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GTA

Going to work sick was a sign of loyalty. Now that it's 'reckless,' companies need to rethink their policies

By **May Warren** Staff Reporter

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Even six months ago it would have been totally normal, maybe even a sign of loyalty.

Heading to work with a cough. Taking a couple of Tylenol to fight off a lingering headache and forgetting about it. Powering through.

But those days are over.

Going to work, or anywhere really, while sick has suddenly become taboo. It's an act that puts coworkers, customers and companies at risk, as more people head back to their jobs during the early stages of COVID-19 recovery. It's a new world of health hyper-vigilance, and employers will need to quickly adapt to the shift, experts say.

In North America, especially in professional contexts, there's been an "implicit expectation" that employees prioritize work over everything else, family, leisure, even their own health, said Vanessa Kimberly Bohns, an associate professor of organizational behaviour at Cornell University.

"In the past, coming to work sick was a signal of that devotion — a signal that you were the 'ideal worker,'" she said in an email.

The sicker you were the stronger the message that you were a loyal, hard worker.

"Now it just seems reckless and irresponsible."

The dynamic may even flip, she said, as workplaces continue to live under the threat of COVID-19. People who come to work sick may feel pressure to go home, be called out by other employees or managers, or shamed by peers.

Pre-pandemic employees felt "like they were making a sacrifice on behalf of the organization when they showed up to work sick. Now it is clear that you are actually putting others at risk," she added.

"So I think it's likely people will start to think of it as more of a sacrifice to stay home."

Showing up to work sick is called presenteeism, said Nita Chhinzer, an associate professor of human resource management at the University of Guelph.

It happens not only because of a culture that praises overwork, but because there are financial incentives for low-wage workers and those in the gig economy to continue working even if they're feeling unwell. Many don't even have sick days, or are so precarious that they fear they may lose their jobs if they stay home.

"They're coming in to work because they feel trapped, they feel like there's no other option," Chhinzer said.

People who have COVID-19 and need to stop work for two weeks to quarantine are eligible for compensation under the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit, she added.

Sick-leave policies vary across Canada, but for the most part “all jurisdictions include some legislation that says you’re allowed to take sick days without being reprimanded, losing seniority, etc.,” she said.

More paid sick days might disincentivize people from coming to work sick, Chhinzer said, as would guaranteed hours for more precarious workers. Companies could guarantee hours over a quarter or a month so that if employees miss 15 hours one week, they could make it up over the next one, or be prioritized for overtime.

Even before COVID-19, researchers had flagged presenteeism as a public health hazard across sectors. One study from 2010 in the [Journal of General Internal Medicine](#) found several sick staff members continued to work during a norovirus outbreak at a nursing home and may have contributed to the spread.

The authors concluded that in the era of international air travel and novel flu virus outbreaks, health-care organizations need to stay vigilant, and see measures like unrestricted sick leave not just as an employee benefit but an investment to help protect patient safety.

Health-care workers feel an even stronger sense of duty, said Chhinzer, even though there’s an increased risk of spreading diseases to vulnerable patients. But subcultures of presenteeism can be found across many sectors. And change needs to come from the top, she said.

If managers show up sick, it can put implicit pressure on everyone else. If they stay home it sends a message that the health of the team is important.

Workers in the “knowledge economy” — fields like academia, education and consulting — face unique challenges because tasks can build up while they’re off sick.

“If I take three days off now I come back to an avalanche of work, and it’s still my work to do,” she said.

But, she added, knowledge workers have the advantage of being able to work from home.

They’ve already proven they can be productive there, said Bill Howatt, chief of research at The Conference Board of Canada, a non-profit think tank. But companies will have to start rethinking policies, like whether an employee who still feels well enough to work remotely is using a sick day.

Employers are transitioning into the recovery phase, and “lots of folks are making stuff up the best they can” around a “return to work with risk management,” he said.

“There’s going to be a recalibration.”

It’s already happening, with some places taking temperatures at the door, and asking if employees feel sick before letting them in.

At Trimaster Manufacturing, a company with locations in Guelph and Milton that employs about 220 people, they haven’t started mandating that yet. (Not everyone who has COVID-19 has a fever and people can be contagious even if they don’t show any symptoms.)

But HR manager Sandra Casarin said the company’s messaging has been clear from the beginning of the pandemic: if you’re sick, do not come in to work. They have signs posted at their employee entrances that instruct staff members to turn around and drive home if they have symptoms of COVID-19, and contact HR or their supervisor.

She has been receiving more sick calls than usual, but the company reports that there haven’t been any COVID cases at either location.

“We have a set-up in place so our employees feel comfortable,” she said, adding they’ll continue to review policies as the situation evolves.

“There will be more, I’m sure, to come.”

Whether companies will make these changes will come down to the organization’s own subculture, said the University of Guelph’s Chhinzer.

Many are already struggling financially because of the pandemic, have had to make cuts, and are already trying to get the most out of the workers they have left, “almost by squeezing blood from a stone,” she said. They aren’t “suddenly going to have a huge shift.”

But the organizations that already recognize employees as an asset “are the ones who will swing harder on this pendulum,” she added.

“Because they understand that there’s a positive return on investment when you’ve got workers who are healthy and safe.”



May Warren is a Toronto-based breaking news reporter for the Star. Follow her on Twitter: [@maywarren11](https://twitter.com/maywarren11)

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