

HR's next big job: Convincing employees to get COVID vaccines

Employers are seen as allies in the distribution and encouragement of coronavirus vaccines. But with some employee skepticism, how can they succeed?

By: Kathryn Mayer | 12-10-2020 | Human Resource Executive



(Photo by Mario Tama/Getty Images)

After months of COVID-related mayhem that's touched every aspect of work, there's finally a bright spot in the form of vaccines that are in the midst of being approved and rolled out around the world.

Even though company and HR leaders have already navigated a number of pandemic-related trials over the past year—from keeping employees safe and healthy and moving operations remote to navigating productivity challenges—they're gearing up for perhaps their most significant challenge yet: getting employees to buy into the vaccines.

It's a tall order: Skepticism and hesitation surround the new vaccines coming out from Pfizer, Moderna and other makers. Recent surveys show as few as half of Americans are determined to be vaccinated against COVID-19.

“This is a complicated issue, with strong feelings for and against personally receiving the vaccine, but it is important to maintain an inclusive and safe culture at work,” says Jaime Klein, founder and CEO of consulting firm Inspire Human Resources.

The polarization means that employers—viewed as an ally in getting scores of Americans vaccinated—have significant work to do in order to convince employees to get vaccinated. And they’ll likely face backlash.

“There is going to be an uproar as decisions are made by these larger corporations, and it’s going to be interesting as it plays out,” says Justin Holland, CEO and founder of HealthJoy, a benefits company that works with employers. But it’s a decision that couldn’t be more important.

“This is probably the first time that HR is having to make a choice from the health and wellness perspective of their organization,” he says. “Companies have to make a stand. They have to decide what side of history they want to be on.”

Most experts agree on one thing: Employers play a vital role in helping promote COVID-19 vaccinations. They’re gatekeepers for the health and safety of employees. And without employees getting vaccinated against COVID-19, there’s no such thing as a safe return to work. As they have been for the past 10 months, offices are ripe for infection and rapid spread of the virus. Exposure is repeatedly shutting down workplaces, forcing deep cleans, quarantining and other measures to keep workers safe.

It’s a routine that employers can’t afford—in any sense of the word—for another year. And of course, there are liabilities for organizations if employees get infected with COVID-19 in the workplace.

“Imagine the amount of employees who could say, ‘I got COVID at work’—who’s going to want to deal with that?” – Justin Holland, CEO and founder of HealthJoy.

“You’re never going to have a situation where you have employees in the office without a vaccine,” Holland says. “Imagine the amount of employees who could say, ‘I got COVID at work’—who’s going to want to deal with that?”

Others agree.

“The distribution of COVID vaccines will be critical to getting back to business as usual,” says Michael Thompson, president and CEO of the National Alliance of Healthcare Purchaser Coalitions, a nonprofit, purchaser-led organization that represents some 12,000 employers. “Employers have a strong stake in ensuring the success of these public health efforts and can be a real ally in making it happen effectively.”

So how do they do it?

It’s a lot about communication and facts. “Between anti-vaxxers and the amount of misinformation through social media, they’re going to have to communicate what is the factual information for distribution of the vaccine,” says Holland, adding that HR and company leaders can offer employees consistent safety and efficiency data on the COVID

vaccine. “The employer is playing a role being a credible fact source, and that’s very, very important.”

Klein adds that employers can amplify the voices of reputable medical experts and reinforce advice from organizations like the CDC say regarding the safety and benefits of receiving a vaccination and the risks of not receiving it.

“Employer efforts to educate on the merits of vaccines in general, and the COVID vaccination process specifically, can make a real difference to mitigate vaccine hesitancy,” Thompson adds. “Transparency and trust will be the key.”

Employers also will likely be at the center of distribution when doses of the vaccine are available, which will give employees ample opportunity to receive their shots. Employers will likely add temporary onsite clinics—in a safe way.

“For essential workers, employers will have to navigate different distribution strategies by state, but they can logically be a natural avenue to organize and support the effort for distribution to these workers,” Thompson says.

Like other vaccinations—including the annual flu shot—employers might be wise to roll the COVID-19 vaccine into their existing wellness program and tie getting it to incentives, Holland says. That may prompt some employees who are unsure about getting the vaccine to do so.

Of course, it’s likely that some employers may not simply nudge employees to get the vaccine, but they will mandate it. That’s something Holland predicts will be seen in the coming months.

For now, of utmost importance is employers coming up with a COVID vaccination plan: Will they make the vaccine mandatory? Who will get it? Will they roll it out? How will they communicate the benefits and how often? And will companies continue to embrace remote work or a hybrid approach in a post-vaccine world?

Although having a plan of action for the vaccine may seem obvious, it’s something most employers have been kicking the can on for the past several months while they wait for news and updates on COVID-19 and see how things play out. Meanwhile, many HR leaders were busy focusing on other priorities in the last couple of months, like readying for open enrollment and rolling out a new set of benefits for the year.

But a wait-and-see approach for a vaccination plan can no longer wait, experts say.

“This has got to be your first priority going into 2021,” Holland says.