

Workers' Vaccination Fears Pose Business Challenges, SHRM Survey Finds

Many organizations will encourage employees to get vaccinated for COVID-19

By Stephen Miller, CEBS

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While many workers in the U.S. are eager to receive the COVID-19 vaccination—and many employers plan to encourage them to do so—a significant number of workers say they are unlikely to get vaccinated, according to new research by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM).

If large numbers of workers remain fearful of the vaccine, it could delay business from returning to normal operations.

At the same time, a substantial number of workers believe the COVID-19 vaccine should be mandatory for everyone who is able to receive it, which could create conflicts with colleagues who won't get vaccinated.

A Rift in the Workplace on Vaccinations

A third of Americans believe that the COVID-19 vaccine should be mandatory for everyone who is able to receive it, while more than a quarter of employed Americans would rather lose their job than get the vaccine.



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of Americans who have been employed at some point in the pandemic would not get vaccinated if their employer required it, even if it meant risking termination from their job.

Source: *Navigating COVID-19*, SHRM, February 2021.

Many companies are encouraging their employees to get the vaccine, but they say they are not going to require workers to get vaccinated before they return to work.

SHRM also found that:

- 60 percent of workers will probably or definitely get the vaccine once it becomes available to them.
- Nearly a quarter (24 percent) of employees who are not planning to get vaccinated would change their minds if their employer offered incentives such as cash bonuses or stipends, paid time off (PTO) or gift cards.
- 12 percent of employees would be willing to get vaccinated only if they might otherwise lose their job.

"Organization leaders, including HR professionals, are making decisions about employees returning to the worksite that will greatly affect their organizations and impact significant society issues," said SHRM President and Chief Executive Officer Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., SHRM-SCP. "While 60 percent of organizations say they will not require the vaccination, I believe we will see employers strongly encourage vaccination in a broad range of enterprises and even consider offering employee incentives. Creating a safe workplace will be a collaborative effort between HR, business leaders and employees."

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According to Alexander Alonso, SHRM's chief knowledge officer, "For the 40 percent of employed Americans who are unlikely to get the COVID-19 vaccine, employer incentives can be an effective tool of encouragement. However, our research shows that most organizations (88 percent) are either unsure or are not offering or planning to offer any vaccine incentives at all."

He added, "Organizations have a major role to play in the fight against COVID-19, and they might have to reconsider their vaccine policies or offerings if we are to achieve herd immunity more quickly."

Through Feb. 1, SHRM received responses from 540 employed Americans—workers who were actively employed, laid off or temporarily furloughed since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, SHRM conducted an initial survey of 955 HR professionals in December 2020 and fielded a follow-up HR survey of 1,515 SHRM members through Feb. 2.

Understanding Employees' Fears

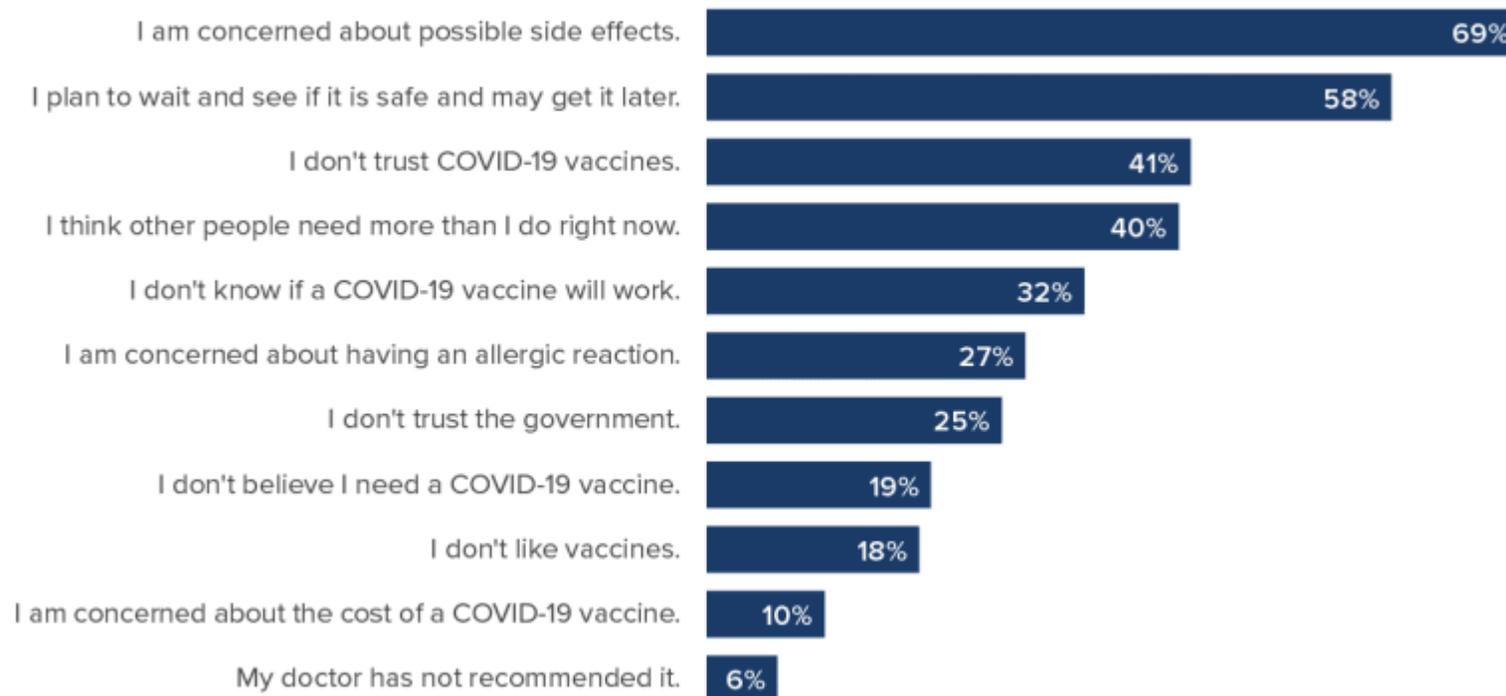
The most commonly reported reasons given by employees who probably or definitely won't get vaccinated were concerns about possible side effects, the desire to wait and see if the vaccine is safe (and possibly get it later), and distrust of the COVID-19 vaccines.



COVID-19 Vaccination Resources

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

Why Employees Won't Get Vaccinated



Source: Navigating COVID-19, SHRM, February 2021.

"Our research shows a stark divide in perceptions surrounding the COVID-19 vaccine," Alonso said. "We could see a real 'vaccine vortex' and a potential financial firestorm impacting employers who need a vaccinated workforce to sustain their enterprises, and those who are likely to avoid the vaccine at all costs."

Encouraging Vaccination

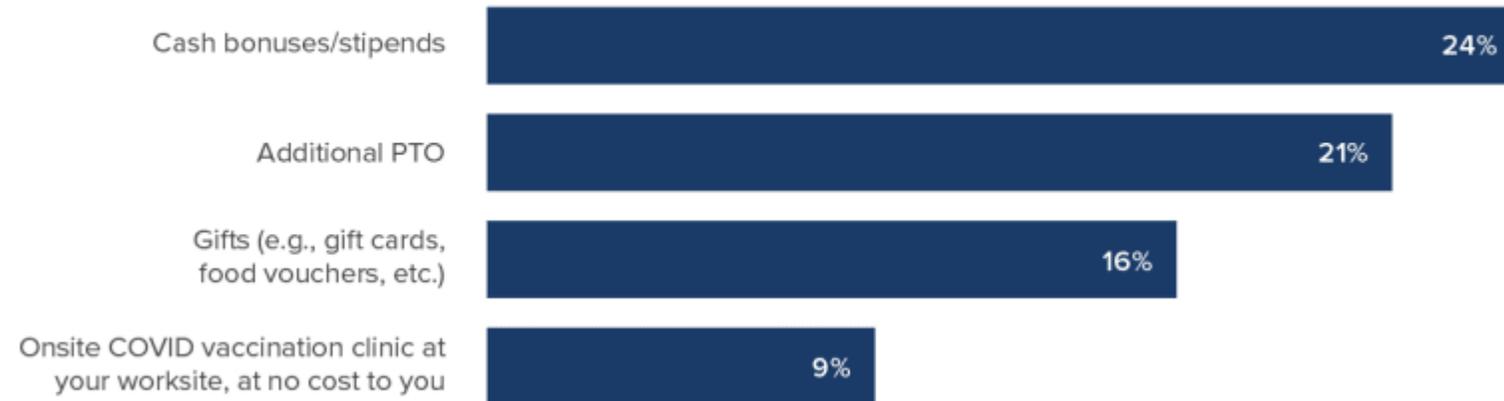
According to HR respondents, organizations in certain industries were more likely to encourage employees to get the COVID-19 vaccine, including those in the health care and social services sector (94 percent); education (84 percent); and the government, public administration or military (77 percent).

Size is also a factor, with large (79 percent) and medium-sized (76 percent) organizations more likely to encourage employees to get vaccinated than small organizations (68 percent), HR professionals said.

What Incentives Can and Can't Do

"A significant majority of organizations are unsure, not currently offering or not planning to offer any incentives to encourage employees to get vaccinated," Alonso said. "However, nearly a quarter of American workers who are unlikely to get the vaccine say they would consider it if their employer offered them cash bonuses or stipends."

Incentives that Fearful Employees Say Could Convince Them to Get Vaccinated



Source: *Navigating COVID-19*, SHRM, February 2021.

While most organizations are not offering incentives beyond paid time off to get vaccinated, there are some notable exceptions. For example, at the high end of the incentive range, several major U.S. grocery chains have announced vaccination bonuses of up to \$200 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/road-to-recovery/2021/01/29/grocery-worker-vaccine-incentives/>), *The Washington Post* reported.

However, nearly 70 percent of employees who probably or definitely won't get vaccinated said no amount of incentive would convince them to get the vaccine, SHRM found.

"Indecision about the vaccine may be driven by a distrust of the health care system, government agencies, or the efficacy of the vaccine itself," said Amy Lui Abel, vice president for human capital research at The Conference Board, an independent business membership and research association. "Many companies, on the other hand, have the trust of their staff; they may consider sharing facts and dispelling myths about the vaccine, or enabling government plans to immunize their workers."

SHRM's Taylor observed, "Returning to the worksite once a vaccine became available was always going to be a complex effort, and the way organizations and employees handle questions about the vaccine will have a profound impact beyond the current public health crisis."

For more information on SHRM's COVID-19 research, tools and resources, visit [shrm.org/futurework](https://pages.shrm.org/futurework) (<https://pages.shrm.org/futurework>).

Related SHRM Articles:

Employer Groups Seek Clarity on COVID-19 Vaccination Incentives (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/benefits/Pages/employers-seek-clarity-on-covid-vaccination-incentives.aspx), *SHRM Online*, February 2021

Steer Clear of Roadblocks to Mandating or Incentivizing Vaccines (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/legal-and-compliance/employment-law/Pages/coronavirus-roadblocks-vaccines.aspx), *SHRM Online*, February 2021

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