



Communicating About COVID-19 Vaccine Requirements

Updated Guidance for Businesses

Updated: September 9, 2022

This document provides general guidance for employers to plan and communicate about COVID-19 vaccine requirements to workers, customers and the media. There's no one-size-fits-all approach, so you should be prepared to customize outreach for groups with unique needs and questions. To help you get started, we've also prepared [key messages](#), [audience insights](#) and [guidance for responding to sensitive questions](#).

Four Key Steps to Planning and Communication

All vaccine requirements need thoughtful planning and communication. Here are four essential steps:

1. Gather employee feedback.

Use surveys or focus groups, and one-on-one or small-group discussions, to hear directly from employees. Think about everyone you are trying to reach within the organization, as well as their varying levels of understanding (and enthusiasm for or concerns about) COVID-19 vaccines. And be sure to engage workers representing communities that have been most affected by COVID-19. Organize vaccine education and listening sessions with employee resource group (ERG) leaders to better understand their unique needs and concerns. [Our resources and workshops](#) can help.

2. Anticipate questions.

Employers implementing vaccine requirements will need to answer a number of logistical and equity questions:

- **How much time will you give workers to get vaccinated?** Remember that vaccine shots are given three or four weeks apart, and it takes another two weeks after the second dose to be fully vaccinated. Build that time into your deadline.
- **How will you track and verify vaccination status?** Federal law permits employers to require proof of vaccination, including copies of vaccination cards. All information about vaccination status must be kept confidential and stored separately from employee personnel files.
- **Who will cover the cost of testing?** If employees have to pay for testing themselves, then requiring vaccinations for all workers may be less of a burden on those from communities hard hit by the virus. However, providing free, regular testing to workers may disincentivize them from getting vaccinated.

- **Can you increase equity by helping address logistical and financial barriers faced by some employees?** Employers are encouraged to provide paid time off for vaccinations and recovery from possible side effects. Employers should also consider providing time off for working parents to get their eligible children vaccinated and recover from side effects. You can also organize on-site vaccine clinics for workers and their families, even during late shifts, or offer free or discounted childcare or transportation to a vaccination site.
- **What is your process for non-compliance?** At most workplaces, employees who do not meet vaccination requirements are first counseled to get the vaccine, then could face discipline up to termination. The stricter your requirements, the more important it is to emphasize equity early on, by speaking to employees representing communities affected by COVID-19 and removing barriers to vaccination.
- **Who in your company will handle terminations if necessary?** Can you begin hiring to anticipate filling those positions or those of staff who resign? Given current labor shortages, businesses will need to be thoughtful about the potential impact of any new rules on productivity and output.

3. Offer a compelling rationale that reinforces your commitment to health and safety.

Here are specific tips to include in a CEO letter you should send to employees and workers:

- **Ground your communication in company values.** Remind your employees of all the ways your company has prioritized a clean and safe work environment. It's also helpful to make a direct connection between your company's mission and your motives for sharing vaccine information.
- **Thank those who have already protected themselves and their co-workers by getting vaccinated.** If your company already has a high rate of vaccination, share that figure in order to cast your new measure as an extension of existing, strongly supported company safety policy.
- **Be direct and transparent** about why your company is strengthening its vaccine requirement. This might include the high rates of infection or hospitalization in your area, the new federal government mandate, the cost to the company of the average COVID-19 hospital stay, or the lost productivity from mandatory quarantines and long illnesses.
- **Facts about safety are key.** Don't just say "the science is solid." Explain that vaccines were authorized by the FDA. This means they met the agency's strict rules for being safe and working well. These vaccines have been studied in clinical trials with large and diverse groups of people, of various ages, races and ethnicities. Systems that allow CDC to watch for safety issues are in place across the entire country, and these systems can detect potential problems.
- **Emotional triggers are equally important.** At the same time, highlight how vaccinations are a pathway to helping us get back to the moments of human connection that we are all yearning for. They also protect the ones we love and those most vulnerable in our community, reduce hospitalizations and save lives.
- **Respect that vaccination is an individual decision.** It is always the employee's choice to get vaccinated. Be consistent with that framing—it's not only respectful, it will also prevent the employee from feeling pestered or coerced as you send them reminders in the run-up to your company's vaccination deadline. Ultimately, if an employee chooses not to get vaccinated and can no longer work at your company, respect that, thank them for their service and wish them well.

4. Expect questions, listen and provide a mechanism for employee feedback.

It is normal (and expected) for your employees and workers to have questions about vaccines. You can provide reliable information about COVID-19 and vaccines from trusted sources, and encourage employees and workers to talk to their doctor or healthcare provider.

Employees and workers may also have questions about company policy and their healthcare benefits. Make sure you have mechanisms in place to field questions and feedback directly from employees and workers so you can quickly address concerns.

Explaining your company's vaccine requirements to the public and press

Employers can expect media interest and press questions about their vaccination policies for workers and customers. Having thought through the practical questions of a vaccination policy and articulated the reasons behind the policy to your employees is excellent preparation for answering questions from the public and press. Here are a few additional considerations to help you represent your policy with confidence.

Rely on simple, straightforward messages.

- **“We want to create a safe workplace and a healthier community.** We all want to turn the tide on COVID-19 so our employees, our families, our economy and our communities can thrive. A fully vaccinated workforce creates the safest possible workplace environment for employees and customers.”
- **“Vaccines are safe and effective.** Over 250 million Americans have received at least one shot of the vaccine. The FDA’s full approval of the COVID-19 vaccines should reassure anyone that these vaccines are safe and they work.”
- **“This is about what’s safest for our workers and our customers.** We have an obligation to keep our workers safe. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for companies, but this is what we need to do to keep our employees and community safe.”

Lean on those messages if you get tough questions.

Your safe, simple, straightforward messaging can answer almost any question that arises.

Q: Are you sure it’s legal to require your employees to get vaccinated?

A: Yes, absolutely. Federal law supports workplace vaccination requirements. **This is about what’s safest for our workers and customers.**

Q: Is it fair to require employees to get vaccinated to keep their jobs?

A: Employers have an obligation to keep their workers safe. **COVID vaccines are proven to be safe and effective** at keeping workers healthy. A more prudent question is whether it’s fair for employers to create unsafe workplace environments by not requiring vaccines when we know they are safe and effective [and supported by the majority of our workforce]. At the end of the day, this is about what’s safest for our workers and our customers.

Q: Why are you doing this now?

A: **We want to create a safe workplace and a healthier community.** The vaccines are proven to be safe and effective. And a fully vaccinated workforce creates the safest possible workplace

environment for employees and customers. So, we're requiring vaccines because we want to do what's best for our workers and customers.

Q: Are you prepared for employees to quit rather than get vaccinated?

A: Despite all the evidence that **vaccines are safe and effective**, despite the financial challenges workers would be bringing on themselves, despite all of the reasons for a person's health, their career and their families, there will be some workers who will not get vaccinated. We never like to see anyone go, but we are prepared for it and **we have to do what's safest for the rest of our employees and our customers.**

Make use of employee feedback and the rationale you gave your workers.

Tell the press or public the same compelling story you told your employees—for example, about the costs your company bears for COVID-19 hospitalizations, the number of days lost to quarantines or long-term illnesses, and the steps your company has already taken to incentivize the vaccine. Also, share anything valuable you learned from gathering employee feedback, including support for a vaccination requirement or current levels of vaccination.

Be real. Be yourself.

The messages in this guide are intended to be safe ground to allow you to answer questions without going too far or setting off a debate. Still, you should make them your own and feel comfortable with what you are going to say. Whatever you choose to say, own it. Presenting your workplace vaccination policy with thoughtfulness and confidence will help dispel skepticism from the press or public.

Share powerful stories. If you have lost employees or family workers to COVID-19, if they have expressed regret about not getting vaccinated, if you can describe the damage that the Delta surge has caused in your community, these will help create understanding and sympathy, and help your audience see you as a full person, not just an employer.

Sample email to employees

Dear Team,

From the beginning of the pandemic, our first priority has been the health of our workforce. That was the reason behind all the measures for a clean and safe workplace we instituted early on and the adjustments we have continued to make as public health guidance has evolved. Every step of the way, you adapted with professionalism and patience, and I thank you again for doing that.

Our commitment to your health is the reason we have shared vaccine information. It's also why we set up listening and conversation sessions to understand the obstacles to vaccination some of you may face, and assure those with questions or concerns.

As you know, I got vaccinated when I became eligible and encouraged you to do the same. In fact, I can report that ## percent of you have disclosed that you have been fully vaccinated from COVID-19. For this, too, I want to thank you — for protecting the health of yourselves and your co-workers, and getting us all closer to doing the things we've missed most with families and friends.

But we are not there yet. Today, the vast majority of COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths are among the unvaccinated. However, breakthrough cases among the vaccinated do occur, causing understandable concern for people with children or others at home who are not yet eligible to be vaccinated and are thus vulnerable to COVID-19.

A workforce whose vaccinations are up to date creates the safest possible environment for you and for our customers. So effective [DATE], we will strengthen our workplace safety by [requiring all employees to be fully vaccinated as a condition of employment or test negative for COVID-19 on a weekly basis - OR other requirement for your COMPANY]. This is a policy that puts the needs of our people first, and is informed by the feedback and unique concerns of our people.

Meanwhile, the virus has affected our company in other ways, too. [Add here specific information about the cost to the COMPANY of the average COVID-19 hospital stay, or the lost productivity from mandatory quarantines and long illnesses].

I will be sending more details soon about the process.

In the meantime, I encourage you to take advantage of [any incentives or COMPANY-provided vaccine access such as paid time off] and remind you that I am committed to helping you [get the facts](#) about vaccines. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has granted full approval to two COVID-19 vaccines, and all the COVID-19 vaccines have been studied in clinical trials with large and diverse groups of people, of various ages, races and ethnicities. They are proven to be safe and effective.

Still, I respect that choosing to get vaccinated is an individual decision. We all need to be comfortable with our choices, so I encourage you to speak with your doctor or healthcare provider, or visit GetVaccineAnswers.org as you make your decision.

Thank you for always prioritizing the health and safety of yourselves and each other.

Yours sincerely,

NAME

President/CEO, Chief Medical Officer, or other trusted leader

Language Do's & Don'ts

| Do Say | Don't Say |
|--|---|
| the pandemic | the coronavirus |
| ending the pandemic | defeat/crush/eliminate the virus |
| back to life back to "moments we miss" with family & friends | back to "normal" |
| "vaccines" (plural), or refer to "vaccination" or "immunization" instead | the "vaccine" (singular) injection, shot |
| safe and effective vaccines | a vaccine developed quickly |
| authorized by the FDA based on clinical testing | Operation Warp Speed; Emergency Use Authorization |

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|---|---|
| get the latest information | there are still things we don't know |
| keep your family safe; keep those most vulnerable safe | keep your community safe; keep your country safe |
| public health | government |
| medical experts and doctors | scientists |
| community immunity | herd immunity |
| community vaccination | mass vaccination |
| personal responsibility | national duty |
| protocols / guidelines | orders / imperatives / decrees |
| essential workers | frontline workers |
| policies that are based on facts/science/data | policies that are sensible / impactful / reasonable |
| inform, educate, answer questions | convince |
| people who still have questions about vaccines | people who are hesitant, skeptical, resistant, or "anti-vaxxers" |

Additional Resources

- [Key Messages for Employees](#) (Also in [Spanish](#).)
- [Conversation Guide for Managers](#)
- [Answers to Frequently Asked Questions](#) (Also in [Spanish](#).)
- [Audience Insights & Key Messages for Black, Hispanic, American Indian and Alaska Native Communities](#) (Also in [Spanish](#).)
- **Handout:** [COVID-19 Vaccines: What You Need to Know](#) (Also in [Spanish](#).)
- **Handout:** [COVID-19 Vaccines: Myths and Facts](#) (Also in [Spanish](#).)
- **Videos:** [Vaccines 101: An Educational Series](#)
- **Videos:** [The Conversation: Between Us, About Us](#)
- **Quick Start Guide:** [Strengthening Workplace Vaccination & Safety in Response to the Delta Variant](#) (Also in [Spanish](#).)

Public health guidance on COVID-19 is consistently evolving. Health Action Alliance is committed to regularly updating our materials once we've engaged public health, business and communications experts about the implications of new guidance from the public health community and effective business strategies that align with public health goals.