

## PERSONAL FINANCE

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# How to ensure career opportunities for remote workers

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As some workers start returning to the office, an employment lawyer says companies should review their approach to career development for those continuing to work from home to avoid the risk of constructive dismissal claims.

Sunira Chaudhri, employment lawyer and founder of Workly Law, said that remote work has implications for employment agreements that set out worker's rights, including an expectation for in-person performance evaluations.

"The risks are in workplaces that have allowed remote work. We actually don't have the infrastructure to evaluate remote workers fairly and consistently among their peers," Chaudhri said.

This can create problems for workers who choose remote work and still want to progress in their career, Chaudhri said, adding that employers will struggle with issues of offering career and educational opportunities to workers who are not physically in the office.

"I think the old adage rings true. Out of sight, out of mind, and some opportunities for office workers will come more easily than to a remote worker," Chaudhri said.

During the pandemic, when some employees were physically at work and others were working remotely, there was a tendency for some companies to pay remote workers differently, which Chaudhri said created two classes of employees and increased situations of inequity.



*A worker uses a laptop computer whilst working from home at a table in her kitchen in Rome, Italy, on Oct. 8, 2020.*

The rising trend of employees choosing hybrid work means employers need to review their policies quickly. Amazon's recent [business survey](#) found that 43 per cent of Canadian office workers would look for other work if they were required to return to the office full time. Fifty-seven per cent surveyed preferred a schedule that allowed for a partial return to work.

Remote workers also miss out on the informal in-person meetings that happen in offices that could lead to valuable work connections, according to Tiziana Casciaro, organizational behaviour professor with the Rotman School of Management.

"A lot of jobs really benefit from that serendipitous spontaneous interaction that occurs in the office when you bump into people," Casciaro said. "These things are real and can affect the prospects of employees."



*A worker uses a desktop computer whilst working from home in Stow Maries, U.K., on April 8, 2020.*

# COMMUNICATE BEFORE YOU MANDATE

While some companies may be looking to mandate employees back to work full-time, Casciaro cautions against this.

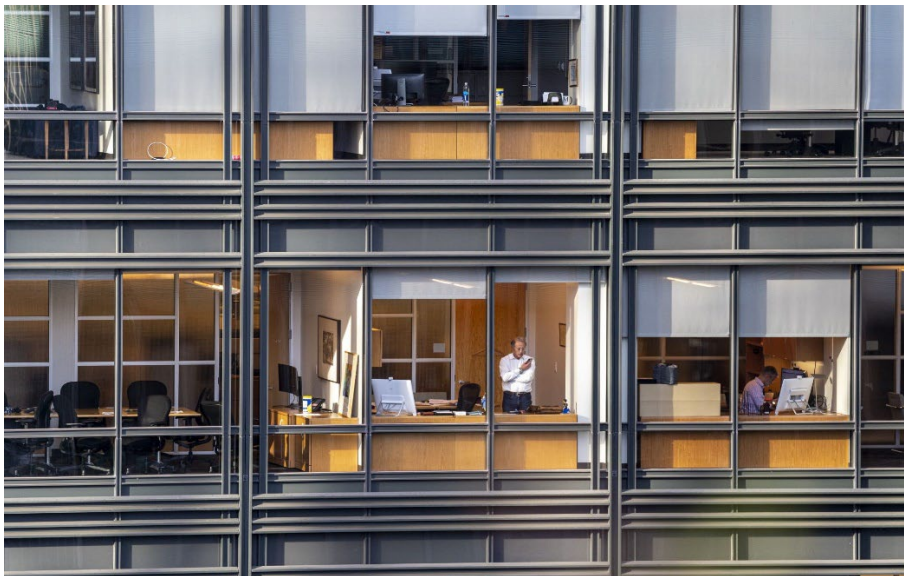
She said that remote working arrangements during the pandemic have given employees the freedom to choose where to work and when to work, which is something that employees value tremendously.

“Managers have to take that into account that there's a heightened awareness in their employees of the value of autonomy,” Casciaro said.

Chaudhri suggests managers speak to employees before mandating a return to work. “I think employers that call employees back without communication bump up against some legal liability,” she said.

## A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

Some employers have adopted a hybrid working arrangement that can help level the playing field between remote workers and office workers looking for opportunities for career growth.



*Employees work at an office in San Francisco, California, U.S., on Oct. 5, 2021.*

Media firm Dentsu Canada moved to a permanent hybrid model early in the pandemic.

“That allowed people to change their mindsets early and adapting to the fact that we’re never going to call them up and say you have to be in the office five days a week,” Jeff Greenspoon, president of solutions Americas at Dentsu, said.

For career advancement opportunities, Dentsu Canada's Chief People Officer Carolyn Meacher said that the company encourages managers to coach, support and champion employees in any way they need to be supported in their career.

Meacher said Dentsu tries to accommodate the individual needs of employees who are interested in jobs that require more frequent face-to-face meetings with clients or other team members.

"We've discovered that you can do significantly more remotely than we ever imagined." Casciaro agrees managers are now more adept at leading employees who choose to work remotely and can still assist in growing their careers.

"The manager has therefore to have conversations with employees to understand what will allow them to do their best work possible," Casciaro said.

For Erin Dixon, having a supportive manager was critical when she was an account executive with her former company based in Toronto.

"I had the opportunity to move to the Niagara region, and I was fortunate enough to have the support of my organization to take my job with me and work remotely," she said. Dixon credits her manager's efforts to recognize her work ethic and create a good working relationship.

## **EQUAL PAY**

Chaudhri said that tactics, such as performance reviews and utilizing compensation grids, need to be reviewed to ensure that the process for evaluating both remote and in-person employees is consistent.

"When you use a high amount of discretion in setting compensation, that's where you can encounter legal liability," Chaudhri said.

As well, ensuring that a company is leveraging any available technology can also help remote workers feel included, especially if they're missing the impromptu conversations in the office.

Greenspoon said that the need to train managers on how to use technology for hybrid teams was important to connect employees from the various work locations.

"There's technology enablement so that the person on the other side of the screen feels as included as possible," Greenspoon said.

When Dixon started working remotely, she said she attended all conference calls and took part in workplace meetings when needed.

"I made it a priority to attend as much as possible and to participate as much as possible. So being really prepared to bring up ideas, sharing experiences, not just sitting there and listening but really engaged in whatever the agenda was," she said.

Dixon said her efforts led her to join different projects and allowed her to move through the organization into more progressive roles. She was eventually promoted to a senior leadership role and continued to work from home.

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