

MAKING IT OFFICIAL

5 POST-PANDEMIC DECISIONS EMPLOYERS
NEED TO MAKE & COMMUNICATE NOW



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Executive Summary

As vaccination rates climb and COVID-19 case counts fall, many employers are starting to consider whether and how to bring people back to work.

But it's not simple. We're living—and working—in a new world. Employees today have higher expectations of their employers. Some have made changes to their lives over the course of the pandemic, and many won't be willing to give up their new, more flexible lifestyles. Others will have lasting concerns about health and safety and will continue to be wary of physical offices or business travel. Some may refuse to get vaccinated.

Given this new complex reality, employers are faced with tougher decisions than ever. Here, we discuss five difficult-but-critical questions that employers have to consider now and start communicating about immediately. Now is the time to start talking to your people about how your company plans to handle the future.

What's more, at Broad Reach we encourage employers to use this opportunity to usher in a new era of employer-employee relationships, one based on flexibility, accommodation and trust. Again and again, we have seen businesses transformed when their leaders choose to clearly communicate that they value output over hours, results over face-time. The more you can embrace this new way of working, and the sooner you can start communicating about it to your people, the more likely you are to build a thriving business into the post-pandemic future.

Changes are Coming... Again

The COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in changes to the business world that previously would have seemed ludicrous, if not impossible.

Before the pandemic hit, some companies had been experimenting with flexible-work and part-time work-from-home schedules, but only to a certain extent. Many hadn't embraced such ideas at all—in fact many couldn't conceive of their business functioning without daily, face-to-face interaction between employees, customers and suppliers, not to mention regular travel. The fact that entire sectors of the business world could pivot instantaneously to zero in-person contact and no travel whatsoever and still keep functioning (albeit with many, many challenges) is nothing short of astounding.

What's even more astounding is how, in the space of a year and a half, that new way of working is leading to a mindset change among many business leaders, former naysayers included. While the ongoing months of lockdowns and restrictions have been extremely difficult for all kinds of reasons, one positive outcome has been business leaders who are finally embracing the benefits of remote work and reduced travel on their employees' physical and mental health. They're recognizing that the most productive workplaces are those whose leaders communicate openly and who aren't afraid to show their humanity.

And now we're headed into another wave of change, as vaccination rates rise and the business world starts preparing itself for a potential shift back to the office.

This should be simple, right? In the grand scheme, it hasn't been very long since we sent everyone home; we certainly haven't forgotten how to work in an office or communicate face-to-face. People are certainly missing human contact, and even while they embraced the lack of commute time and the increased time with their families, many also felt they were less productive at home.

And with so many progressive business leaders now embracing the benefits of work-from-home schedules, companies should be able to find a healthy balance that takes the best parts of both approaches... right?



A Huge New Set of Concerns for Employers

Unfortunately it's *not* so simple. We're not going back to the same world we had in early 2020. There's a tremendous range of opinions, preferences and expectations among employees today. For example:

- Some people will be happy to return to the office, others will never want set foot in one, and many will look for some kind of flexible model that balances both.
- Some will travel, others won't, and some will be reluctant to work with anyone who has.
- Some will refuse to be vaccinated, others will refuse to work with anyone who isn't.
- Many won't be satisfied with a new policy unless their leaders decidedly walk the talk themselves.

The war for talent is growing exponentially; it's an employee's world. Employers need to figure out how they're going to differentiate themselves in the face of all this potential conflict—and they need to start communicating their approach as soon as possible.

Today's employers have a *huge* new set of concerns to deal with and questions to answer before they can consider having people back to the office. We all congratulated ourselves for how quickly we adapted to the pandemic, but the truth is that those changes were *forced* on us. There was no choice in the matter. Now we have actual decisions to make, and they're difficult ones. And even harder than *making* those decisions will be the challenge of *communicating* them in a way that ensures all employees feel respected and valued. *This* is the true test of leadership and business resilience.



Five Decisions to Make and Communicate Now

We've spent a lot of time talking to our clients about what the future will hold and what challenges they see ahead. We've noticed a number of common threads.

Here, we look at five key questions many employers are working through as they think about the best ways to communicate with their teams in a post-COVID world.

It's impossible to predict *when* any given jurisdiction will be able to completely reopen their offices, at least in North America, but if you haven't started considering these questions, we urge you to get started as soon as possible. We can't offer solutions, because every company has its own needs and culture. But we can raise the questions and get you started on your thinking about what approaches are right for you and how to best communicate with your people.

One thing we can guarantee is that you *will* be asked these questions. There will be no room for ambiguity. A well-thought-out communications strategy will enable you to keep employee engagement levels high, retain top talent, and avoid costly and damaging lawsuits. The more you can determine your approach in advance, the better.

At the core of these questions are the concepts of respect and humanity. At Broad Reach, we have long promoted the idea that leaders need to be more *human* in their decisions and communications. We even have a podcast that dives deep into this topic—it's called [On Point: Bringing Humanity to Leadership Communications](#), and we encourage you to look for it wherever you get your podcasts. When the pandemic hit, we stressed that those who could embrace this approach would come out of this crisis stronger, with more loyal teams and a more resilient business. And the human touch may be even more important now as we start to find our way to a new, long-term reality.

We'll discuss each of the questions in detail, starting with one of the toughest.



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1

Will you require your employees to be vaccinated?

The concept of an “unsafe work environment” has taken on a whole new meaning.

Canadian business leaders need to be very clear about what they’re expecting of employees when it comes to vaccinations, and communicate it sooner rather than later. It’s certainly a legal question to which we can’t give you an answer, but it’s critical that you pose the question now and get the best legal/HR advice you can get.

Can you require vaccinations? Will you require employees to show some kind of vaccine passport? Would it constitute discrimination? What kinds of exceptions would you consider? What is the legal risk surrounding people who are exposed to an unvaccinated colleague?

We spoke with Dan Black, an employment lawyer at Caravel Law and vice-president of Legal with Closing the Gap Healthcare, for his take on these very difficult questions. He agreed there is no simple yes or no answer to any of these. “Under health and safety law, employers have a legal duty to take every precaution reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of their employees,” he told us. “It’s difficult to reconcile not requiring employees to be vaccinated with that duty. At the same time, if someone is contraindicated for the vaccine, the employer has a legal responsibility to accommodate them, and privacy law prohibits them from disclosing the reasons for that accommodation.”

But that will leave you other questions that demand to be resolved—“we’re not allowed to disclose that” is not going to be enough of an answer. There will be a huge range of difficult conversations that will need to be had.

Talk to your legal team about your responsibilities surrounding having employees work together. How will you handle it if someone won’t come into the office at all unless you confirm that your workforce is 100% vaccine-compliant—will you allow them to work from home full-time? Can (or must) you require someone who’s *not* vaccinated to work exclusively from home to ensure everyone else’s comfort and safety? In all cases, how will you communicate your decisions in a way that shows respect for all of your employees’ personal positions and wishes?



2

Are you going to set the tone?

We've heard from many employers that they plan to institute some level of hybrid or flexible work-from-home model.

To truly make such a model effective and valued, however, the senior people in the business must set the tone through their actions. Effective communication is just as much about action as it is about words.

That means leaders have to work from home sometimes, too. It's critical to clearly model that it's possible to hold one of the most senior jobs in the company without being there five days a week. A company might be saying "go ahead and work from home; we absolutely support you," but if its leaders' actions are adding a not-so-subtle "we just have to come in because it's expected at a certain level," their employees will quickly figure out what the company truly values. That may leave them feeling caught between their desire for flexible work and what they see as their possibilities for career advancement... which might end up just chasing them out the door.

If you haven't clearly articulated your company values, now would be a great time to put them together and publicize them widely. And most of all, make sure to have everyone, including the most senior people, model them every day. At Broad Reach, we have a [published list of company values](#) that clearly sets out what we stand for and what kind of workplace we are—and as leaders we make sure to model these for our team.



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3

Are you going to treat men and women the same way?

Your answer to this question will surely be “of course.” But the question here, just like the previous one, is less about written policy and more about actual practice.

Studies have shown that women’s equality has been set back during the pandemic, with many women taking on the bulk of household responsibilities, or even stepping out of the work world entirely due to the pressures of home schooling and caregiving.

There was a time when some employers would hesitate to hire women who they deemed likely to start a family, hoping to avoid having to deal with maternity leave—of course this was never an official position, but it did factor into some people’s hiring decisions nevertheless. With the increased childcare needs related to virtual and hybrid schooling that could continue through any future waves of the virus, there’s a risk that discrimination will extend even further, to women who already have school-aged children. Employers need to be very clear and deliberate about their policies in this regard.

Beyond hiring, consider how you will address caregiving needs. Will you offer special accommodations for primary caregivers? What about for parents whose kids are attending virtual school, or who can't find or afford summertime activities for their children? Even before the pandemic, childcare and eldercare issues were becoming more important among employees. "Employers simply can't discriminate against someone based on their family status or their gender," says Black. "Yet many may do it without realizing it, and they need to know they're opening themselves up to risk."

And don't stop at simply resolving to accommodate flexible schedules—the bigger question to be answered is whether flex-time accommodations will affect work opportunities or career advancement. In many companies, promotions have long been dependent on putting in face-time and attending events and client lunches. You'll need to consider to what extent those things will matter in a post-COVID world, and work to break down barriers more than ever before. Progressive companies might even consider a counter-approach in which they actually ask employees (particularly men) to *reduce* their face-time in order to level the playing field.



4

What will be your framework for employee flexibility?

For all employees, it'll be very important to clarify the parameters for flexible work and ensure they aren't inadvertently punishing those who choose to work from home—or those who choose to come in, for that matter. More than ever, we need to consider what's best for each individual, allowing them to make choices based on their personal situation



Geographic flexibility

One new consideration is the question of geographic flexibility. Over the course of the pandemic, some people have chosen to move out of major city centres, taking advantage of the remote-work opportunity to find affordable property, more space, or simply a different, often quieter way of life. Employers will need to be very clear about whether their expectations are going to change once their offices open—will you make room for these remote workers? How will it work and how will you communicate it? You could even consider taking advantage of this situation to broaden your geographical hiring range.

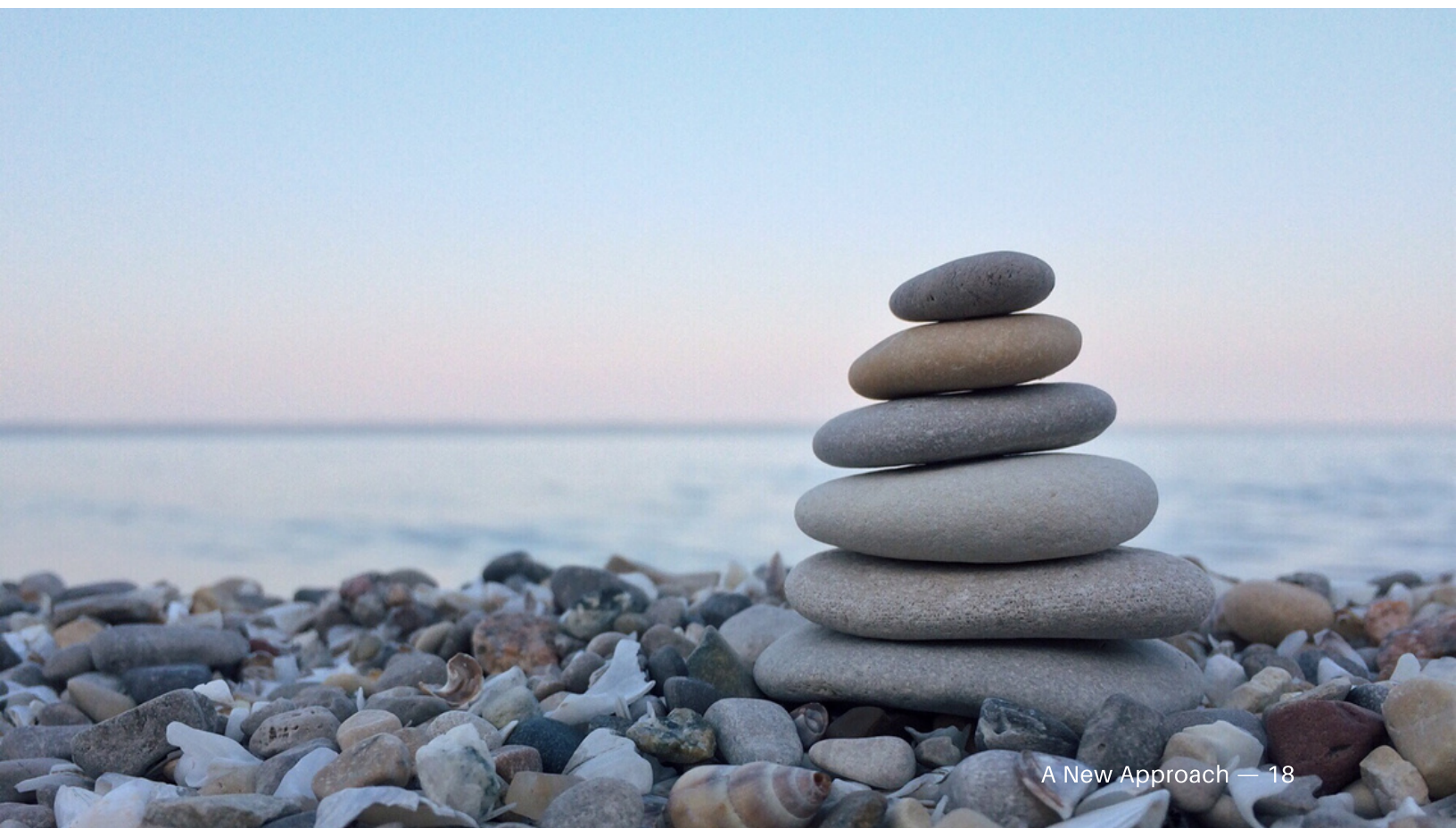
Of course, there may be legal questions to consider, suggests Black, such as whether the remote-work period during the pandemic constituted a permanent, enforceable change to the employee's original contract, or only a temporary adjustment. If you do decide to require these employees to come back to the office, you will need give them ample notice, to be fair to them and reduce your legal risk.




Mental health

Companies also need to consider their mental-health policies. This was important pre-COVID, but it's even more important now. How will you approach employees that need to take leave to deal with their own mental health, or that of their loved ones? Will you allow employees to determine their own needs (as opposed to having strict requirements for things like doctor's notes)? According to Black, there's a real opportunity for employers to demonstrate their progressiveness in this area, through policies that promote trust and employee assistance programs for people who need it. Maybe most importantly, now is a great time to put supports in place to help employees *maintain* good mental health by attending to the rest of their lives and avoiding burnout.

And, once again, what's most important is to make sure that whatever you communicate as policy is actually lived in practice. Someone who lives two hours away can't pop into the office for an emergency client meeting, and if that fact results in their losing out on opportunities or promotions, the policy won't be successful. Managers can't be rolling their eyes, even inwardly, when someone takes a mental health break or takes their child to an appointment. To make any kind of flexible model work, employers need to make sure everyone understands the reasons behind it and buys in, and that nobody is penalized for participating in it.



A close-up photograph of a hand holding a small, translucent object, possibly a piece of glass or plastic, against a bright, sunlit sky filled with scattered white clouds. The sun is positioned directly behind the object, creating a strong lens flare and illuminating the hand and the object. The background shows a vast, open landscape with rolling hills or mountains under the expansive sky.

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5

How will you approach business travel?

Before the pandemic, many of us routinely travelled to meet with colleagues and clients. But for the last year and a half, almost nobody has travelled at all, let alone for business.

“ Companies have shown that business can be conducted without such extensive travel, although many are itching to start sending their people out again and some can't wait to get out on the road. These changes were imposed on us and businesses had no choice but to adapt, but now's the time to be more deliberate in thinking through your business model and deciding to what extent travel is needed. ”

Ask yourself what your policies will be, again with an eye to communicating respect for people's wishes and making sure everyone feels comfortable. It seems clear that business travel will be cut down in our new world, but to what extent? If travel is deemed to be safe, can you make it a job requirement? How might your policies differ by length of trip, or by destination country? How will you handle situations in which your employees aren't comfortable travelling? Will non-vaccinated employees be allowed to travel? What if they're willing to travel, but airlines or governments won't allow it—what are the legal parameters around making travel a job requirement in that case?

Now is a great time to rethink your business model with an eye to reducing travel, if possible. How will you generate business if your sales people can't get out on the road? Will that impact their success? What about teambuilding, something that's nearly impossible over video chat—is there a way to build strong teams if they can't get together in person?



It's Time to Communicate a New Approach: Output, Not Hours

There are no easy answers here. Companies have never had to manage such a wide range of employee preferences, and most are not really set up to do so. But it's going to be a necessity in the new world, and businesses that want to retain their top talent are going to have to find a system that works.

Our best advice is to take three key words into your planning and communications: **accommodation**, **flexibility** and **trust**. We no longer live in a world in which employers can demand rigid work schedules or constant face-time and expect to keep their best people. Employees want to dictate how their work lives are structured, and if they aren't able to, they may not hesitate to move elsewhere. If they are given flexibility but find it hampers their career, again they may look to greener pastures. Progressive companies that are deliberate about answering these questions in advance—purposefully seeking to strike a balance, going beyond their legal minimum requirements and being prepared for the toughest situations—will be able to attract the employees they want.

At Broad Reach, we suggest that businesses take this a big step further and ask themselves whether they even need “special accommodations”—could you simply take this opportunity to build more trust into your workplace, measuring employees on their output and value rather than on the number of hours they put in? The work world is moving in that direction—now might be the time to get onboard and demonstrate that your company is ahead of the curve.

There will be detractors of flexible models, particularly those who want to reduce employees' pay accordingly. But the old “punch-the-clock” industrial model has run its course. It's not at all difficult to imagine a world in which employees are told, “These are your projects. How, when, and where you get them done doesn't matter to us.”

This approach has been proven to work.

A few years ago, Bruce Bowser, the Chairman of AMJ Campbell and co-author of *The Focus Effect: Change Your Work, Change Your Life*, ran an experiment with his administrative team. Based on the research he was doing for his book, he determined that the time that most people were actually working productively in an eight-hour day was about four or five hours. Rather than treat that discovery as a negative, he codified it: he asked his team to put in a solid five hours a day, and said they could do it whenever and wherever they wanted as long as they met their deadlines.

The result? Productivity skyrocketed, and employees were happier and even healthier (sick days went down!). He was able to cut down on office space, as many chose to work from home. He proved that there was no value involved in sitting at a desk for eight hours. As he says in his book, “When a working environment is shaped by an emphasis on the value of employees’ time at work rather than a fixed notion of how long they work, good things happen.” [1] He got *more* value out of his employees by demanding *less time* and providing *more flexibility*. The key to success, he proved, is not a longer day with more hours; it’s finding focus for a shorter period, and trusting people to get the job done.

Now, if that kind of model were overlaid with the old hourly mentality (“You worked five hours? We’ll pay you for five hours.”), we would lose all the benefits. We can’t allow this to be an exercise in cost-cutting. Instead, make it an exercise in recalibrating what it means to bring value as an employee. Let’s overlay the model with a sense of respect, with a salary structure that pays people for the work they’re expected to complete rather than the time they’re expected to put in—clearly communicating that they are valued for their skill and output. If we can do that, employees—and companies—will thrive.

[1] Bruce Bowser and Greg Wells, *The Focus Effect: Change Your Work, Change Your Life* (Nevada: Lioncrest Publishing, 2018).

Making it Official

We're evolving to a more humane, healthy and compassionate way of working. Employees want to have the time and space to manage their health, explore their interests and spend time with their families and friends. If we can clearly communicate that the people they work for value those same things, they'll come to work refreshed and motivated, rather than exhausted and reluctant.

The business world made these changes during the pandemic. We've proven that this approach can work. Now it's time to make it official, turn these temporary changes into permanent decisions and take these concepts even further. Let's figure out how to let our employees manage their work in the ways that work best for them, accommodating their wide variety of preferences and needs, giving them flexibility to manage their lives, and trusting them to deliver the value we know they can bring.



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Andrea has more than two decades of experience as a communications strategist and trusted advisor for some of the world's most respected brands.

She has deep experience counselling C-level executives, mid-level managers and boards across a range of industry sectors including professional and financial services, legal, insurance, real estate, technology, telecommunications, mining, manufacturing and energy. Before founding Broad Reach, Andrea was a strategy consultant at Deloitte, held successively senior roles in the public relations industry, and worked in the public affairs division at the Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C.

Committed to her community, Andrea serves on the boards of Women of Influence, an organization dedicated to the advancement of professional women, and the Boost Child & Youth Advocacy Centre. She also recently held a board position with the Toronto chapter of the Young Presidents' Organization (YPO).

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David has more than 25 years of experience as a communications professional specializing in crisis communications, issues management, and transactions. He has managed high-profile client crises involving data breaches, community protests, employee deaths, executive terminations, third-party investigations, labour disruptions, facility closures, hostile takeovers, litigation, regulatory interventions, restructurings, and bankruptcies. He has worked with clients across Europe, Asia and the Americas, at leading organizations in energy, financial services, government, healthcare, manufacturing, professional services, resources, and utilities.

Earlier in his career he held senior positions with FleishmanHillard and National Public Relations as practice lead of financial communications and corporate communications, respectively. Prior to consulting, David led the proactive public relations team at Scotiabank, served as a senior advisor to the President of York University, and was a policy advisor to two Ontario Cabinet Ministers.

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COVID-19 Thought Leadership

Long before the COVID-19 outbreak, Broad Reach was a leading voice in guiding the communications of Canadian companies and their leaders through crises and out the other side. As the pandemic has evolved, the company's advice has been featured in publications across a broad range of industries, including mining, automotive, accounting, investment and entrepreneurship. Visit our [COVID-19 page](#) for links to bylined articles, interviews, webcasts and podcast episodes featuring Broad Reach President Andrea Lekushoff.

On Point Podcast

As we slowly emerge from a worldwide crisis, one of the most important ways business leaders need to adapt their communications approach is to start showing their humanity. In [On Point: Bringing Humanity to Leadership Communications](#), Andrea Lekushoff interviews thought leaders, best-selling authors, executives, academics, and health and wellness experts to explore the role of communications in a time of crisis and how leaders can—and must—evolve their approach.



BROAD REACH

C O M M U N I C A T I O N S

Broad Reach is a full-service PR agency that creates powerful campaigns to help organizations elevate their brands, build their reputations, engage influencers and drive business results. Since 2008, Broad Reach has represented an impressive roster of global clients and has earned shelves of coveted industry awards. Outperforming our peers by being “In a League of Our Own,” Broad Reach is a fast-growing, innovative, entrepreneurial agency staffed by the industry’s top talent. Our people enjoy a flexible, team-spirited environment where they can really connect with clients, feel valued and supported, and produce their best work.

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