



Roundtable Member, **Beth Tyndall**, Chief People Officer at Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan, explores the future of work and shares her tips for advocating for flexibility in a post-COVID world.

Mentoring **MATTERS**



Throughout the pandemic, I have been fully working from home. This setup has worked really well for me and other members of our team for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recently, senior leadership and my boss are socializing the idea of returning to the office and would prefer to have everyone back in the office between Monday and Friday. This isn't sitting well with me and I'd like to talk to them about it. Any advice on how to approach the conversation without making it a career limiting move?

It's hard to believe how much our lives have changed in just a few short months. When I think back to the beginning of the year, I couldn't have imagined that our organization would have moved so swiftly to a work-from-home model. The pandemic has certainly taught us all a few things about being flexible and adapting to new circumstances.

Although many companies are preparing to head back to the office, it's clear that flexibility is here to stay. Several [surveys](#) have shown that employees are looking for a mix of office-based and remote working moving forward, and that the majority want to retain some of the balance we've become accustomed to in recent months.

The truth is, COVID-19 has transformed the future of work and I don't think we'll be returning to what we used to know as "normal." Assuming your role can be performed equally well from home, you shouldn't feel uncomfortable requesting flexible work arrangements. Given how much things have changed and the positive experiences many of us have had with remote working, I guarantee you're not the only one in your workplace who may have concerns.

Personally, I'm a huge proponent of flexibility and believe it's important to always be open and honest about how you're feeling.

Here are five tips to help start a constructive discussion.

1. Be Clear About Your Needs

There are a number of reasons why people might feel anxious about returning to the office, including concerns around the safety of public transit, the perception of an unsafe environment, limited options for child or elder care and protecting the health of themselves or their loved ones. While some roles may be better performed in the office than others, the bottom line is that employers will need to keep the lines of communication open to continue to be as accommodating as possible.

Regardless of what's making you feel uneasy, make sure you discuss your needs with your manager directly. Their role as a leader is to help you navigate the transition and ensure that safety remains a top priority.

2. Focus on the Mutual Benefits

Clearly communicate what your experience has been like at home over the past few months and why it's been so beneficial for you. For example, perhaps you've been able to use the time saved on commuting to enjoy more time with your family.

The next step is to make the connection between how these perks have enhanced your performance at work. Are you finding you're less stressed or more efficient with your time? You should also be prepared to speak to what you've accomplished while working remotely and how you've contributed to your department and company's objectives. Focusing on results achieved, not hours, is becoming an increasingly effective way to measure productivity and support the argument for flexibility.

3. Understand the Why

Imagine you're a member of your senior leadership team. What are some of the reasons why they may want to have employees in the office five days a week? It could be that they want to avoid the perception of giving some employees special treatment, or they may have received feedback that some people are excited to return on a full-time schedule. Once you know more about the rationale behind the thinking, you'll be able to have a productive discussion.

Asking your manager some of the following questions can help you learn more:

- Do you see our approach to remote working continuing to evolve?
- Are there certain days or meetings where it's important for me to be in the office?
- How much notice would I need to give if I wanted to work remotely?
- What's the best way to continue to share feedback with the leadership team?

4. Come Up with a Plan

When having a conversation about flexibility, it's important that you propose a solution that works for you and your team. Give some thought to your most urgent needs, or "non-negotiables." Is working from home every Tuesday a top priority because it allows you to pick up your kids from daycare? Or would you rather have one day a week where you can adapt your schedule as needed? Be specific about your preferences and be ready to articulate how you'll manage any issues or challenges that come up.

5. Keep at It

If your initial conversation doesn't go as planned, don't be discouraged. Flexibility is a tricky topic and your manager may not have all the answers right away. Your company's stance may also continue to evolve as we all adjust to returning to the office. The key is to keep the conversation going in a respectful way that shows you also understand the needs of the business and the challenges your leadership team is facing.

And while it may take a while to see progress, one thing is certain in a post-COVID world: flexibility isn't going anywhere.



Beth Tyndall is the Chief People Officer at Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan, where she's responsible for the human resources function across global offices in Toronto, London, and Hong Kong. In the last three years, Beth has transformed the structure and capabilities of the People & Culture team and reimaged the organization's approach to talent, culture and leadership.

Beth has a passion for developing top talent and her authentic leadership style helps all employees feel included and empowered at work. Her team was recognized as the 2019 Canadian HR Team of the Year and she was featured on the HRD Global 100 list of leading HR professionals. A true champion of inclusion and flexibility, Beth was also recently named as one of Women in Capital Markets' 2020 Champions of Change and is a recipient of the Globe and Mail Report on Business magazine's inaugural 2020 Best Executive Awards.



Glain Roberts-McCabe is passionate about the art of leadership and supporting ambitious mid-career leaders. She created **The Roundtable** to provide emerging leaders with the navigational skills, tools and savvy needed to manage increases in scope, pressure and leadership complexity.