditional workplace may be a precursor to withdrawal and the avoidance of the people and activities associated with work, leading to an increase in resignations and absenteeism.

It comes as no surprise that the biggest areas likely to see these effects will be in talent retention and productivity. Also not surprising will be the resulting skyrocketing healthcare costs related to employee stress, burnout, and ensuing mental health issues.

In Craig Storti's book, *"The Art of Coming Home"*, he discusses the variables that can affect re-entry.

Storti states that involuntary re-entry (in this case, making employees return to the workplace full-time with no other option) is much worse than offering voluntary re-entry. Likewise, he states that the length of the time of the overseas stay (again, in this case the length of the pandemic and working from home) has a direct impact on the ease of re-entry. The longer the stay (18 months for most), the harder it may be for employees to leave their homes for the workplace.

The re-entry environment plays a pivotal role for employees, and will in the coming months of the post-pandemic movement. The more familiar and supportive the organization, the easier this transition will be for all involved. This means that organizations need to be flexible and offer a variety of options for returning to work, such as allowing people to continue to work from home, or returning in a phased or hybrid format. It also means that organizations need to have support systems in place that are clearly developed so employees experiencing transition difficulties can obtain what they need to re-adapt without unnecessary delay or suffering. Managers need to learn how to recognize re-entry challenges to employee emotional well-being and create an environment that is supportive while at the same time encouraging self-care.

On a grander scale, organizations may have to reassess their culture to determine what needs to be retooled to focus more on employee well-being.

What are you doing to ensure a smooth reentry process for your employees?

What support will you have in place for those employees experiencing difficulties in the transition?

Is your culture designed to prioritize employee well-being?

As a partner with Change-Ready Solutions, Certified Professional Leadership Development Coach, and affiliate of The Table Group through CAPA PRO, Diana partners with organizations to create innovative solutions in the workplace and help employees feel fulfilled and successful in their jobs and careers. Reach out to clientcare@changereadysolutions.com to learn more about how Change-Ready Solutions can help your organization.