

## Employers, don't allow your least advantaged workers to pay the price for the Coronavirus

By Ron Gerlitz

May 19, 2020

The country is going back to work now, and employers are bringing back some of their workers from unpaid leave – but not all of them. The Israel Employment Service estimates that about a fifth of the country's furloughed workers, some 200,000 people, will not be returning to their old jobs until the end of the year and possibly much later. Who are these workers destined to remain outside the workforce, perhaps for a very long time?



This of course is a crucial question for everyone who lost their job or went on unpaid leave – all of them now desperate to return to work – but the issue is also important for Israeli society as a whole. In a commendable shift in recent years, more and more people from groups historically discriminated against and underrepresented in the labor force have begun to enter it. Right now, there is a profound concern that these workers – Arabs, ultra-Orthodox, Ethiopian Israelis, people with disabilities, and others – will be the last to return to work after the Coronavirus crisis. Should that occur, it will mean grave injury to the most disempowered groups in Israel. It will be a terrible blow to the men and women from those groups who, despite facing substantial obstacles to employment in the first place, managed through tremendous effort to find their way into the workforce.

Social psychology teaches us that there are several natural reasons for the tendency of employers rehire workers from minority groups last. First, in periods of anxiety, economic uncertainty, and threats to health – as in the current period – there is a greater natural tendency for people to prefer members of their own group. This tendency is known in social psychology as “in-group bias.”

Second, during stressful and threatening periods, people naturally tend to take fewer risks. Many managers will find it easier and safer to first bring back the workers who most resemble themselves, people they may understand and rely on more easily. For example, a Jewish manager will tend to recall a Jewish employee before an Arab employee.

And third, during the Coronavirus crisis there was a documented increase in stereotyping of different groups in Israeli society, especially toward the ultra-Orthodox population. Clearly, then, a recently hired ultra-Orthodox employee at a given workplace may very well not be the first furloughed worker to be brought back to work. Ultra-Orthodox workers who have already proven themselves to be professional and suitable for a job may lose their livelihood simply because of the greater negative stigma attached to the ultra-Orthodox at the moment.

The powerful combination of these three factors may lead managers to prefer to first bring back workers who resemble themselves. In the coming weeks, this could do substantial and long-term harm to the career prospects of individuals from disadvantaged groups. This is a horrendous scenario for anyone who believes in the right to employment equality and the enormous importance of a diverse and inclusive workforce.

In recent years, there has been a positive change in this regard in Israel. For example, the percentage of Arabs aged 25-54 who participate in the workforce grew from 56% in 2010 to 62% in 2018. During the same period, the employment rate for ultra-Orthodox workers in the same age group also rose from 52% to 63%.

This laudable development came about thanks to concerted efforts by many people. Some are themselves from underrepresented groups, some are in government – but most crucial to the change has been the commitment of tens of thousands of managers and employers: During the last decade, their evolving hiring practices have gradually opened the doors for members of different groups in Israel. This is an important achievement that sends a clear message to all of Israeli society, and it is imperative that the Coronavirus crisis not lead to a reversal of this achievement. The virus itself is bad enough; a retreat into the employment situation of the past could deal another punishing blow to Israeli society.

Hence this call to managers and employers: Many of you have already successfully spearheaded policies of diversity and inclusion in your organizations and have been instrumental in reshaping the job market in Israel. Please be careful not to take steps now that would wipe out your hard-earned accomplishments in this regard. When it is time to begin bringing employees back to work, let the considerations you weigh include diversity. And remember that ostensibly objective and worthwhile parameters like seniority at the workplace can injure members of less empowered groups, with negative consequences. Keep the necessary charts and check your lists carefully – and make sure you are not relegating workers from minority groups to the end of the line.

Now, at a time of great crisis, it is your responsibility to choreograph the return of workers from furlough in a fair manner that expresses your commitment to equal and diverse employment. Your decisions in the next few weeks and months will shape the Israeli job market and Israeli society for many years to come.

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*To see the original in Hebrew in **The Marker**, published on May 19, 2020, [click here](#).*

