

Return to work at the office? Energy workers say 'not so fast'

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As Texas and other states begin to reopen retail and other businesses, workers who have been working from home—for some, for seven weeks or longer—face the prospect of returning to corporate offices and business workplaces. A study of the energy workforce released Thursday found that more than 70% of workers prefer to continue working remotely.

The study, led by the University of Houston's [energy](#) initiative, found that 20% of those surveyed said they would prefer to take an unpaid furlough over a physical return to their employers' offices in the next month. About 5% said they would consider quitting rather than returning to the office now.

But a company's planning and communication with workers made a difference, said Ramanan Krishnamoorti, chief energy officer at UH and a study co-author.

"Workers who expected good sanitation and cleaning protocols as well as solid supplies of masks, sanitizer and supervisors who they feel are committed to eliminating workplace transmission of COVID-19 felt more comfortable," he said.

The study, a collaboration between the University of Houston, Robert Gordon University and Texas A&M University, involved 448 energy workers, 81% of whom normally work in an office. Another 11% have been furloughed or laid off, and the rest work in the field or offshore or

in another capacity. The analysis of attitudes about returning to work involved the employees working from home since mid-March. Faculty members from the UH College of Medicine were involved in developing study questions, along with Josie Long, a consultant with P-PIC working with [energy companies](#) on return-to-work issues. Community and industry partners involved in the study include Pink Petro, the Petroleum Equipment & Services Association (PESA) and the Independent Petroleum Association of America.

The researchers make a number of policy recommendations for human resource professionals, supervisors and other company executives.

Christiane Spitzmueller, professor of psychology at UH and an expert on work-family issues, said the study offered insight into other factors workers will consider as they return to work.

"Those who live in multi-generation households were more wary about returning to work," she said. But researchers also found some unexpected results: Employees with health issues that can raise the risks of contracting COVID-19 were no more reluctant to return to work than those without pre-existing health conditions. Similarly, older workers, who also are at heightened risk, were more likely to want to return to work than younger workers.

Among other findings:

- 6.6% of respondents said they had experienced COVID-19 symptoms but had been unable to get a test. Three had tested positive for COVID-19. 25% reported pre-existing conditions that put them at increased risk of complications from the virus
- While most respondents said their physical health remains good, the reported [mental health issues](#) exceeded pre-COVID-19 national norms. 28% said they had experienced six or more days

of poor mental health in the previous month. Energy workers who had been laid off and those struggling to balance work and family responsibilities were at particular risk

- Concerns about childcare and whether companies are able to effectively reduce the likelihood of COVID-19 transmission in their immediate workspace were linked to workers' reluctance to return to the office

The study suggests concerns about mental health issues in the workforce will need ongoing attention. Rhona Flin, professor of industrial psychology at Aberdeen Business School and a co-author, said those concerns were particularly pronounced for workers who had been laid off.

"Discussing mental [health issues](#) will need to become a more routine part of the workplace," Flin said. "Laid-off workers have suffered the most during this pandemic." The study concludes with that and other recommendation for company executives.

Valentini Pappa, a researcher with the Texas A&M Energy Management Institute, said employers may wish to consider a slower-than-planned return to physical workspaces given employees' reluctance to return, as well as acknowledging issues around childcare and other work-family conflicts.

Employers also may consider adding mental health training for supervisors and managers, she said.

More information: [uh.edu/uh-energy/research/whit ... work-white-paper.pdf](https://uh.edu/uh-energy/research/whit...work-white-paper.pdf)

Provided by University of Houston

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