



How Will Employers' COVID-19 Vaccination Policies Impact Absence Management?

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Introduction

As the COVID-19 vaccine becomes more widely available across North America, employers, and most Americans, are largely breathing a sigh of relief that there's finally a defense against the virus that caused the pandemic. However, employers also need to consider a new paradox. Having a workforce that's vaccinated against the virus supports a safer return to the workplace; however, organizations may experience increased absenteeism if employers require that all employees be vaccinated before returning to work onsite. No realistic discussion of the future workplace can avoid addressing this issue. Leaders in human resources should already be including absence management planning in their HR strategy. HR teams need to begin looking ahead at the possible impact on their workforce if they plan to require employees to be vaccinated prior to returning to the workplace, and if they don't. Either choice can be expected to affect absence patterns.

What ReedGroup Has Learned

From 11+ Months of COVID-19 (And Not Only From Our Absence Data)

The COVID-19 pandemic was responsible for broad changes in the way ReedGroup operated, how we interacted with our customers, and in the reasons why our customers needed to take leaves.

Like many organizations, ReedGroup moved to fully remote operations in March 2020. During 2020, our Customer Care Center experienced a 27.7% increase in calls from claimants, compared to 2019. In addition to higher call volumes, longer interactions with ReedGroup representatives were notable from

the onset of the pandemic. "Often, claimants were quarantining in their homes, sometimes all alone, away from family members, friends, or colleagues. They wanted to spend more time talking and sharing their situation and needs," said Heidi Dross, ReedGroup's VP of Customer Service and leader of the Customer Care Center. "We also learned that many leave requests were due to COVID, but not due to illness. Here's a direct quote from one claimant: 'I need leave to take care of my mother, who lives with us. I need to care for her while helping my kids with virtual schooling.' Often, people were getting hit by things like public transportation getting shut down, or elder care and daycare being closed due to COVID. These events caused them to need to take a leave, even though they weren't sick."

Top Reasons, Other Than Illness, Cited By Employees Requesting COVID-Related Leave in 2020

- Health risk due to employee's pre-existing condition
- Suspected exposure to COVID-19
- Needing to care for a dependent following school, daycare or elder care closure due to COVID-19

In 2020, ReedGroup managed 114,006 employee leaves of absence that were related to COVID-19. Of those who took "COVID leaves," just under half were due to employees taking leave due to COVID-related issues, not due to illness.

Based on ReedGroup's 2020 data and the survey responses regarding vaccination concerns, employers who require COVID vaccines as a condition of returning to work may be facing a new wave of COVID-related absences that are not due to illness. This time, employers may receive leave or work from home accommodation requests from employees who refuse the vaccine due to a disability or a sincerely held religious belief.

Current Attitudes About COVID-19 Vaccination



Although a majority of Americans (60%) surveyed in a recent study by Pew Research said that they are willing to get a COVID-19 vaccine, 39% said they would definitely or probably not get the vaccine. However, one hopeful trend for employers is that the percentage of Americans willing to be vaccinated has recently increased. A mid-December study by KFF (Kaiser Family Foundation) showed that the share of survey respondents saying they would definitely or probably get vaccinated was up 8 percentage points from a similar KFF survey conducted in September, increasing from 63% to 71%. Conversely, the share of respondents saying they definitely or probably will not get vaccinated was down 7 percentage points. As COVID-19 vaccinations are not yet widely available for working-age adults who are not front-line workers, a continued trend of rising willingness to be vaccinated could result in a larger majority being open to vaccination by the time the shots are available to them.

How Employers are Responding

Employers have good reason to be optimistic that having employees who are vaccinated against COVID-19 will support a healthier workforce. As the number of Americans who have been vaccinated against COVID-19 continues to rise, cases have been steadily falling. Physicians evaluating the vaccine have endorsed its use; the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (ACOEM), in COVID-19 guidelines published by MDGuidelines, rates the COVID-19 vaccinations as Strongly Recommended.

Further supporting employers who want their employees vaccinated, the EEOC recently published guidance that employers can, subject to certain exceptions, require COVID-19 vaccination as a condition of returning to the workplace. As of early January, the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) reported that 40 percent of employers insist on a COVID-19 vaccination before an employee returns to the workplace, and two-thirds of employers said that COVID-19 vaccines were either very or somewhat necessary for business continuity. For organizations that are leaning toward requiring vaccination, the combined support of the medical community and the EEOC may be persuasive, especially combined with the slowly increasing percentage of the US public that says they're willing to get the vaccine.

"Intent to Get a COVID-19 Vaccine Rises to 60% as Confidence in Research and Development Process Increases", Pew Research Center, December 3, 2020.

"KFF COVID 19 Vaccine Monitor: December 2020", KFF, December 15 2020

Centers for Disease Control, COVID Data Tracker, as of February 23, 2021.

MDGuidelines "COVID-19 Guidelines", December 14, 2020.

"What You Should Know About COVID-19, the ADA, the Rehabilitation Act, and Other EEO Laws", U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, December 16, 2020

"Majority of Employers Will Encourage, Not Require, COVID Vaccine: SHRM Research", January 6, 2021

What Are the Considerations Before Deciding on Vaccination Recommendation/Requirement for Your Organization?

As your organization evaluates whether or not to require vaccinations for employees working onsite, here are some of the key considerations that may affect your absence management strategy:

YES, YOUR ORGANIZATION WILL REQUIRE COVID-19 VACCINATION FOR EMPLOYEES RETURNING TO WORK ONSITE

Have you developed an accommodation plan for employees who refuse the vaccine who cannot or will not comply? Are all HR team members aware of the plan, to ensure consistency?

Have you notified your vendor partners (for example, third-party administrators and workers comp providers) of the requirement? External vendors may need time to adjust.

Have you developed a communications plan, drawing information from the CDC and other resources? This would allow you to offer employees complete and current information, and reduce anxiety about the vaccine that might increase requests for leaves of absence.

Have you considered offering vaccinations onsite, when available, to reduce the amount of time off required for an employee to meet your requirement?

If you are not going to offer onsite vaccinations, have you offered additional paid time off for employees to get vaccinated offsite?

NO, YOUR ORGANIZATION WILL NOT REQUIRE A COVID-19 VACCINATION FOR EMPLOYEES RETURNING TO WORK ONSITE

Have you evaluated the impact on future absenteeism based on absence data from 2020? Many COVID-19-related leaves of absence were due to high-risk employees requesting accommodations to avoid COVID exposure. Allowing reintegration of unvaccinated workers may result in further leave requests from the high-risk group.

Have you developed a communications plan, drawing information from the CDC and other resources, to get employees informed about and reduce anxiety about the vaccine that might increase the chance that they will voluntarily get vaccinated on their own?

Are you considering offering vaccinations onsite?

Have you offered additional paid time off for employees to get vaccinated offsite?

Have you developed a return-to-work plan that enforces ongoing precautions against the spread of COVID-19, to develop confidence in the safety of your workplace?

Sources

Source: Internal ReedGroup data from January 1 – December 31, 2020

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