Perceptyx
RESEARCH & INSIGHTS

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A Workplace Divided: Split Opinions on COVID-19 Vaccine Could Disrupt The Return to Work

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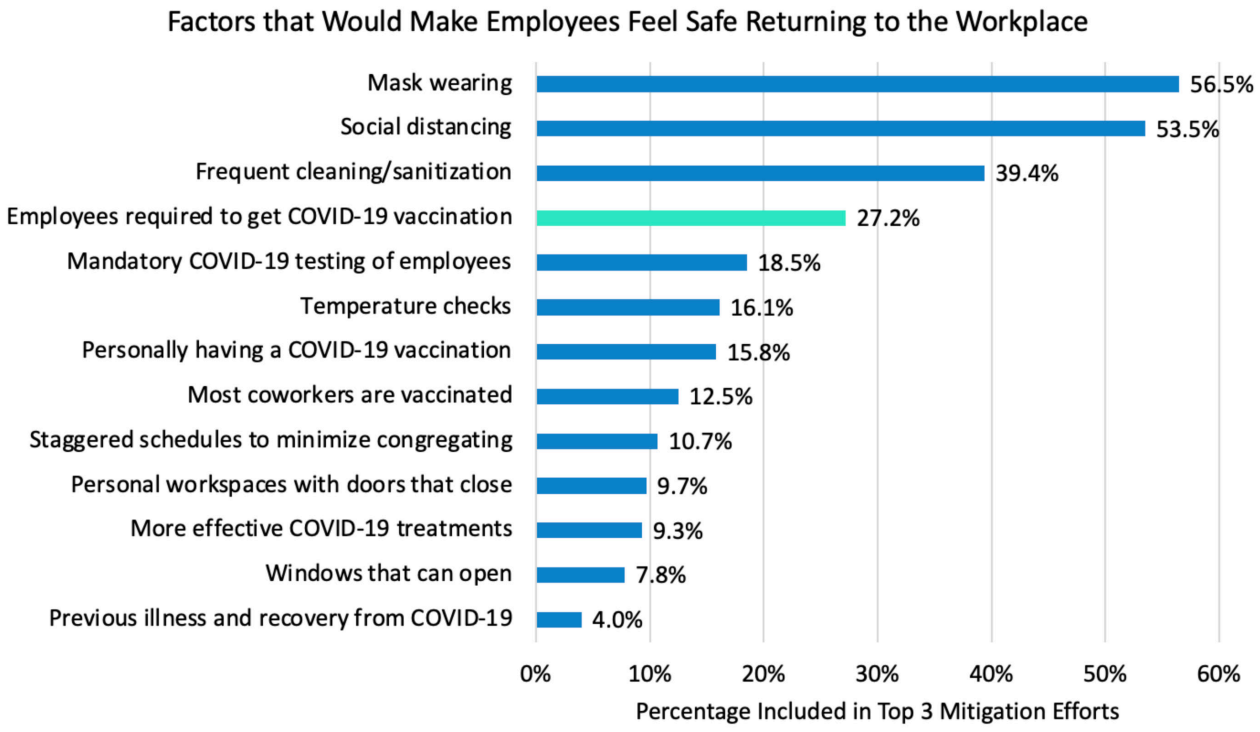
January 20, 2021 will mark the anniversary of the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the United States. In just one year, there have been nearly 23 million confirmed cases - that's one out of every 15 Americans - and 375,000 deaths. Despite a year of quarantine, mask wearing, social distancing, and other restrictions, the United States continues to break new daily records for cases, hospitalizations, and deaths, making the end of the pandemic seem further away than ever.

The one glimmer of hope has been the authorization of Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines, as well as vaccines from AstraZeneca, Janssen, and Novavax, which are in large-scale (Phase 3) clinical trials. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has ruled that employers can require vaccinations in order to return to the physical workplace. Our panel research study of over 1,000 working Americans suggests employers should strongly encourage and perhaps even incentivize vaccination, but not require it.

Mask Wearing, Social Distancing, and Frequent Cleaning Top The List for a Safe Return to Work

While there is no doubt that COVID-19 vaccines are a welcome advancement in our fight against the pandemic, our data indicates that they are neither the sole, nor even the primary factor in employees feeling safe heading back to the office. Employees were asked to select the top three mitigation efforts that would help them feel safest returning to the physical workplace. Mask wearing, social distancing, and frequent cleaning stand out and top the list. Requiring employees to be vaccinated ranked fourth, with just over one in four respondents including it in their top three selection. Ranked last on the list was previous illness and subsequent recovery from COVID-19, as there is currently mixed evidence on how long natural immunity may last.



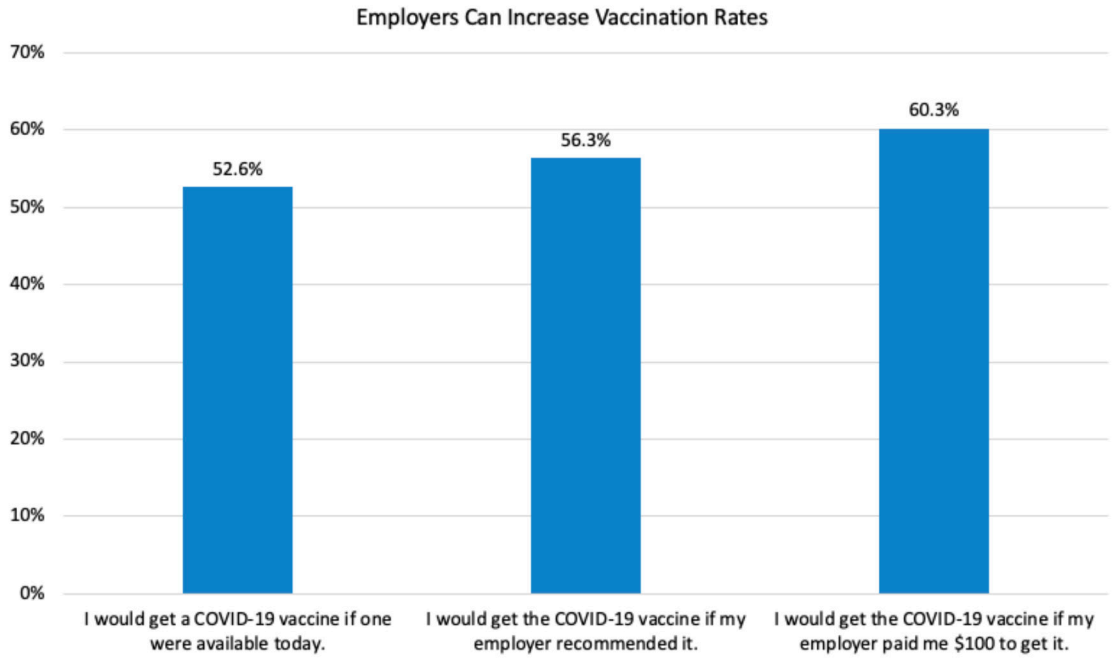
Employees Split

For organizations hoping to get their employees back into the office in the new year, it may not be as simple as requiring they all get vaccinated: 53% of those surveyed believe employers should not require vaccination of their employees, and 43% note they would consider leaving their organization if they were required to be vaccinated. These sentiments are even stronger for employees who classify themselves as essential workers: **60% of essential workers believe their employers should not require employees to be vaccinated before returning to the physical workplace, and 51% note they would consider leaving their organization if they were required to be vaccinated.** Essential workers who continue to work in the physical workspace generally feel more comfortable and safe in the physical workspace than do their colleagues who work from home at least part-time.* Organizations would do well to take note of this sentiment when messaging or making policies about vaccination, particularly if they have mixed workforces.

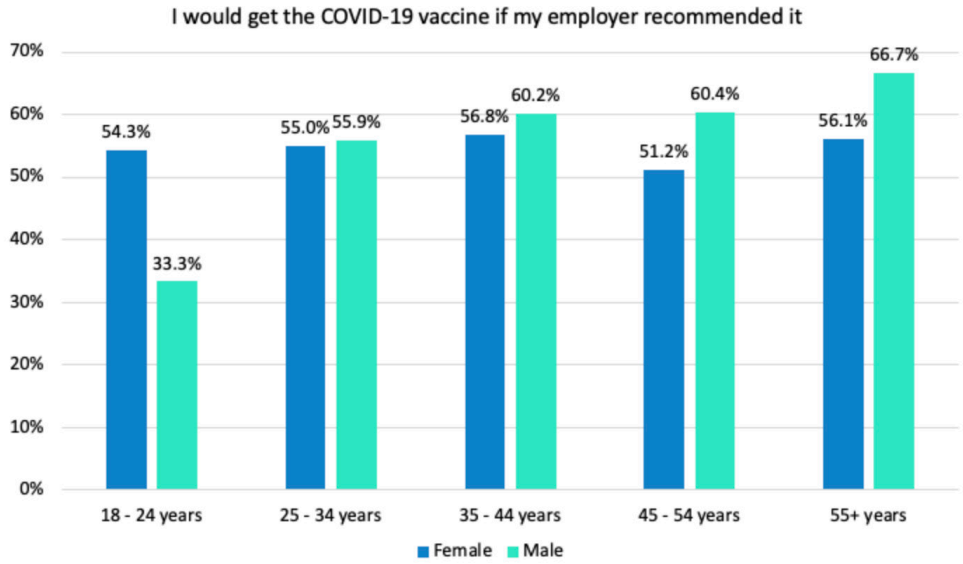
**This feeling of comfort and safety is likely due to the fact that essential workers have months of experience working directly in harm's way and seeing that existing safety precautions work sufficiently.*

Nudging Employees to Vaccinate

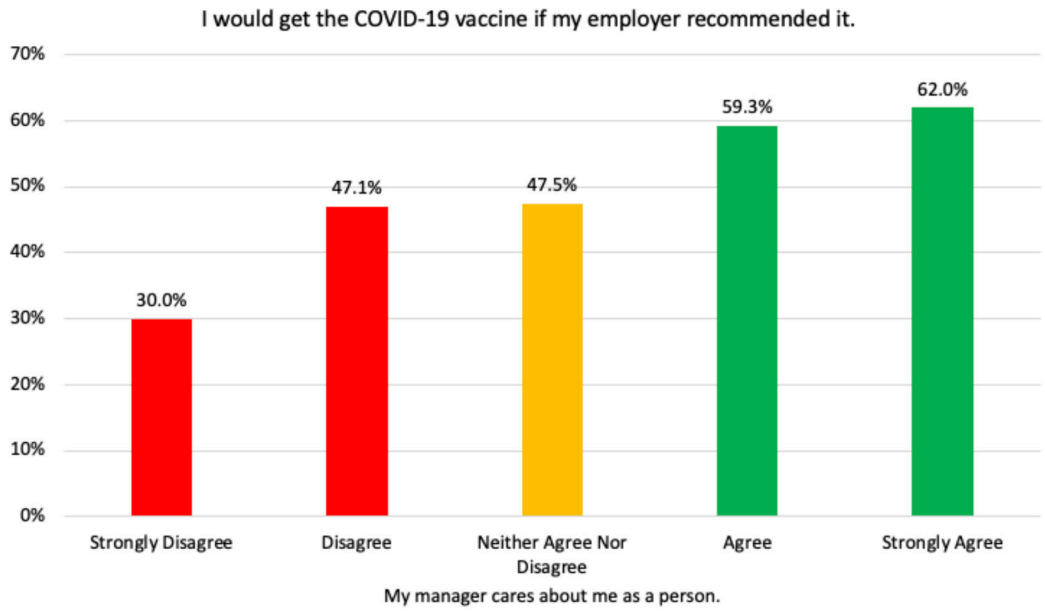
We found that employees are more likely to get vaccinated if their employer encourages them to do so, as opposed to making it a requirement. While 53% of employees say they would likely get a vaccine if it were available today, 56% would get the vaccine if encouraged to do so by their employer. An even greater number of employees - 60% - would take it if their employers offered a monetary incentive of $100 to do so.



Gender and age also play a role. **One group particularly against vaccination is younger males, aged 18-24.** This is the only group in which fewer than half indicate they would get the vaccine if their employer recommended it. Targeted messaging can help increase vaccination for this group (who are already more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors), especially if this messaging comes from their peers.



Additionally, those who feel sincerely cared about by their managers are more likely to trust and be persuaded by their employer's encouragement to get vaccinated. In particular, **employees who responded favorably to the statement, "My manager cares about me as a person" are nearly 2X more likely to get the COVID-19 vaccine if their employer recommended it than are employees who responded unfavorably to the statement.** This is yet another indicator that great leadership and investing in the individual and unique needs of employees is critical to an organization's success.


I would get the COVID-19 vaccine if my employer recommended it.
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
30.0%
47.1%
47.5%
59.3%
62.0%
Strongly Disagree
Disagree
Neither Agree Nor Disagree
Agree
Strongly Agree
My manager cares about me as a person.

Split Employee Sentiments on Vaccination

When asked specifically if they agreed with a number of statements, it is clear that employees have split sentiments about the vaccine. Key findings include:

- 60% of employees are fearful of the potential side effects of the vaccine; however, more than 67% believe the research and development of the vaccine is trustworthy.
- Half (50%) say their employers have encouraged them to get the vaccine when available, while 38% say their organizations are requiring it in order to return to the physical workplace.
- Just over half (54%) would feel safe returning to the office if they were vaccinated, even if others weren't, while another 64% believe there is no safe return to work until all employees are vaccinated. Those who are working remotely are more likely to believe there is no safe return without requiring all employees to be vaccinated (68% versus 58%) than are those already working at the office.
- Just over half (52%) say they would get the vaccine so they wouldn't have to wear a mask at work; however, the CDC still recommends mask wearing even after having received the two doses of the vaccine.

Organizations continue to face many difficult decisions when it comes to the (actual and perceived) safety of their employees, and about what will become the next normal in the workplace, and how to keep business on track during turbulent times. These decisions are made even more difficult by mixed feelings about the vaccine and the criteria for employees to feel safe returning to the physical workplace. Many of these mixed feelings are based on individual beliefs and specific situations that vary greatly. It is imperative that, given this inconsistency in level of comfort, employers truly understand the needs of their employees and ensure they feel safe and confident before requiring them to return to work.

Need To Know

1. Employees will take advice from their organizations, but will balk at being forced to get vaccinated. Strong, personal relationships between employees and their managers increase the likelihood of employees getting vaccinated if their employer recommends it.

2. Organizations with both essential workers and those working remotely may have the greatest struggle in forming a comprehensive return to work plan for all, as essential workers who continue to work in the physical workspace generally feel more comfortable and safe in the physical workspace than do their remote-working co-workers, and they are more likely to resist vaccination, regardless of whether they are encouraged or required by employers.

3. A key way to build strong relationships is with quality two-way listening: Don't talk to employees, talk with employees. One way to accomplish two-way listening is via return to work pulse surveys and action planning. The Perceptyx Return To Work survey measures crucial needs and environmental factors for employees at every stage of the reintegration process and uncovers barriers that can be addressed to mitigate risks to health, safety, and wellbeing, as well as risks to productivity and customer experience.

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