

# Returning to Work

## *Managing Employee Emotions is Crucial*

By John C. Pompe

**W**orkforce reductions of the magnitude seen in recent years can be a very challenging experience for business leaders. While the economy is always rather uncertain, many laid-off employees *have* returned to work. This prompts many executives to assume that the pain incurred from job losses has disappeared.

The truth is – a return to work requires a period of adjustment. Whether the absence is due to a layoff, medical issue or a prolonged holiday, returning to work after being away for weeks or even months can be an anxious and difficult time. Most of us can relate to this, even if we've never been away from work for an extended period of time.

Consider what it feels like to return to work after a long holiday or vacation. The simple act of driving to work or entering your work area, something you've done hundreds or even thousands of times, can feel slightly foreign and produce minor anxiety.

Now, consider having been out of work for six months or even a year or more – and bear in mind that you left work not because of a vacation or an unanticipated illness, but because you were among those laid off? What would it feel like to get back to work then?

### **Managing Emotional Responses**

When laid-off employees return to work, there is a sense of relief among both business leaders and those being called back to work.

Recalling former workers and hiring new ones are signs that indicate a significant improvement in the business climate. Moreover, the presence of additional employees may allow organizations to resume work that had been put on hold.

Employees going back to work will likely feel relieved from a financial standpoint and also

excited that they can be productive and get their careers back on track.

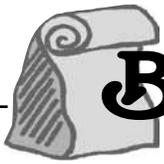
Unfortunately, emotions don't stop there. Employee recalls following layoffs typically are marked by complex professional, emotional, and interpersonal responses that, unless managed carefully, can have a negative impact on employees and the workplace.

Supervisors should be aware of the emotional reactions they may see from employees returning from a lengthy layoff or other period of unemployment. It's important for managers to be aware that, like any change, returning to work is a process that plays out over time. Employees may even exhibit some reactions that seem contradictory.

### **Understanding Employee Behaviors**

Employees returning to work may demonstrate one or more of the following job-related behaviors:

- Exhilaration, enthusiasm, and high levels of motivation;
- An exaggerated desire to please or impress others;
- Anxiety and fear;
- Lack of confidence;
- Social anxiety, isolation or withdrawal;
- A reluctance to engage with others or take on special work, particularly if the work is highly visible;
- Problems with memory, concentration or focus;
- Increased sensitivity to criticism, discussions about performance, or talk of economic problems;
- Difficulty getting along with others;
- Anger, sarcasm or cynicism;
- Higher levels of absenteeism or medical complaints;
- Performance problems stemming from a



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variety of factors, including erosion of skills; and

- A distracted, fatigued or tired appearance.

*Exercise: Use this space below to note if any of these behaviors are occurring in your employees – and if so, which ones?*

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Why would supervisors see such reactions? After all, these employees have been brought back to work, presumably because the economy has improved. What could possibly be the problem?

It may be helpful if supervisors try to understand their employees' experiences so they can better recognize potential problems and respond appropriately. Bear in mind that employees who were laid off during the economic downturn went through one of the most stressful and challenging experiences of their lives. Employers and supervisors won't know how they coped during this period. In most cases, employees will have coped well and will conduct themselves appropriately. However, there is potential for employees to experience:

- Anger;
- Resentment; and
- A host of physical and/or emotional problems.

These feelings may – or may not – have been resolved by the time they return to work.

Employees may also feel a sense of shame or embarrassment following their time away from work. They may have a hard time facing their co-workers or engaging socially for fear that they will be viewed as “less than” or non-essential.

### **Survivor Guilt**

Likewise, employees and supervisors who had continued working may feel uncomfortable around

those returning, as though they had done something wrong or should feel guilty for continuing to work. This is sometimes referred to as “survivor guilt.”

At first, surviving employees may experience a sense of relief that they're still working. However, over time, feelings may turn negative as employees are left with even bigger workloads now that their colleagues have left, as well as fearing for the future loss of *their* job.

Survivor guilt may result in anxiety and animosity for those who may have learned to “do more with less.” In the worst cases, tension can develop between those who were laid off and those who weren't.

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### **Lack of Confidence**

A loss of confidence is also normal when returning to work – the “use-it-or-lose-it” principle is readily seen. Basically:

- Skills may erode over time;
- Employees can simply forget parts of their work; and
- Jobs can change in ways that require new skills.

Confidence may be particularly low when employees haven't been working at all during the layoff. Supervisors may have to regain an appreciation of the skills of the returning employee. Coaching, training, and/or simply the passing of time are usually needed to refresh both skills and working relationships.

## Deconditioning & Burnout

“Deconditioning” (i.e. a reduction in employee hardiness or stamina) may also occur over time when employees are not challenged by daily job demands. Moreover, some employees may experience bouts of fatigue and burnout upon their return to work. As a result, a period of adjustment to the physical and mental demands of daily work may be necessary.

## Changes in Leadership

Compounding the need to “shake off the rust” are changes in leadership and organizational structures. Employees returning to their former jobs may be greeted by:

- New work duties;
- New functional areas; and/or
- New leadership.

These changes can complicate their efforts to manage their emotions.

## Financial Woes?

Employees returning to work may also be experiencing financial problems stemming from their time away from work. As a result, they may be anxious or distracted, and they may need to conduct personal business during work hours. They may be resentful toward their employer for laying them off in the first place, and may see this as the cause of their financial problems.

Supervisors should be alert for signs of possible financial concerns and should also consider that employees’ motivations for working may have changed during their time away from work. For instance, whereas employees may have been highly engaged in the company’s success and their own career advancement, they may now be motivated merely by the need to earn money.

## Suggestions for Supervisors

How can supervisors, managers, and other business leaders effectively manage employees who are returning to working following a prolonged layoff? The following are several suggestions that employee assistance professionals can share with business leaders to assist them during this uncertain time.

❖ **Open lines of communication with existing employees before the returning employees arrive.** Discuss the impact on workplace teams and their work. Educate them about the difficulties that can accompany a return from a layoff or job loss and encourage them to be supportive and engaged with new and returning employees. Make certain that all workers understand the state of the business, the rationale for employee recalls, goals for the future, and expectations for employees’ work and conduct.

❖ **Spend time with each employee returning from a layoff.** Don’t intrude into their personal lives, but show a genuine interest in their return. Acknowledge the difficulties and anxiety they may be experiencing, and try to gauge their emotional responses about returning to work. *Referrals to the employee assistance program should be routine.*

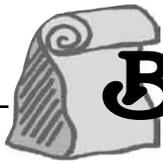
❖ **Set clear performance expectations and goals for returning employees, but allow ample time for the “settling in” process.** Understand that anxiety and loss of skills may impede performance in the short term. However, do not insulate returning employees from challenging work or give them only menial tasks. Hardiness is not built by avoiding possible stress. Moreover, supervisors must also acknowledge that they may lack trust in new and returning employees. Be ready to provide them with *reasonable* challenges and opportunities for success *soon after* they start.

## Summary

Clearly, employees returning to work after an extended period will experience diverse and complex emotions and behaviors. Regardless of the nature of an employee’s response, it’s important for supervisors to be prepared to assist workers during this adjustment period.

Employee assistance professionals should be consulted at every phase of the recall process in order to support both managers *and* employees. ■

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## Succeeding in Today's Economy

According to Laura Harris, a nationally renowned speaker, the answer for small business owners in today's "operating lean and mean" uncertain economic times is to hire and retain the right staff. The following are her tips to retain and nurture employees who think more like owners:

❖ **Every company needs a foundation of uniformly enforced rules and guidelines on which to agree.** Create a detailed employee handbook and stick to the guidelines so everyone (including you) knows the company policy. Having rules in writing helps the employees understand what is expected of them so they can succeed as a team member.

❖ **Invest in your employees' education by paying for courses and offering time off to take classes.** Rather than worry your team member will get so smart they'll leave or want a raise – worry your business will remain stagnant if you don't invest in employee education and they don't grow in their current level of expertise.

❖ **Help your employees put their families first.** Allow time off for children and parents when it's needed. Putting family first doesn't detract from the job – it creates a well-balanced work environment for the boss and the employees.

❖ **Hire responsible people, take the time to train them well and give them room to work.** Micromanaging stifles creativity, creates second-guessing, and it leads to stress for both the owner and the employee.

❖ **Be loyal to your staff and they will be loyal to you.** Spend time investing in the right

person so they stay with you. A resignation or firing is disruptive to the flow of business and bad for the morale of everyone remaining on the team.

❖ **In some cases, it's not the employee that needs to be fired – it's the client.** Know what type of client gives the organization the highest rate of return and is the most hassle free. Gear advertising and public relations toward taking on new clients like these. Put another way, reel in the big fish, and throw the small ones back!

The following are Harris' *hiring* tips:

❖ **Never hire a prospective employee with an unprofessional phone voice or sloppy appearance.** The first impression you have of a prospective employee is the same first impression a client will have of your company.

❖ **When interviewing, include introducing the potential employee to key staff** so you know how the team members will interact. This process can be invaluable.

❖ **Hire an inexperienced person you can train to mesh with your style of leadership.** People with extensive experience often have old habits and pre-conceived ways of doing things. Training someone from scratch means you can mold them to perform the way you prefer.

❖ **Hire someone with different strengths and weaknesses than your existing team** rather than hiring someone just based on how much you like them. Adding staff should *expand* what your business has to offer. ■

*Laura Harris is also the author of the business self-help book, Surrender to Win. For more information, visit [www.lauraharris.com](http://www.lauraharris.com).*