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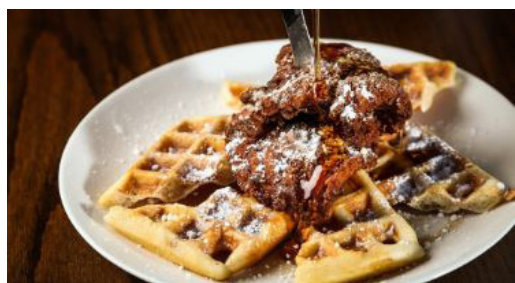
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Employees are feeling burned over broken work-from-home promises

Kimberly Merriman, Professor of Management, Manning School of Business, UMass Lowell; David Greenway, Doctoral Candidate in Leadership/Organization Studies, UMass Lowell

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As vaccinations and relaxed health guidelines make returning to the office a reality for more companies, there seems to be a disconnect between managers and their workers over remote work.

A good example of this is a recent op-ed written by the CEO of a Washington, D.C., magazine that suggested workers could lose benefits like health care if they insist on continuing to work remotely as the COVID-19 pandemic recedes. The staff reacted by refusing to publish for a day.

While the CEO later apologized, she isn't alone in appearing to bungle the transition back to the office after over a year in which tens of millions of employees were forced to work from home. A recent survey of full-time corporate or government employees found that two-thirds say their employers either have not communicated a post-pandemic office strategy or have only vaguely done so.

As workforce scholars, we are interested in teasing out how workers are dealing with this situation. Our recent research found that this failure to communicate clearly is hurting morale, culture and retention.

Workers relocating

We first began investigating workers' pandemic experiences in July 2020 as shelter-in-place orders shuttered offices and remote work was widespread. At the time, we wanted to know how workers were using their newfound freedom to potentially work virtually from anywhere.

We analyzed a dataset that a business and technology newsletter attained from surveying its 585,000 active readers. It asked them wheth-



er they planned to relocate during the next six months and to share their story about why and where from and to.

After a review, we had just under 3,000 responses, including 1,361 people who were planning to relocate or had recently done so. We systematically coded these responses to understand their motives and, based on distances moved, the degree of ongoing remote-work policy they would likely need.

We found that a segment of these employees would require a full remote-work arrangement based on the distance moved from their office, and another portion would face a longer commute. Woven throughout this was the explicit or implicit expectation of some degree of ongoing remote work among many of the workers who moved during the pandemic.

In other words, many of these workers were moving on the assumption – or promise – that they'd be able to keep working remotely at least some of the time after the pandemic ended. Or they seemed willing to quit if their employer didn't oblige.

We wanted to see how these expectations were being met as the pandemic started to wind down in March 2021. So we searched online communities in Reddit to see what workers were saying. One forum proved particularly useful. A member asked, "Has your employer made remote work permanent yet

or is it still in the air?" and went on to share his own experience. This post generated 101 responses with a good amount of detail on what their respective individual companies were doing.

While this qualitative data is only a small sample that is not necessarily representative of the U.S. population at large, these posts allowed us to delve into a richer understanding of how workers feel, which a simple stat can't provide.

We found a disconnect between workers and management that starts with but goes beyond the issue of the remote-work policy itself. Broadly speaking, we found three recurring themes in these anonymous posts.

1. Broken remote-work promises

Others have also found that people are taking advantage of pandemic-related remote work to relocate to a city at a distance large enough that it would require partial or full-time remote work after people return to the office.

A recent survey by consulting firm PwC found that almost a quarter of workers were considering or planning to move more than 50 miles from one of their employer's main offices. The survey also found 12% have already made such a move during the pandemic without getting a new job.

Our early findings suggested

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