

OPINION

How to have a conversation with your boss about postponing your return to the office

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Since March, much of the Canadian workforce has been in a pandemic-induced hibernation. Unless you were in a role that was deemed essential, you've either been working from home, or not at all. But as COVID-19 restrictions start lifting across the country, many individuals are facing an unexpected conundrum. In fact, you too might be in a similar situation: Your employer wants you to return to the workplace, but you're not yet quite ready to go back into an office or other communal environment.

The reasons vary. Perhaps you have a compromised immune system. Or you live with an elderly relative and your workday trips could put them at risk. Maybe you are choosing to delay your children's return to school and you don't have alternative childcare. Or the simplest reason of all – you find that you're more productive working from home and you want to continue. Whatever the reason, what will it take to persuade your employer that you should postpone your return to the shared work environment? If you keep a few key points in mind, you'll increase your likelihood of success.

REVIEW WHAT IS ALREADY BEING PLANNED

As organizations plan to bring people back to work, physical changes and protocols are being put in place to protect the health and safety of employees. So find out what is being planned for your workplace. This knowledge will allow you to not only acknowledge what is already being done, but will also

help you to overcome possible objections when you talk to your boss about what you would like to do.

ASK

As obvious as this sounds, you have to ask. Don't assume that your manager will miraculously realize that you have reservations or preferences about returning to the traditional work environment. And don't throw this topic in at the end of another meeting, otherwise you'll run the risk of inadvertently minimizing how important this issue is to you. Instead, schedule a video or phone conversation specifically to discuss how you'd like to work moving forward.

PROPOSE AN END-DATE

If you want your immediate supervisor to come around to what you want, then you need to reduce the perceived risk associated with you being physically absent from the team. One of the easiest ways to do this? Offer an end-date. Something as simple as "I'd like to continue to work remotely until November 30th, after which we can reassess how well it's working" will lead to greater success than an open-ended request. Propose it as "an experiment," or "a test," or the one that seems to resonate the most with many people – "a pilot."

RECOMMEND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

If you want to bring your boss on board, don't just expound on the reasons why you don't want to return to work, offer possible solutions as to how you will make it successful. In other words, don't dwell on what will go wrong if you come back, address what will go right if you stay away. The fact that you live with a high-risk elderly parent is important, but if that is all you focus on when you make your case, it isn't going to reassure your manager that what you are proposing will be successful. So think about the possible objections to your preferred scenario and then explain how you will overcome them. If you can demonstrate how you can make it work, you'll make it easier for your boss to say yes.

BE OPEN TO ALTERNATIVES

If your manager does not immediately embrace what you suggest, then put forward alternatives. Perhaps you could work from home a few days a week? Could you limit your interaction with others by modifying your working hours to non-peak times? Is it possible to adjust your responsibilities for a period of time so that your obligations can be met from afar? You won't know until you ask, and you might be pleasantly surprised by the answer.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Do good work. When all is said and done, and you're able to persuade your boss to let you extend your time away from the office, prove that this was the right decision. Make sure that your performance is prompt and productive.

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