

LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF EQUITY — RETURN TO WHAT?



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After a year and a half of hunkering down, carefully quarantining, social bubbling, and generally acting like hermit crabs, the world—and the workforce—is slowly getting back on track. Just as the start of the pandemic was traumatic, reentry into the workplace following an unprecedented global crisis feels similarly jarring. For attorneys who have had the privilege of working from home,¹ the transition back into the office is wrought with anxiety. In fact, 37 percent of managers say most of their employees are anxious about returning to the office.²

With many law firms targeting a Fall return date,³ all this nervous energy is being channeled into "reentry anxiety."⁴ Reentry anxiety comes in two main forms. First and foremost are the obvious underlying safety concerns. What happens if the vaccine suddenly wears off? What if there is a new vaccine-resistant variant? Or an entirely new deadly virus? Second, after being relatively isolated for the last 18 months, almost everyone is experiencing some level of social anxiety. Psychologically, humans have perceived each other as threats in a way that does not come with a handy on/off switch. The brain's amygdala, which identifies potential threats, is currently stuck in "fight vs. flight" overdrive. As the kids these days would say, everyone is "sus" (suspect). It's unclear exactly how this collective post-traumatic stress will

impact office dynamics; however, experts suggest it could lead to increased irritability and low motivation.⁵ Whatever happens, it will take time for everyone's brains to be rewired.⁶

Returning to the office may prove particularly frustrating for those individuals who have enjoyed working from home. A significant percentage of younger workers—63 percent—appreciate the lifestyle that working from home affords them.⁷ Specifically, millennials "think it is more convenient to work from home, and nearly half said they don't mind staying in their homes for long periods."⁸ Regardless of age, transitioning back into the office will result in the loss of a significant chunk of personal time. During the pandemic, commute times were replaced with extra time in the mornings for anything from sleeping in to working out, from getting a jump start on billable hours to enjoying a few additional minutes with family in the morning.

Further, with return dates coinciding with the start of school, working parents are particularly anxiety-ridden. From a health and safety standpoint, there is still cause for concern. The coronavirus will still be here and young children still won't be vaccinated. With COVID safety-measures declining, adults will be at an increased risk of infection and, even if the infection is

mild, could unknowingly transmit it to a child. It only takes one child to pose a threat to an entire school, thereby prompting a closure. Parents well know that any semblance of routine can be upended on a moment's notice with the slightest sniffle.

Many parents are also stressed out, with just cause, about their children's mental health. The pandemic and the concurrent social isolation triggered anxiety, depression, obesity, and other related health issues in a lot of children and teens. With all this baggage, school reintegration will prove challenging for students and teachers alike. Getting kids up to speed will involve more than just remedial lesson plans; it will require the remediation of self-esteem, too.

Despite all of this worry, there is a burning desire to return to some semblance of pre-pandemic life. According to a study conducted by Arlington research, 73 percent of respondents reported feeling "worse overall" as a result of working remotely during the pandemic.⁹ Younger attorneys routinely express frustration about working from home full-time because of the lack of mentorship, social isolation, and the merger of work/life boundaries. Older attorneys miss the spontaneous collaboration and hands-on assistance they had in the office.

Many law firms are offering hybrid working accommodations in an effort to cater to the different needs of their attorneys and remain attractive to candidates in a competitive legal market. For example, in late May 2021, Dechert unveiled a flexible work policy with a half-remote option starting September 13th. This decision was made after a survey of its employees confirmed that they generally valued the flexibility of working virtually "at least some of the time" and that supervisors had developed "trust [in] their people to be effective, regardless of their location."¹⁰ While these new flex-schedules seem enticing, nebulous expectations can also be stressful. What does the firm mean when it expects employees to spend "at least half their time" in the office? What if a client or practice group leader has different expectations? What if the hybrid models change unexpectedly, once again upending childcare needs?

There is one consistent theme that underlies all of these concerns—the fear of uncertainty. To combat reentry anxiety, individuals have to learn how to tolerate uncertainty. According to motivation expert Dr. Carol S. Dweck, in her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*,¹¹ fixing self-perception is the first step. People have one of two types of mindsets: fixed or growth. For someone with a fixed mindset, change can be difficult because they are locked into a belief that they are only good at certain things. When stuck in this mindset, much time is wasted repeatedly proving one's value by operating solely within a comfort zone and avoiding challenges. Conversely, an individual with a growth mindset welcomes change. By acknowledging the limits of their knowledge, demonstrating a desire to learn, and welcoming challenges and criticism, these individuals view uncertainty as an opportunity. Perfectionistic lawyers, who seek validation from their successes and—let's face it—hate to lose, may find it particularly challenging to adopt a growth mindset.

Though there is no magic bullet that flips a fixed mindset into a growth mindset, New York Times bestselling author Lindsey Pollak explains that there is a magic word: "yet." When faced with a seemingly insurmountable obstacle, reframe negative self-talk by adding the word "yet" to the end of a sentence. For example, I can't eat an entire box of donuts—yet.

With regard to embracing uncertainty, in her new post-pandemic book, *Recalculating: Navigate Your Career Through the Changing World of Work*,¹² Pollak explains the importance of accepting things that cannot be controlled, such as the economy, virus variants, emergency client requests, and other people. Instead, spend more time focusing on what can be controlled: attitude, work ethic, daily habits, and boundaries. One pro tip Pollak offers to help facilitate the transition back into the office is to talk directly about communication and work styles with "your stakeholders"—the people who really count—whether that is a direct supervisor or a team of employees. What is the senior partner's preferred method of communication? Do they prefer to communicate via email or phone, text or Zoom? Do they want frequent updates or just the end product?

What days or times is face-time most helpful for the team to feel supported, motivated, and unified? What is the preferred back-up plan if an emergency arises and someone cannot make it into the office? Work a different day in the office, work from home, or take time off? Knowing and communicating one's own boundaries during these discussions will allow everyone to regain some semblance of peace.

For parents, assuming a growth mindset is not only beneficial on a personal level, it sets an excellent exemplar for children by framing change as something to embrace, not fear—a lesson that is particularly important as children are coping with their own reentry anxiety. In addition, children process reality by relying on the emotions transmitted by the adults who care for them. This is a concept called “emotional contagion.”¹³ Essentially, parents can choose to chill out or freak out. Choose wisely because kids will model that behavior.

Here are a few practical tips for everyone to get to the Zen end-game.

Practice makes perfect

Or at least more comfortable. Master the logistics of the return to the office. Go in a few times before the office start date. Locate a back-up parking lot in case the usual one is full. Can't go in? Do a practice run at home to get used to the new morning routine,

whether that includes waking up an hour earlier, rescheduling a workout, getting dressed in work attire, or actually applying makeup for the first time in 18 months.

Adopt the M&M approach

Integrate movement and mindfulness into each day. (A few chocolate M&M's wouldn't hurt either.) Mindfulness can come in many forms. Meditate, read a good book, listen to an uplifting podcast, or sit outside for a few minutes. Some happiness boosters include Sarah Blondin's meditations on the (free!) Insight Timer app, any podcasts or books by Brené Brown, and the podcasts Happier with Gretchen Rubin and We Can Do Hard Things, hosted by Glennon Doyle.

Start small

Small changes build up over time and are more sustainable. So listen to five minutes of a motivational podcast, wake up 10 minutes earlier, or work on getting into the office regardless of time.

Just remember, reintegration into the workplace is not an event, it is a process. It won't always be flawless and it will evolve over time. However, with the right mindset, healthy habits, and open communication, the work train will eventually be back on track. Perhaps even headed toward a more fulfilling destination. 🍀

Notes

- 1 As a parent of three children who attended cyber school throughout the pandemic, I admit working from home feels more like a prison than a privilege some days. There are also days I would welcome the regular meal service and occasional solitary confinement that prison has to offer. However, I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge how lucky I am to still be employed at all, let alone being able to do so in sweats from the comfort of my home.
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