

# THE STRAITS TIMES

---

FOR SUBSCRIBERS

## Return to the office: How to deal with backstabbers, bad bosses and 'social rust'



Experts say going back to the office is not something to be feared as long as people do so with an open mind. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO



**Amrita Kaur**

---

PUBLISHED 11 MAY 2022, 5:00 AM SGT

**SINGAPORE** - When accounts executive Reena Ong went to the office last week, she was anxious and even fearful of interacting with her colleagues.

The 30-year-old, who goes to the office three to four times a week, joined her company in May last year, during the Covid-19 pandemic. She had not met many colleagues in person as most had been working from home.

"I was a bit intimidated because I did not know if I would gel with them, and I felt like I would be an outlier because I was new, while the others already knew one another well," she says.

With the easing of safe distancing measures, many companies are getting their staff to return to work in the office more regularly.

While working in the office is not new for most, experts say some people may need time to make the transition.

Mr Adrian Choo, chief executive and founder of career strategy consulting firm Career Agility International, says many people started at a new workplace during the pandemic and may not have met all their team members face to face, so people should give relationships time to grow.

To cultivate better relationships with colleagues, Mr Dean Tong, head of group human resources at UOB, says to respect one another.

"Some comments may come across as crude due to a lack of socialising over the past two years, but give people the benefit of doubt that they have good intentions and don't overthink some of those comments."

Going back to the office, he adds, is not something to be feared as long as people do so with an open mind.

Here are ways to deal with seven common challenging situations when you are back in the office.

## 1. Come out of your shell



ST ILLUSTRATION: MIEL

Many people may feel rusty when it comes to socialising with colleagues, after working from home for most of the past two years.

With the return to the office, it is time to get comfortable with small talk with colleagues and build relationships in person.

Mr Samuel Yeo, founder of executive search and coaching company Beacon, says extroverts usually have it easier as they draw energy from people and find it interesting to talk to others.

Introverts, on the other hand, should consider socialising in a gradual manner and spacing out their interactions.

"Transitions can feel uncomfortable, so start slowly," he says. For instance, if you used to have lunch or tea breaks with colleagues two to three times a week, start with once a week before picking up the pace, he adds.

#### MORE ON THIS TOPIC

[S'pore salary guide: Are you getting paid as well as your peers?](#)

[It's okay to be quiet in meetings](#)

For a less stressful experience, Mr Choo of Career Agility International suggests that people reach out to those they are familiar with.

Mr Tong of UOB says supervisors can organise welcome lunches for employees or consider organising a townhall that involves physical teambuilding activities. "People need time to warm up, so it'll be good if we can bring them back in a more social setting," he adds.

Mr Choo also advises people to be genuine and authentic in their interactions with colleagues.

"Instead of networking for the sake of it, have a desire to learn more about people, ask them out for lunch and coffee breaks, and take the chance to learn more about the person's background. This will make it a smoother socialising experience," he says.

## 2. Stay focused amid distractions



ST ILLUSTRATION: MIEL

It can be difficult to concentrate in shared work spaces, with people walking around and talking to one another. This can be a problem especially if you are used to working in a quiet space at home.

To deal with this, says Mr Hardeep Matharu, head of new business at workstyle consulting firm Veldhoen + Company, find your sweet spot.

If your office has a variety of spaces - such as a library, quiet room or enclosed meeting room - for you to work from, choose the right one for the work you are doing.

You can also ask your colleagues to lower their volume or move to another spot, such as a meeting room or pantry, says Mr Matharu.

#### MORE ON THIS TOPIC

[Hot desks, cool offices: How workspaces are changing after the pandemic](#)

[Why returning to the office can be good for your well-being](#)

If all fails, use headphones. "This is by no means ideal, but it can provide a form of sound isolation at the very least," he adds.

UOB's Mr Tong says using headphones sends a signal to your colleagues that you want to focus on your work. But he advises against using these all the time as you may be seen as antisocial.

"If we come back to the office and just hunker down at our desk and don't talk to anybody, that's not right. You are going to a cold office," he adds.

Instead, you should get work done and set aside some breaks during which you can interact with your colleagues.

### 3. Get a grip on gossip, backstabbing



ST ILLUSTRATION: MIEL

As people return to office, they may encounter one of the perennial hazards of office life: office gossip and backstabbing.

Dr Annabelle Chow, a clinical psychologist at Annabelle Psychology, says being the target of office gossip can be detrimental to a person and lead to feelings of shame, embarrassment and reduced self-esteem.

"Acknowledging these emotions within yourself and noticing what you're feeling can help you understand your reactions to hearing uncomfortable comments and try and resist the urge to retaliate," she adds.

If the accusations are untrue or harmful to your career, it may be helpful to address the issue with your boss or the human resources team, she advises.

#### MORE ON THIS TOPIC

[Work/Life: Confessions of an office bully's sidekick](#)

[Bosses, if your team doesn't feel safe to speak up, everyone loses](#)

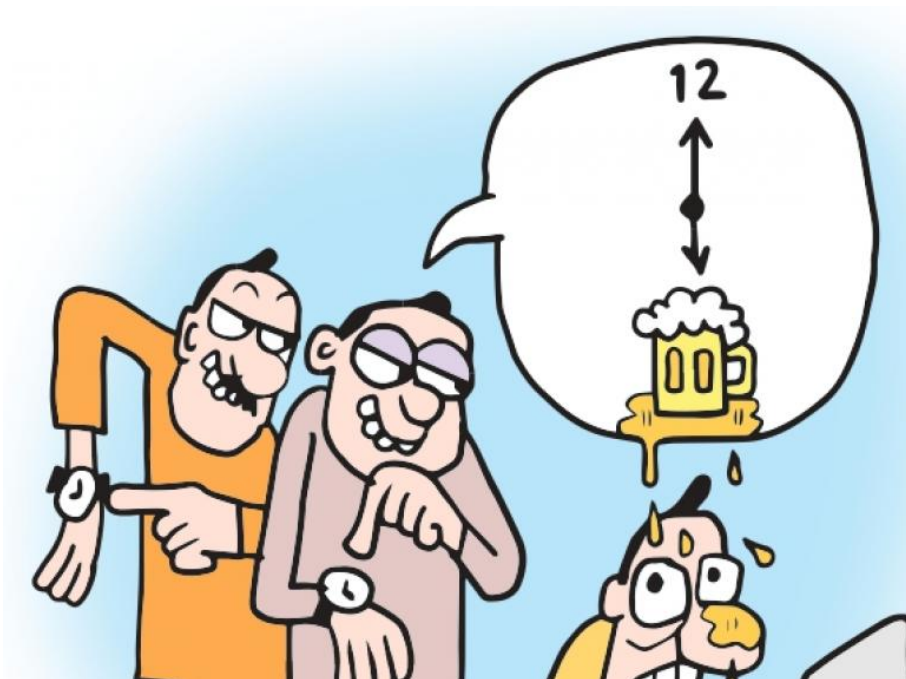
Meanwhile, Ms Hetal Doshi, an organisational psychologist and chief executive of O Psych, an organisational psychology consulting and training company, suggests ignoring the gossiper or asking him or her the intent of the comments.

"Do not attack the person in question, but rather raise your concerns about negativity in the workplace and the aspiration to have a healthy work environment," she says.

It is important to keep an objective mind when dealing with workplace conflicts, Ms Doshi adds.

Seek to arm yourself with facts and encourage an evidence-based approach. Clarify at the end of a conversation what were facts and what were not, she suggests.

#### 4. Socialise off the clock



ST ILLUSTRATION: MIEL

In certain countries, such as South Korea and Japan, it is common for office workers to head for dinner or drinks with colleagues after work.

While this is less common in Singapore, what can you do if you do not feel like socialising with your colleagues outside of work hours, but feel pressured to do so?

For sure, experts say taking part in such activities can help you improve your visibility and build stronger relationships.

Mr Choo of Career Agility International strongly encourages employees to attend these events as they are great opportunities to not only bond with teammates, but also pick up information regarding business moves which can help in your career.

But Mr Yeo of Beacon says that in deciding whether to attend such events, it is also important to understand your priorities.

#### **MORE ON THIS TOPIC**

---

[Young South Koreans dread revival of 'hoeshik' work dinners as pandemic eases](#)

---

[Ignoring a text message or e-mail isn't always rude - sometimes, it's necessary](#)

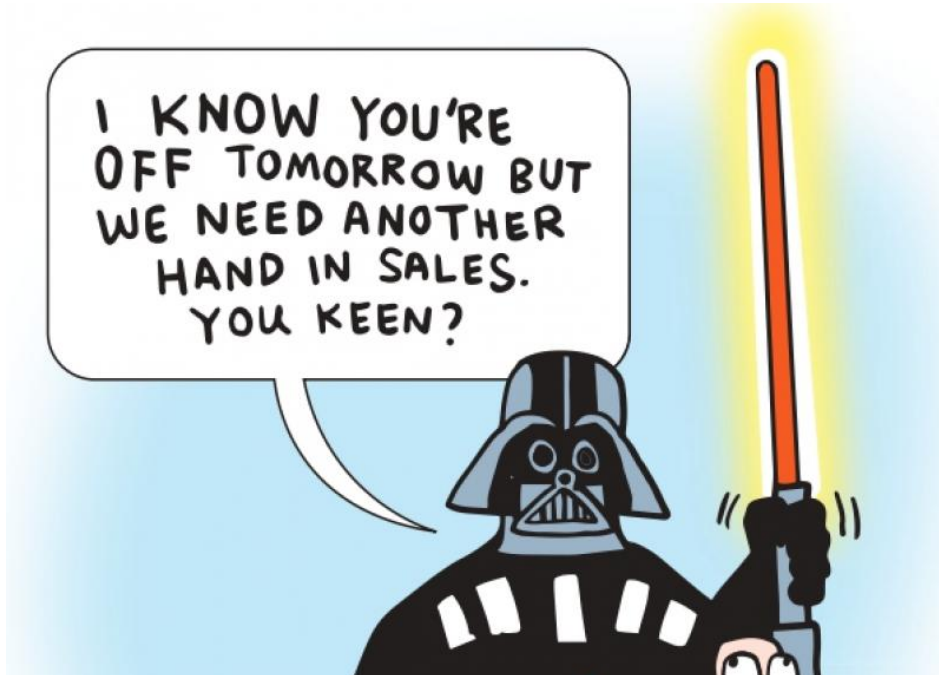
For some people, family and health are priorities, while recognition and achievements at work are secondary. In such cases, people can be selective about the activities they want to go to, he adds.

Mr Matharu of Veldhoen + Company believes that people are now more understanding of those who want to prioritise their personal life, especially after the pandemic has changed the ways people work.

His advice is to be honest and explain to the inviting party why you cannot attend these events.

You should also express your appreciation for the invitation. If you are keen to join the next time, this will encourage people to think of you when they are organising other events, he adds.

## **5. Look out for toxic bosses**



ST ILLUSTRATION: MIEL

There may be more stress from increased inperson contact with toxic bosses, such as those who give workers a dressing-down in front of others or make unreasonable demands.

Ms Doshi of O Psych says a boss crosses the line when his or her behaviour makes others feel intimidated or offended.

"The root of these behaviours tends to be to advance their ego and agenda through manipulation, abuse, power, forced compliance and the satisfaction of trouncing or humiliating others."

Examples of workplace toxicity include unfair treatment, blaming others, setting people up for failure, undermining employees or denying an employee a promotion or opportunities.

Says Ms Doshi: "Because the experience of toxicity may creep in over a long time, slowly chipping away at your personal power and rights, victims may eventually experience learned helplessness, which is to become conditioned to believe that a bad situation is unchangeable or inescapable."

#### **MORE ON THIS TOPIC**

---

[What to do if you are harassed at work](#)

---

[When the boss is open and kind, workers are less likely to cheat a company.](#)

There are steps people can take to deal with such a situation.

Try to detach yourself from your boss' toxic behaviour by recognising that his or her actions have nothing to do with you, she says. Do not expect him or her to change and do not blame yourself for his or her behaviour.

Another way is to empathise.

The boss in question may have had experiences that led to such behaviour. But Ms Doshi adds that it is important to recognise that empathy can stop at understanding and does not mean endorsing the bad behaviour.

Mr Choo of Career Agility International says employees can approach the human resources department for help. "Share your experience and point of view with them and ask them for advice on how to deal with the situation."

In coping with toxic behaviour, Dr Chow of Annabelle Psychology urges people to engage in acts of self-care, such as having adequate nutrition, sleep and exercise, as well as allocating time for relaxation and maintaining relationships that are important to them.

## 6. Put on your best face



ST ILLUSTRATION: MIEL

When the camera is off during online meetings, you can freely multitask or roll your eyes at comments you find silly.

But now that in-person meetings are back, think twice before you switch off or so much as raise an eyebrow.

Mr Matharu of Veldhoen + Company says one way to pay attention at meetings is to minimise distractions. "If you don't need to use a device during the meeting, don't take it along. Laptops and mobile phones can split your attention, so exercising some discipline in their use is important."

You should actively engage in the meeting through your body language, he adds. For instance, maintain eye contact with the speaker, nod along to signal you are paying attention and make sure you face the speaker.

"This will not only keep you more involved in the meeting, but it will also encourage others to follow your lead," says Mr Matharu.



He suggests that people use the meeting as a chance to hear others out or ask for clarifications.

"Try not to react within the meeting, but follow up with others if you need to. Not only will you be able to take a more measured response to points which riled you up, but you'll also show your best self in meetings," he adds.

#### MORE ON THIS TOPIC

[5 tips on returning to work after a career break](#)

[Are workers more creative in the office?](#)

Mr Yeo of Beacon says it helps for people to be "emotionally aware" to have better control over their reactions.

He had a client who tended to react impulsively to unfriendly e-mails and this hurt her chances of career advancement.

Mr Yeo advised her to first write down her response to an unfriendly e-mail on a Post-it note and revisit it when she is calmer. "This helped her to pause, be aware of her emotions, realise it was not an ideal response and think through her reactions."

He advises people against multitasking while attending meetings.

Citing a 2014 National University of Singapore study, Mr Yeo says doing a few things at one time may impair the formation of long-term memories, which could in turn increase the risk of Alzheimer's disease or early-onset dementia.

"Practise the healthy habit of doing one thing at one time and give it your entire attention," he adds.

## 7. Ward off 'time vampires'



ST ILLUSTRATION: MIEL

Some colleagues may be inconsiderate windbags or ask you for help with various work tasks without respecting your time.

Depending on whom you need to cut off or turn down, Mr Yeo of Beacon says it is important to do so in a tactful way that does not hurt relationships.

If you have to turn down someone who is soft-spoken and courteous, be gentler and explain the situation, he adds.

"For example, say I'd like to help you, but this is not the right time and explain why," he suggests.

For others who are less likely to take offence, you can be more direct and ask for permission to be honest about why you cannot speak to or help them.

But Mr Choo of Career Agility International says that unless you are in a great hurry, let people finish their point before excusing yourself.

Back in the office? Get a grip on workplace gossip and backstabbing | Living Well



#### MORE ON THIS TOPIC

---

[Workers gained new skills, shifted work aspirations amid Covid-19: IPS report](#)

---

[Let's head back to workplaces to learn with and from one another](#)


Join [ST's Telegram channel](#) and get the latest breaking news delivered to you.



### Subscribe today

Get unlimited access to exclusive stories and analyses by the ST newsroom


Choose your plan

 E-paper

 Podcasts


 Facebook

 RSS Feed

 Instagram

 Telegram

 Twitter

 Youtube

- SINGAPORE
- ASIA
- WORLD
- OPINION
- LIFE
- BUSINESS

- TECH
- SPORT
- VIDEOS
- PODCASTS
- MULTIMEDIA

[Terms & Conditions](#)

[Need help? Reach us here.](#)

[Data Protection Policy](#)

[Advertise with us](#)

Sign up for our daily newsletter

[More newsletters](#)

By registering, you agree to our T&C and Privacy Policy.

MCI (P) 031/10/2021, MCI (P) 032/10/2021. Published by SPH Media Limited, Co. Regn. No. 202120748H. Copyright © 2021 SPH Media Limited. All rights reserved.