

Facebook moderators forced to return to offices as COVID-19 continues to spread

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Facebook moderators are being forced to return to offices in Europe and the US as positive tests for COVID-19 continue to surge.

An October 20 report by nonprofit publication *Rest of World* states that workers in Hyderabad, India were forced to return to offices this summer, as COVID-19 cases were surging in that country. The workers are employed by Genpact, which employs around 1,600 moderators in India. Genpact is one of several companies Facebook uses around the world to outsource content moderation. Some 15,000 workers worldwide are employed as moderators for Facebook.

Facebook claims that moderators are working in person only if they choose to do so, but *Rest of World* cited current and former Genpact employees who said people are being forced to go to work. The report cites a senior moderator who said Genpact employees were informed they could lose their jobs if they didn't come to the office. "The operations team told them these are important orders" the moderator said, adding that there was a threatening factor behind it.

In the middle of a pandemic and economic recession, workers are fearful of losing their jobs. *Rest of World* cites a former content moderator who left Genpact after being sent home in March at the beginning of the lockdown but remains in contact with former coworkers. "Genpact is doing it because there aren't any jobs and people are getting laid off. So people are too scared to actually say anything. And I think that's what Genpact is taking advantage of," the worker said.

Prior to the pandemic, moderators in India were paid less than \$2 an hour and wages were supplemented by food benefits, either through in-office meals or through a prepaid meal card. When Genpact employees were sent home during the COVID-19 lockdown, that benefit disappeared. Genpact says it is continuing to provide packed meals and snacks for on-site workers. The

potential loss of this essential subsidy is added pressure on workers to show up at the office despite concerns for their health.

In Dublin, Ireland, moderators working for contractor CPL were forced to go into the office as the country returned to its highest tier of COVID lockdown after the company categorized them as "essential workers." The *Guardian* reported moderators employed by the contractor CPL said they were told they are considered essential workers and therefore not bound by Ireland's Level 5 restrictions, which require everyone to work from home unless they are "providing an essential purpose for which your physical presence is required."

Facebook announced in August that employees were allowed to work remotely until July 2021, but this does not include moderators, who review the millions of reports flagged to them by Facebook users, as they are predominantly employed through third-party contractors. "People are feeling that they're being exploited," a moderator anonymously told the *Guardian*. "Facebook themselves, they are making almost all their employees work from home. Even people working in the same team, on the same project as us—we're doing the same work—Facebook is letting them work from home and not us."

When CPL recalled staff to the office in July, as the Irish lockdown was partially lifted, the company made no distinction regarding the topics moderators were working on. All staff were informed, "Your role involves ensuring the safety of online communities and the internet" and that the "company has concluded that your job cannot be undertaken from home."

Moderators were told that in the event of a confirmed COVID case, the office would be closed for 72 hours but since the end of September, "there have been three such cases, according to emails sent to staff, but the office has not closed," according to the *Guardian*.

Within days of contractors employed by Accenture returning to its Facebook facility in Austin, Texas, at least one worker had tested positive. “We have learned that one of our people working Facebook Domain 8 on the 12th floor has tested positive for COVID-19,” according to an email cited by the *Intercept*. “This individual was last in the office on 10/13, became symptomatic on 10/14 and received a positive test result on 10/16. Currently, this person is in self-quarantine.”

Earlier the *Intercept* reported that it had obtained an audio recording of an October 2 virtual meeting in which an Accenture manager said, “Some of the questions we’re getting are what happens when I get sick, or what happens when somebody in the office gets sick,” adding, “So now I’m going to dive in to, you know, how Accenture handles these situations. Some of you have been in buildings where there have been notifications sent that somebody has tested positive, and that is a reality of where we’re at today, and that will happen as people test positive, and it’s not necessarily something to worry about”—audio cuts out briefly—“been in direct contact.”

Facebook has said that moderators working on sensitive topics, such as terrorism or self-harm, were not allowed to do so from home, citing concern for their mental health while working in isolation. A February 2019 report in the Verge, titled “The Trauma Floor: The secret lives of Facebook moderators in America,” reports on working conditions for moderators at Cognizant in Phoenix, Arizona and Tampa, Florida: “Collectively, the employees describe a workplace that is perpetually teetering on the brink of chaos,” the authors state. They describe a place where “team leaders micromanage content moderators’ every bathroom and prayer break,” and where “people develop severe anxiety while still in training, and continue to struggle with trauma symptoms long after they leave; and where the counseling that Cognizant offers them ends the moment they quit—or are simply let go.”



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