

HR Insights



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Communicating With Employees About COVID-19 Vaccines

Employee communications related to the pandemic have played a major role in keeping employees safe and healthy while navigating operational changes and challenges. Now, the long-awaited COVID-19 vaccines have become available after the Food and Drug Administration issued emergency use authorization for two vaccines. As initial supplies of COVID-19 vaccines are allocated for people in certain groups, employers can and should begin planning for when the general public has access.

More than 70% of Americans say they will get vaccinated against COVID-19, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation poll. Although the vaccines are exciting to most, the topic can also present challenges for employers as they decide whether vaccination will be encouraged or required—and ultimately how to get buy-in from hesitant employees.

As employers plan to navigate the legal risks and logistics of employee vaccinations, this article explores what, how and when to communicate about COVID-19 vaccines with employees.

What to Communicate

Employers play a critical role in helping promote and providing accurate information about COVID-19 vaccinations. Employees getting vaccinated against COVID-19 can be a driving force for a safe return to work. That's the big picture that should be reinforced with employees.

Employee vaccination should be driven by transparent communication and facts. As employers develop their COVID-19 vaccination plans, employee communication will play a pivotal role in the plan coming to life in the workplace. Employers should consider sharing the following information with employees:

- General COVID-19 vaccine information:
 - Overview of available vaccines and their differences
 - Facts and myths about the vaccine
 - How vaccines work
 - Benefits
 - Efficacy and safety
 - Possible side effects
- Vaccination timelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), including distribution phases for targeted groups and the general public
- Vaccination timelines for the organization
- Organization vaccination policy
- Vaccination sites (whether at authorized clinics and pharmacies, or on-site)
- Vaccination costs (including potential paid time off for getting vaccinated or recovering from any side effects)
- Workplace COVID-19 safety precautions or protocols, such as continuing to wear a mask and avoiding close contact in the workplace

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- Educational resources to learn more about COVID-19 vaccines

Employers' communication efforts will be more successful with a thoughtful, proactive approach, rather than a reactive one. Anticipate common vaccine objections and questions, and help mitigate concerns and doubts by providing accurate, engaging and educational information to employees.

Keep in mind that messaging should also reflect what local health officials and health care providers are communicating. Lean on research and guidance from the CDC and other public health experts. Keep in mind that CDC guidance continues to evolve with the pandemic and can change frequently.

How to Communicate

As with any communication, tailoring it to each audience is critical. Attitude and perspectives on vaccinations can and will vary. A one-size-fits-all approach will not be as effective, so conduct some research to better understand employees. Consider pretesting content and making it available in multiple languages, if necessary.

Sticking to the Facts

Stick to the facts, and avoid using jargon and strong language. If employees are unsure about getting vaccinated, employers' efforts will be more successful if they approach messaging with a sensitive and respectful tone, while building a solid case with science and data. Communicating with compassion and transparency will help build employee buy-in and support of workplace vaccination plans.

Communications that lead with values, like unity or interconnectedness, are also effective because they motivate employees to act. The end goal is to keep employees safe and healthy and protect communities from COVID-19. The pandemic has taken a toll on the average employee, and this is a way to emphasize the need to protect themselves, their loved ones and their co-workers.

Using Communication Channels

Employers should first consider their existing employee communication channels and how they can be leveraged to relay COVID-19 vaccination information. The following

channels or tools may be helpful in building workplace confidence in COVID-19 vaccines:

- Company intranet
- Emails
- Fact sheets
- FAQs
- Meetings or town halls
- Posters
- PowerPoint presentations
- Social media
- Testimonials
- Videos

The goal is to reach all employees, so keep in mind information consumption differences between on-site employees, non-wired employees and remote employees. A communications strategy that leverages multiple channels can be most effective at informing and engaging employees.

Listening

Listening to employees is just as important as what employers are communicating. It's crucial not to ignore employees' concerns about the COVID-19 vaccine. Identify a point person at the organization who can field and address questions or concerns—and share information in response to those concerns and questions. Two-way communication is especially important if the workforce is in different locations or working remotely. Everyone needs to be on the same page, and everyone needs to feel informed and heard. Not only is it critical to be in touch with how the workforce feels, but tailored content can help increase employee buy-in. It's important for employers to demonstrate that they're listening to their employees and truly care about them.

When to Communicate

There is no better time than now to start planning employee communications about COVID-19 vaccines. It'll be some time until the general public receives access to COVID-19 vaccines, but it's important to start laying groundwork now with employees. It's all about meeting employees where they are and starting the conversation. Use this time to be thoughtful, transparent and sympathetic to employees' current concerns.

Employers could start with communicating that they are carefully monitoring the availability of COVID-19 vaccines and highlight how vaccines will positively impact their workplace and other organization needs. Most importantly, listening to and addressing employee concerns will ultimately help build that necessary vaccination buy-in.

For More Information

In addition to the considerations above, employers should consult local legal counsel to determine whether there are unique risks to consider for their specific organization and industry.

Employers are playing a vital role in helping promote COVID-19 vaccines. For more information on the pandemic and keeping the workforce safe and informed, contact us today.