

# Balance **WORKPLACE SAFETY** with **EMPLOYEE RIGHTS**

How to communicate with employees about the vaccine.

**T**he end of the tunnel is finally here – shots are in arms around the globe, the spread of the pandemic is slowing in vaccinated areas, and something like normal life is at long last in sight. I even went out to a movie a few weeks ago; I'd forgotten how incredibly loud they are! There's traffic on the streets again, and the trains are full of enough people that you have to jockey for space. It's almost like old times.

"Almost," of course, is inevitably followed by "not quite." Across the country, at least, there remains an insidious barrier to normalcy: anti-vax misinformation. And just as we're beginning to fully reopen in the US, we seem to have hit the ceiling on vaccinations with a rate of only 48%. This is far short of the needlessly elusive "herd immunity" (the fully-immunized percentage – estimated to be 70% – at which non-immune people are at virtually zero risk of infection). Currently, unvaccinated individuals are getting infected at steady or even increasing rates. Which puts companies and particularly HR Executives and Professionals in the difficult position of determining whether vaccination should be required in the workplace, how to implement new policies, and how to effectively communicate to motivate as many employees as possible to get vaccinated.

Naturally, there are arguments to both sides and in order to help motivate those who are hesitant, understanding both is essential. On one hand, the vaccine very clearly works and is demonstrably safe. Infection rates are plummeting as even the highly-virulent delta strain finds fewer and fewer unvaccinated hosts, providing hope for an end to a global mass-casualty event. On the other hand, there is a large number of people who, for one reason or another, legitimately do not trust that this vaccine is safe (keep in mind that some of those reasons are extremely valid – especially in communities that have had negative experiences with medical professionals and the



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healthcare industry at large). So what are we to do? However blatantly unfounded antivax claims are – no, the vaccine won't turn you into a human magnet – the vast number of people who actually believe them means we have no choice but to reckon with the situation.

While it would be easy to say that everyone should simply make their own decision, after all, those who are vaccinated are protected, it's far more complicated than that. Without the coveted herd immunity, the virus can and will continue to spread and mutate, potentially into more virulent and lethal forms that could even outmatch the vaccines. And, through no fault of their own, vaccinated immunocompromised people may not be able to achieve full immunity, although new research now suggests otherwise. What do we owe workers with immune deficiencies? There's a saying that your rights stop where someone else's begin; however, it's clear, especially by this point in the pandemic,

that the reality is not so simple.

Vaccination as a public health measure is essential to ensuring community safety; as a workplace policy, it protects both employees and unvaccinated clients and customers alike from infection, while allowing workplaces to reopen and in-person meetings to resume. And while it might not be possible to change every vaccine skeptic's mind, there are some communication strategies that can help.

My background and expertise is in communications, so from that perspective, here are some of my recommendations for communicating with employees about the vaccine.

1. *Start with empathy.* Do your best to understand why the employee is hesitant to get the vaccine. What exactly are their concerns? Really listen and reserve judgment. Remember, empathy is key! Then offer clear, concise and fact-based evidence. Without empathy, you aren't really communicating, so listen and understand their concerns (even and especially if you don't share them, this is about the employee, not you).
2. *Remove barriers.* Make getting the vaccine as easy as possible for employees. Provide time off, even offer transportation and additional sick days for those who get the vaccine in case they feel unwell afterwards.
3. *Incentivize vaccination.* Offer bonuses, paid time off or other material, direct benefits. While there's been limited success with this strategy, it's still worth trying. Linking vaccination to reward rather than punishment is going to sway some people.
4. *Appeal to emotions.* What are employees missing out on by not being vaccinated? Champion the message that the vaccine is what allows us to enjoy all of the things we've had to miss out on for over a year, without having to worry about infecting ourselves or others!
5. *Prioritize the safety of immunocompromised employees (if and wherever possible).* Schedule employees returning to the office so that unvaccinated workers do not share shifts or common workspaces with immunocompromised employees, and keep the workplace thoroughly disinfected.
6. *Restrict unvaccinated workers from public-facing roles.* This will help prevent

inadvertent spreading of the disease. Make it clear that, while their employment is not conditional on vaccination, the company does have an obligation to ensure the safety of all of its employees and clients and that other work will be found for them unless and until they accede or the pandemic fully resolves.

7. *Require frequent and regular PCR infection tests for unvaccinated employees.* Be sure to have a system in place to track and check the results and furlough infected workers until they're clear.

These are practical recommendations for any HR Professional to consider that, while not the most fun, attempt to respect both the agency of unvaccinated employees and the health of everyone else. Are some of them a pain? Yes, but, as we all know by now, COVID-19 isn't something we can simply wish away, and safety for everyone will require ongoing life changes for people who, of their own volition, decline vaccination. While HR can't take responsibility for their decisions, your company has every obligation to respond to those decisions appropriately and ensure the safety of your employees, clients and customers. Do your best to take care of what you can. ■

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