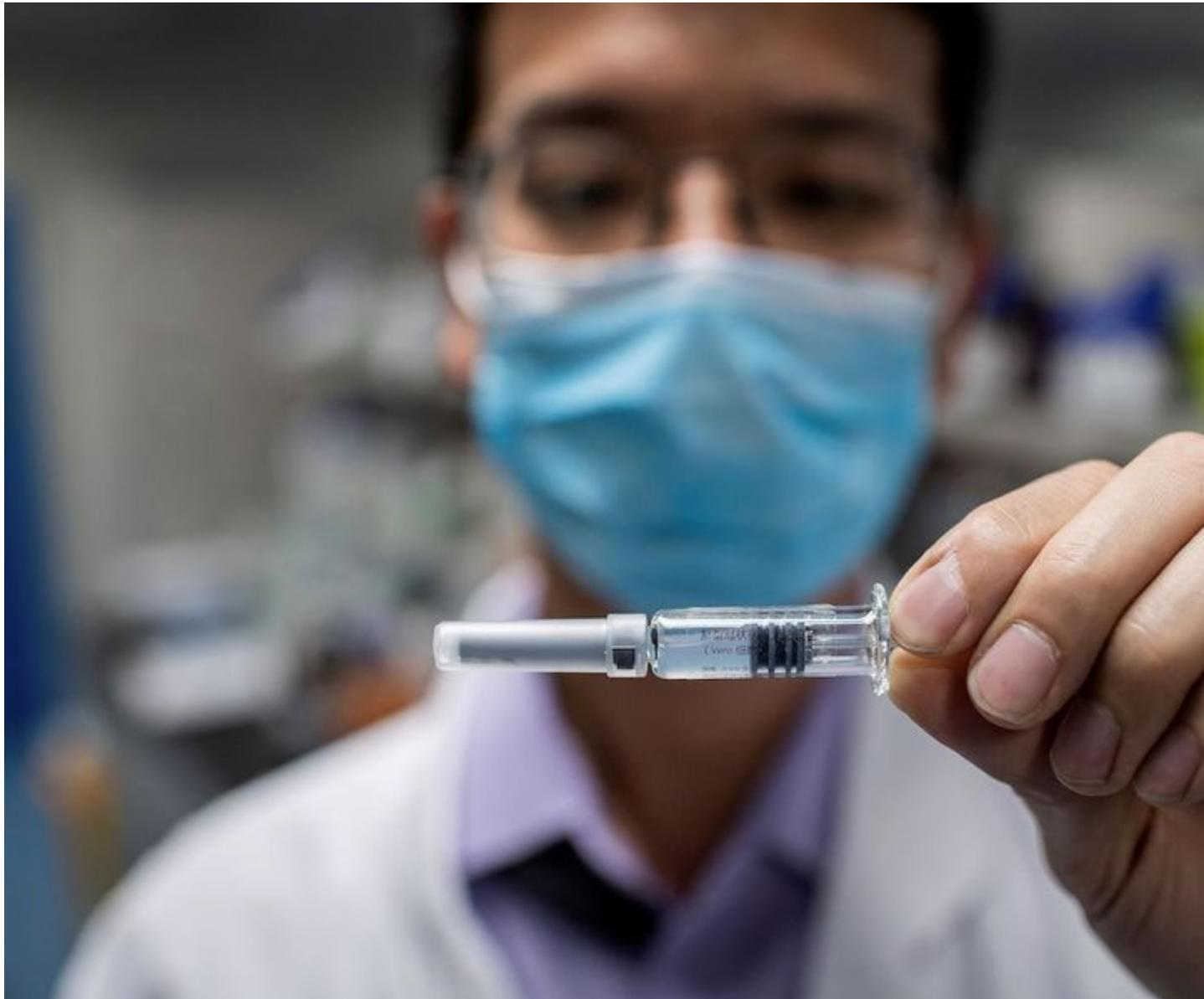


What is companies' role in ensuring workers get vaccinated?

Published November 23rd 2020



The world has not yet rounded a corner, but the corner is, at least, within sight. In the past two weeks data from late-stage trials of three different vaccines, developed by Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca, have shown spectacular results. An end to the pandemic could

well be approaching. As soon as the news came out, managers began considering the implications. “I have been getting questions already from clients,” says Deena Merlen, an employment lawyer at Reavis Page Jump, a law firm in New York. Companies, she says, are asking: **“Can we require it? Should we require it? What if people don’t want a shot?”** Just as we are able to require that people wear masks, isn’t it the same thing?”

The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission suggests that, during a pandemic, **“employers should consider simply encouraging employees to get the influenza vaccine, rather than requiring them to take it”**. Experts suggest that the same guidance would apply for covid-19—though vaccination could be made mandatory for some workers, such as those in health care, social care and other professions dealing with vulnerable people. But even then, American disability and civil-rights legislation, and similar laws in Europe, create carve-outs for several protected classes.

For the rest of the population, however, nudges are likely to work better than rules. Firms can—and should—make it easier for their staff to get shots, and should play their part in encouraging the take up of vaccination. We spoke to lawyers, sociologists, economists and HR experts to understand the role that companies can play in fighting covid.

- **Firms have a duty to get involved.** “Everyone is seeing this vaccine as some immediate thing. Obviously it’s going to take months for it to roll out, even in the developed world,” says Randall Peterson, a professor of organisational behaviour at the London Business School. “The involvement of private employers is going to be critical to do this at scale, at speed, and to actually get it done.”
- **A “take it or leave it” approach will not be enough for covid-19.** “It’s more than just the casual, ‘this is available if you feel like it’,” says Mr Peterson. Many employers already offer staff members a flu vaccine if they want it. When it comes to covid-19 shots, however, he suggests companies should shift towards positive encouragement. “As a private employer you can even say ‘we expect you to’ or ‘we want you to’,” he says, as with other things that firms may strongly encourage without actually mandating, such as safety training or diversity training.

It is in the interests of companies and their employees to get back to business quickly. So what can companies do to encourage and maximise take-up?

- **Make it easy for workers to get a shot.** For firms that don’t offer vaccination on site, offering paid time off to go get a shot is a simple solution. Offering to pay taxi fares is an added bonus.
- **Inconvenience plays a bigger role than misinformation** in explaining why people don’t get vaccinated, according to Melinda Mills, an Oxford sociologist who conducted a rapid review of the behavioural aspects of vaccine uptake and misinformation for the Royal Society and the British Academy. “When you want your employees to do something, you have to provide them with the lowest possible hurdle to do it,” she says. That means taking into account the costs (in both time and money) of taking time off work, and minimising them.

- **Firms should start preparing now**, by deciding which department will be responsible for vaccination. “It could fall under risk management, or it could fall under HR as part of the on-boarding process,” says Amber Clayton, director of the HR Knowledge Centre at the Society for Human Resource Management. She cites her own example: “I used to work in the health-care field, and I was responsible for ensuring that we received tuberculosis information for new hires.”

Moreover, how a company handles vaccine policy could enhance its reputation as an employer—or damage it.

- **Some firms may offer covid-19 shots as a perk:** “I think we will see a lot of leadership by companies who want to differentiate themselves, who will say ‘we have secured access because it is difficult to get, and you can get it for free, and you can get it on site’,” says Iwan Barankay, an expert on behavioural economics and workplace incentives at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania.
- **Having a vaccination programme shows companies care about their workers.** “I don’t know that having a flu vaccine or providing that to workers is a big factor in someone coming to an organisation,” says Ms Clayton. But “because of the seriousness of covid, it could be that somebody wants to work for an organisation that has put safety measures in place. I know for myself I would want to work for an organisation that takes those things seriously.”
- **Firms that do nothing run the risk of reputational damage.** In today’s febrile environment, when customers and workers are quick to call out companies for wrongs real or perceived, companies that don’t at least provide paid time off to get vaccinated are likely to be shamed on social media, reckons Mr Barankay.

While many employees will be grateful for a vaccine, some may be sceptical—not just those who object to vaccines per se, but also those who are concerned that vaccine development might have been rushed, or are worried about the lack of information about long-term side-effects (which is inevitable for new drugs). Plenty of smart, sensible people will need coaxing. What is the best way to do it?

- **Provide role models in an organisation.** That does not just mean having the CEO or chairman rolling up their sleeves to get the jab. It can be even more effective to emphasise broad, diverse take-up across the organisation. “You need to see that men do it, women do it, African Americans, Hispanics—not just rich white guys,” says Mr Barankay. Providing role models that everyone can relate to early in the process can get the ball rolling.
- **Later in the process, encourage the hesitant through strength of numbers.** HR departments can send emails or Slack messages telling workers that “80% of staff members have taken the shot”, for example, choosing the whole organisation, a department or whichever unit has the most impressive numbers. (Such cherry-picking is frowned upon in journalism, but not in communicating messages for public health.) “This side-steps a lot of problems,” says Mr Barankay, who says that rather than getting into pointless arguments with vaccine sceptics, social pressure can be more effective.

Over the coming weeks and months, more vaccine-makers will report their results. As vaccines are certified for general use, a historic mobilisation will be required over the course of 2021 and 2022 to vaccinate the entire world. National governments, non-profit groups and educational establishments will have a role to play. So will employers. **Those that start thinking about it now will be in the best position to ensure the welfare of their workers when the effort starts—and to get back to work.**

Dig deeper: The US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has a [detailed FAQ](#) on pandemic preparedness in the workplace and its relation to the Americans with Disabilities Act. The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention have some tips on [vaccination in the workplace](#). The Association of State and Territorial Health Officials has a [40-page guidebook](#) on “Boosting Influenza Immunizations at Work” aimed at state health departments.