

# Majority of Employers Will Encourage, Not Require, COVID-19 Vaccine: SHRM Research

By John Egan  
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**D**uring a one-week period leading up to Christmas, over 5,600 nurses, doctors and other front-line workers at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston received what they may have cheered as an early holiday present—their first COVID-19 vaccinations. About 40 hospital employees staffed the vaccination clinics, which administered shots to as many as 1,000 people per day. The hospital even created a special app for its more than 20,000 employees to make COVID-19 vaccination appointments.

MD Anderson spent three months setting up a logistics framework for the rollout of its vaccination program—a program that's voluntary, not mandatory.

The Houston hospital is among the majority of U.S. organizations (61 percent) that intend to encourage, but not require, their employees to get the COVID-19 vaccination, according to research from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) conducted in December. Conversely, more than one-third (35 percent) of organizations aren't certain whether they'll require vaccines.

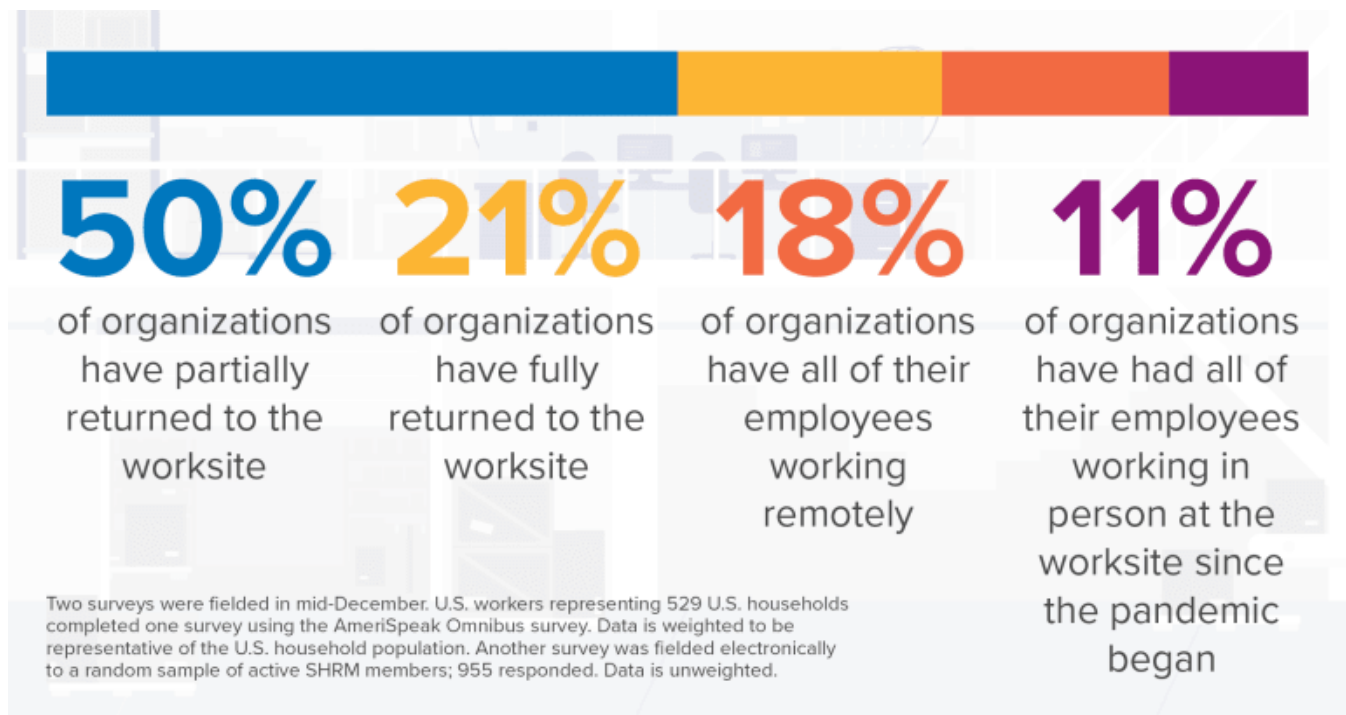
Diving deeper into the question of whether to mandate vaccinations, more than half of organizations (55 percent) say they're unsure whether they'll require employees to receive a COVID-19 vaccination before returning to the workplace. Four in 10 organizations (40 percent) won't insist on a COVID-19 vaccination before an employee returns to the workplace.

## SHRM RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

COVID-19 Vaccination Resources ([www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/Pages/COVID-19-Vaccination-Resources.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/Pages/COVID-19-Vaccination-Resources.aspx))

For many organizations, COVID-19 vaccinations are a matter of dollars and sense. In SHRM's survey of employers, two-thirds (66 percent) say the COVID-19 vaccination is very or somewhat necessary for business continuity.

Many employers won't need to do much arm-twisting in terms of vaccinations, though: SHRM's research indicates nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of U.S. workers say they're likely to get the COVID-19 vaccination once it becomes available. If an employer imposes a vaccine mandate, over half (55 percent) of U.S. workers say they're extremely or very likely to get the COVID-19 vaccine, according to SHRM's research. Almost one-fourth (24 percent) of workers, however, say they'd balk at getting the vaccine if their employer required it.



For this research, two surveys were fielded in mid-December. U.S. workers representing 529 U.S. households completed one survey using the AmeriSpeak Omnibus survey. Data is weighted to be representative of the U.S. household population. Another survey was fielded electronically to a random sample of active SHRM members; 955 responded. The data is unweighted.

#### Vaccine To-Do's

Trent Burner, SHRM-SCP, vice president of research at SHRM, believes more American workers will warm up to COVID-19 shots once they see people in their everyday spheres—friends, neighbors, co-workers and bosses, for instance—getting vaccinations. So far, the vast majority of Americans receiving the shots have been health care workers, high-profile politicians and at-risk residents of long-term-care facilities.

"The majority of working Americans are ready to take the vaccine once it's available, but it's just not available yet to the masses," Burner said.

Based on guidance (<https://www.eeoc.gov/wysk/what-you-should-know-about-covid-19-and-ada-rehabilitation-act-and-other-eeo-laws>) issued in mid-December by the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, U.S. employers can require their workers to get vaccinated ([www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/legal-and-compliance/employment-law/pages/coronavirus-mandatory-vaccinations.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/legal-and-compliance/employment-law/pages/coronavirus-mandatory-vaccinations.aspx)) against COVID-19 and can tell them to stay away from the workplace if they don't comply.

Daniel Kadish, an employment attorney at Morgan Lewis, noted that an employer must provide "reasonable accommodations" to workers who decline to get the COVID-19 vaccination due to religious or disability concerns.

"Just as they do with the influenza vaccine, state laws may impose additional requirements or exceptions for COVID-19 vaccine requirements," Kadish said.

Under federal law, "reasonable accommodations" wouldn't extend to workers who object to vaccines for reasons such as political beliefs or personal opinions, he said. However, state laws may protect those workers.

Kadish recommended that most employers hold off on COVID-19 vaccination requirements until the U.S. Food and Drug Administration grants full approval to vaccines rather than the current emergency approval. By waiting for full FDA approval, employers can decrease risks associated with employees' fears about the vaccines' emergency status, he said.

"Ultimately, employers should make sure that any practices or programs they roll out concerning COVID-19 vaccines are done consistently across their workforce and that they have an established way to handle accommodations in a consistent manner," Kadish said.

Kevin Troutman, a partner at law firm Fisher & Phillips and co-chair of its national health care industry group, said employers should monitor state and local developments regarding COVID-19 vaccinations, as some elected officials have discussed banning vaccination mandates.

"Employers should think through the particulars of how and why a vaccine might be required in the workplace," Troutman said. "Many employers are considering ways to encourage the vaccine rather than mandating it, but even incentive plans can be tricky and must be handled in a nondiscriminatory manner that complies with applicable laws. For example, an incentive offered through a wellness program may require employers to consider alternatives for those who are medically unable to take the vaccine."

Dr. Welela Tereffe, chief medical executive at MD Anderson, said keys to successfully executing her hospital's vaccination program include:

- Consistently distributing "factual, trustworthy information" to employees about COVID-19 vaccinations.
- Clearly communicating ethical, transparent guidelines about how vaccinations will be administered, based on recommendations from state and federal health authorities.
- Enabling employees to self-schedule vaccination appointments.

"Our main goal is to ensure that we're providing information in the language people understand best in a format that works best for them, with support for questions that they have, and that we're giving them equitable access to the vaccine," Tereffe said. "Over time, we'll assess how that process is working before we consider setting any sort of requirements or targets for vaccination."

Yolan Campbell, associate vice president of HR operations at MD Anderson, also cited organizationwide teamwork as an element of the hospital being able to effectively carry out a vaccination program. Starting in September, she said, representatives of stakeholders like HR, ethics, legal services, nursing and employee groups banded together to craft a vaccination plan—as opposed to "two people in a room deciding who gets a vaccine."

"That really helped set the stage for where we are today," Campbell said.

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