NAVIGATING COVID-19

VACCINATION AND THE WORKPLACE

How Executives Approach the Next Phase of the Pandemic
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*BY JATHAN JANOVE*  

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One year into the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work continues to be the norm, with many employers and employees forgoing in-person interaction for video meetings and conference calls. Once an interesting idea, growing to 5.2 percent (about eight million people) of the workforce in 2017, remote work is now the day-to-day reality for many in the workplace.

With each passing month, working Americans have become more comfortable with working re-motely. Based on February 2021 research from SHRM, more than half of employed Americans (52 percent) would choose to permanently work from home (i.e., never return to their worksite) on a full-time basis if given the option. Thirty-five percent would even accept a reduction in salary if it meant permanently working from home on a full-time basis. Organizations need to respond accordingly, taking into account employee preferences in an increasingly virtual world.

According to recent SHRM research, two-thirds of HR professionals say all the employees at their organization continue to work remotely or have only partially returned to the workplace. More than one-third of U.S. organizations (34 percent) are unsure when they will bring all employees back to the worksite. For many employers, a hybrid work model is poised to become the norm in 2021.
At this critical juncture, a return to traditional work depends primarily on the decisions that employers and employees make about the COVID-19 vaccine. A full-scale return to in-person worksites cannot happen until organizations and their HR professionals determine what they will require regarding vaccination, and what employees will do.

The world of work, workers and the workplace is marked with great uncertainty as to how vaccine distribution will affect employers and employees. The prevailing questions are simple, yet not so straightforward to answer: Will employers require their workers to be vaccinated before returning to worksites? And will employees comply? As organizations strive for better workplaces and a better world, consensus is difficult to come by.

THE EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE

As the COVID-19 vaccine is distributed, public consensus is noticeably lacking, but pro-vaccine sentiments are most common. While mass vaccination has not yet been reached, with only 14 percent of employed Americans already receiving the COVID-19 vaccine, most employees are open to the idea of vaccination. The majority of working Americans (60 percent) will “probably” or “definitely” receive the vaccine once it becomes available to them.

Of the employed Americans who plan to get vaccinated, over half (56 percent) say they will receive the vaccine as soon as possible. Still, many Americans are skeptical about COVID-19 vaccination. Forty percent of employees will “probably not” or “definitely not” receive the vaccine. Of those employees, 70 percent claim they would not get vaccinated if their employer required it, even if it meant risking termination from their job. Twenty-eight percent of working Americans are willing to lose their job over the vaccine or take a pay cut to continue working from home. All signs point to increased turnover.

Among skeptical Americans, 69 percent are concerned about possible side effects, 58 percent plan to wait and see if the vaccine is safe and possibly receive it later, and 41 percent claim to not trust the COVID-19 vaccine altogether. While the reasoning varies and most employees are open to vaccination, those who have deep-seated concerns present a challenge for organizations seeking better workplaces and a better world. In the months to come, employers will need to reckon with a workforce that is split in sentiment, along pro- and anti-vaccine lines.
**THE EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVE**

Before the COVID-19 vaccine became publicly available, more than half of organizations (55 percent) were uncertain whether they would require employees to receive the vaccine before returning to work. Since then, uncertainty has dropped, with just over one-third of organizations (35 percent) currently unsure whether a requirement will be imposed.

While many employers remain undecided, those that have decided are increasingly averse to a vaccination requirement. In a December 2020 survey from SHRM, two-fifths of employers said they would not require employees to receive the vaccine before returning to work. In a subsequent February survey, that number increased to 60 percent. Only five percent of employers have committed to requiring the vaccine for some or all of their workers, a percentage that has remained steady in recent months.

**FIGURE 2: DECLINES IN ORGANIZATIONAL VACCINE MANDATE INTENTIONS OVER TIME**

![Figure 2: Declines in Organizational Vaccine Mandate Intentions Over Time](image)

Whether required or not, more employers are planning to encourage their employees to receive the COVID-19 vaccine than ever before. Of the organizations that are unsure or are not planning to require the vaccine for their employees at all, 74 percent will still encourage workers to get vaccinated once those workers are eligible. Some employers are even offering or plan to offer incentives for employees willing to get vaccinated, such as additional paid time off, cash bonuses and stipends.
LOOKING AHEAD
A RETURN TO THE WORKPLACE?

For months now, employers have dealt with unforeseen circumstances and severe disruptions in workflow, and there is more COVID-19-related uncertainty to come. If a vaccine requirement leads to substantial turnover, can organizations deal with that outflow of talent? Do they have the talent recruitment pipeline to handle skill replacement? Similarly, if organizations are forced to adopt a hybrid work model, how do they sustain their workplace culture in the meantime?

Organizations, led by HR professionals leveraging SHRM resources, should plan for the future by preparing for vaccine-related turnover. This means understanding the skills of current employees and those who may replace them. Given the differing opinions about the COVID-19 vaccine, U.S. organizations should educate their employees about the vaccine and make plans to potentially move forward with a hybrid working environment. A fully vaccinated workforce in a single location may not be realistic.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach, and employers should do what they feel is best for their business. To that end, SHRM resources can help ensure that learning and development is a top priority for HR professionals and other organizational leaders tasked with recruiting and retaining talent. Organizations need to consider a multi-pronged approach, not only supporting current employees through upskilling, reskilling and redeployment but also coping with workforce reductions via outsourcing, outplacement, and other tactics. Regardless of the approach, organizations should enable and encourage two-way skills transparency, mapping out the skills of their current employees and those who are hired to fill vacant positions.

Until mass vaccination is widely accepted as an inevitable reality or employers develop viable plans for a split workforce, a return to traditional work will remain elusive. Lingering skepticism about the vaccine and a lack of vision for the future workplace bring America no closer to the pandemic’s conclusion.

THERE IS NOT A ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL APPROACH TO COVID-19 VACCINATION FOR BUSINESSES, DO WHAT IS BEST FOR YOUR BUSINESS

LEVERAGING COVID-19 RESOURCES

In the meantime, it is imperative for organizations—led by HR professionals and other decision-makers—to leverage the resources available to them. As organizations work to promote health and safety in the workplace, they are not in this fight alone. From employer surveys to legal information on vaccine requirements and how-to guides on employee accommodations, SHRM offers a wide range of coronavirus-related resources that can help steer organizations through the public-health crisis. Those resources can be accessed here.
The city of Phoenix recently announced that it will pay each employee $75 to get vaccinated. Why pay someone to do something that’s supposedly in their own best interest?

For employers longing to see COVID-19 in the rearview mirror, SHRM has sobering news. Nearly 2,500 SHRM members responded to random electronic surveys in December 2020 and January 2021. Members surveyed represented U.S. organizations ranging in size from two to over 25,000 employees. The topic: receptivity to vaccination. The results of these surveys were analyzed in conjunction with a survey of working Americans done by the University of Chicago in late January.

The surveys’ bottom line: Up to 40 percent of the workforce may opt out on vaccination. I asked Dr. Charles Elder, Portland, Ore., what this means in terms of herd immunity. If these survey results prove accurate, will we be able to relegate COVID-19 to the past? “People can become immune either by getting COVID-19, or by getting vaccinated,” Elder stated. “In order to prevent broad community transmission of SARS-CoV-2, experts project that herd immunity must be maintained in the range of 75 percent.” These numbers suggest we’re in for a long, tough haul before potentially achieving herd immunity.

“We could see a real ‘vaccine vortex’ and a potential financial firestorm impacting employers who need a vaccinated workforce to sustain their enterprises, and those who are likely to avoid the vaccine at all costs,” stated SHRM Chief Knowledge Officer Alex Alonso, SHRM-SCP, based in Alexandria, Va. “The number of employees who indicate they will not get the vaccine, even at the risk of losing their job, raises important questions for organizations.”

Should employers who find this information disturbing make vaccination mandatory and perhaps also require proof of vaccination as a condition of employment.

The survey data indicates that of the 40 percent inclined to opt out, nearly a third said they would get vaccinated if necessary to keep their jobs. Nearly a quarter of the 40 percent group said that if vaccination isn’t required but encouraged, they would consider getting the COVID-19 vaccine if offered incentives. Although sample sizes are too small to be statistically significant, incentives that might be persuasive include cash, additional paid time off, gift cards, food vouchers and convenient onsite, no-cost vaccination.

Another point worth noting regarding the 40 percent: Although sample sizes were too small to be statistically significant, the survey suggests that as additional information and evidence of the vaccine’s safety and positive effects arise, potentially a substantial number of vaccine resisters will move to the other side. Elder believes that many people who initially balk at the vaccination can in fact be convinced. “Vaccine acceptance can be materially improved when physicians directly recommend the vaccine to patients, through dispelling misunderstandings about the disease and vaccination process, and with adequate education about vaccine risks and benefits.”

Where Do We Go from Here?

“If CEO, I would create and lead a steering committee
of the company to assess the situation and activate a company response,” stated Doug Conant, former CEO of Campbell Soup Co. in Philadelphia. His steering committee would include the head of HR, general counsel, the head of global supply chain, the chief medical officer, the head of corporate communications and the chief financial officer.

According to Conant, specific members of the steering committee would be responsible for shaping and shepherding each of the following three streams of activity: (1) an education program for all employees and their families, (2) an employee-representative task force to explicitly gather employee input and connect the population to the process, and (3) an expert panel from within the company to ensure that the company was well connected to all industry and government agencies. This panel would also be responsible for staying abreast of corporate response efforts within the organization and beyond.

Conant stated he would also set up regular briefing meetings for the steering committee “and design a process where each stream of activity was kept appropriately abreast of the developments of the other streams of activity.”

Conant also would set a deadline. “We would have a goal of finalizing and activating a company response plan within 30 days.”

Whatever policies an employer adopts, McManus recommended inclusion of these components:

1. A learning and development program using reliable sources of information, so that employees can educate themselves and their families on the vaccine(s).

2. A procedure for individuals who are mandated to receive the vaccine to request accommodation for medical or religious reasons. “Many employers already have these types of procedures in place, so it might be helpful to review them to see if any updates are needed for this consideration.”

3. A review committee consisting of leadership with decision-making authority and professionals with knowledge of HR, benefits, occupational health and legal to review policy issues and requests for accommodations, as well as address employee questions or concerns about the policies.

4. A communications plan identifying the who, what, when, where and why of the vaccination policies. “A communications plan helps employers to think carefully through the necessary steps, timing and types of messaging to ensure a more successful rollout.”

Staying Current on the Latest Updates

“It is essential to have a team that stays completely aware of the most recent information regarding the benefits and potential side effects of the vaccine,” stated Paul Jones, chief people officer, USANA Health Sciences, Salt Lake City. “This team should be charged with educating the entire company workforce to ensure all understand the risks and rewards.”

Jones also recommended that companies “wrestle with how established policies regarding this issue can affect the culture and trust in the organization. Gathering insight regarding specific courses of action prior to taking those actions will significantly reduce the risk of negatively impacting those vital factors of a successful organization.”

Rich Stayner, CEO at Bridge Property Management in Sandy, Utah, sees both sides of the argument for vaccination. “As an employer, I want to keep all employees as well as residents of our properties safe. We do that now by requiring masks, social distancing, temperature registration and any personal protection that is necessary.”

Colleen McManus, SHRM-SCP, a Phoenix-based senior HR executive for the state of Arizona, thinks along similar lines. “It’s probably not realistic for an employer to hope for a permanently COVID-19-free workplace. There are too many variables out of the employer’s control.”

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COLLEEN MCMANUS, SHRM-SCP
“The thought of making a vaccine a requirement for employment seems too extreme at the moment,” Stayner stated. He propounds developing an overall action plan of education about vaccines as well as health and wellness protocols and potentially a program for vaccination that’s not necessarily mandatory.

“One of the things I struggle with is the thought that the current vaccine, in its current form, only has antibodies for a certain amount of time. Does that mean that the policy of vaccination would now exist on an annual basis in order for employees to stay employed? This seems extreme. I believe there are just too many unknowns to use ‘mandatory’ as part of new or continued employment,” Stayner said.

**Alternatives to Mandatory Vaccination**

When there are a significant number of workers who are unlikely to get vaccinations in a timely fashion, Michael Tkach, Psy.D., chief operating and behavioral health officer, Affinity Return to Work in St. Paul, Minn., recommended that employers consider alternatives to mandatory vaccination. “These can include COVID-19 screening, minimizing shift overlap, monitoring overall adherence to COVID-19 reduction techniques and preventive PCR testing—a COVID-19 molecular test that uses the polymerase chain reaction lab technique.”

Tkach noted that PCR tests may be seen as less invasive or less anxiety producing than vaccines since they report whether the virus is present “instead of introducing a medical compound with an intended biological effect.” He added, “Results can then be monitored through an appropriate HR representative to verify current infection status, helping to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spreading through the workforce, and giving employers and employees peace of mind at work.”
 Returning employees to the workplace during and after the COVID-19 pandemic won’t be as simple as announcing a reopening or return-to-the-workplace date and carrying on business as usual. Not only will many workplaces be altered initially, some changes may be long term, even beyond the imagined “finish line” of a widely available vaccine or treatment.

The details of each employer’s plan to return will look different, but there are 10 key issues most will need to understand and start preparing for now.

IN THIS CHECKLIST:

- Workplace Safety
- Recall Procedures
- Employee Benefits
- Compensation
- Remote Work
- Communications
- New-Hire Paperwork
- Policy Changes
- Business Continuity Plans
- Unions

ACCESS THE CHECKLIST
METHODOLOGY:

HR SURVEY 1
The HR survey was fielded electronically to a random sample of active SHRM members from December 14th through December 17, 2020. In total, 955 members responded to the survey. Academics, students, consultants and retired HR professionals were excluded from the survey. Respondents represented organizations of all sizes—from two to more than 25,000 employees—in a wide variety of industries across the United States. HR data is unweighted.

HR SURVEY 2
The HR survey was fielded electronically to a random sample of active SHRM members from January 28th through February 2, 2021. In total, 1515 members responded to the survey. Academics, students, consultants and retired HR professionals were excluded from the survey. Respondents represented organizations of all sizes—from two to more than 25,000 employees—in a wide variety of industries across the United States. HR data is unweighted.

EMPLOYED AMERICANS SURVEY
A sample of 1,000 Americans was surveyed using the Amerispeak Omnibus, NORC at the University of Chicago's probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. The survey was administered Thursday, January 28 to Monday, February 1, 2021. Of the 1,000 Americans surveyed, 540 were either working as a paid employee or laid off or furloughed since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. For the purposes of this survey, we refer to this group as “employed Americans.” All data was weighted to reflect the U.S. adult population.