

Returning to normal and the office?



I'm not so sure

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As August approached I was looking forward to a return to campus and teaching my fall class to our University's seniors. I had the foresight (i.e. blind luck) to not commit to teaching in the 2020-2021 academic year and was happy to have dodged that bullet. The course I teach is a highly personal and interactive one and I couldn't imagine fostering the same connections for the class while we were all masked and socially distant. But just a couple of weeks ago while prepping for class, looking forward to seeing my colleagues at the Center in-person, and discarding the masks that were scattered everywhere on the homefront, life took yet another unexpected turn.

The Delta Variant surged and the responses from organizations were as varied as one could imagine. There are:

- Mandates that all employees and students must be vaccinated and subsequent lawsuits and protests pushing back on these mandates.
- Required masks indoors regardless of vaccination status countered by public assumptions that we don't need to wear masks since we're all vaccinated.

- Proclamations that “We are opening in September regardless of what’s happening with the virus” followed by others stating, “We’re pushing back opening until November or the beginning of 2022, or indefinitely.”

It is all head spinning, and the whiplash we’re experiencing from “let’s get back to normal” to the surge of 100,000 new cases a day has made it virtually impossible to figure out what’s next.

What happened over the past year on the work and home front has also been highly varied and confusing. Much depended on what industry you were in and how your employer responded. For the laid off workers who were in the industries most adversely impacted, there was no work and resulting financial stress. For essential workers, it was “show up for work,” which brought health risks and raised concerns about their children’s well-being. For knowledge workers who were parents, the combination of working from home and doing full-time caregiving and homeschooling simultaneously led to burnout for many. While the circumstances varied widely, the result for all of these groups was the same - **major stress**. The US mental health statistics bore this out for all groups, with the [incidence of mental illness episodes skyrocketing](#).

But, just as certainly as normalcy crept back in early this summer, it just as quickly slipped away in a matter of weeks. While it was no secret that 100+ million Americans were refusing to get vaccinated, it was the rising variant that has dramatically compounded the situation. In fact, the recent numbers show that 97% of hospital cases since the surge have been those who are unvaccinated. I guess that I, like many others, had simply adopted the mindset that once we are vaccinated, everything would be okay.

Now, reopening seems a very confusing endeavor. Schools, trying to do what’s right for their students, are struggling with how to move forward. As the [Wall Street Journal reported](#) on Sunday, “When students in California and Illinois head back to school in a few weeks, they will have to wear masks. Florida and Arizona, meanwhile, banned mask requirements in schools. Some, but not all, districts there are insisting on them anyway.” But in Florida, Governor Ron DeSantis has stated if a school district tries to impose a mask mandate, [it faces losing state funding](#). At a time when we clearly need unity and have a common dependence on the best data available, some government leaders have placed politics ahead of science in the decision making process.

Our Center works mostly with corporate employers, and the well-respected organizations we work with are using scientific data to determine their best courses of action. Pragmatic business leaders are weighing that data and what’s good for their employees with what needs to be done to keep their enterprises viable. But as we know, even those who pay close attention to science are far from clear about what the right next steps are.

Two weeks ago, the same WSJ reporter, Chip Cutter, published two articles in that paper on the same day. The first was called, [The Boss Wants You back in the Office, Like Now](#). The second was titled, [The Office is Back, What if COVID Has Other Plans?](#) If that doesn’t speak to the confusion we’re all experiencing, I don’t know what does. As Cutter wrote, “The surge in Covid-19 cases is giving some companies and workers pause over looming return-to-office plans, even as a number of employers push ahead and reopen workplaces.”

So as we look forward to the opening of schools and workplaces, I'm sorry to echo what you already know. The picture is murky and confusing. The best we can hope for is that more of our fellow citizens opt to be vaccinated, there will be a resulting downturn in the COVID variant, and that organizational leaders will continue to balance these important factors - ***listening to the data on the virus, looking out for the well-being of their employees, seeing flexibility as a business imperative, and doing all they can to keep the enterprises they run viable.*** The good news is that these are the things that effective leaders always do. Now we just need to hope we have the right people in those critical positions.

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