A Firsthand Look at How a Vaccine Mandate Can Affect Employees

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With Covid-19 variants like Omicron keeping the pandemic alive and well, there's no magic answer for when the world will be able to fully "reopen," or get back to "normal." The underlying question for workplaces within that is whether vaccine mandates are the right choice. For my business, Vagaro, a mandate was a decision we don't regret.

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Initial high productivity quickly caved to high stress

Initially, when the pandemic hit and we sent people home, employees worked long hours and were incredibly productive. Working from home lost its novelty, energy, and excitement after about a month, however. We didn't really have a 9-to-5 workday anymore. The lines between "work" and "home" blurred. People had meetings at all hours. They were coping with missing loved ones, difficult roommates, unreliable internet connections — all kinds of frustrations. Especially in our support phone calls, we could see the stress levels mounting higher and higher.

Around May 2021, we started to ask the support staff to come back to the office. We did everything we could to make that

return safe, including installing HEPA filters, providing masks, installing a contactless thermometer at the front desk and wiping down surfaces. Our executive staff came back, too, so that we could lead by example.

The first two weeks or so of the return, people weren't sure if they could go about business as usual and, understandably, still had anxiety. Eventually, we saw the walls come down. People started talking to each other again. Human connection and social interaction were – safely – restored. Productivity went up.

We kept an eye on all departments as more employees started coming back. Among our marketing team, usually a really social group, the stress was high enough during our work from home period that we had people leave without even having other work lined up. We noticed that people generally weren't even turning on their cameras for video calls anymore. Comparing that to our employees who had returned to the office, it was very clear that a lack of work-life boundaries was taking its toll.

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Laying the foundation for new rules

We wanted everybody to come back, but we wanted to base our decision on science to make sure they'd be safe if we did. We looked at our Covid rate and realized that, with about 30 percent of the workforce on-site, we hadn't had a single positive case within that group. In fact, when we did finally see a case within our staff, it originated with work-from-home people. I partially attribute that to the fact that our strict health precautions added a layer of safety that workers might not have secured on their own at home.

The next step was to decide our approach to getting people vaccinated. We settled on a vaccine mandate of our own even before President Biden announced one. We offered people time off to go get vaccinated and recover. HR kept records of who was vaccinated, when and with which vaccine. We kept rapid test kits on hand and sent them home with employees if we suspected that they might have the virus. We did contact tracing, as well.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) asserts that even most people with underlying medical conditions, including cancer, can still safely get a COVID-19 vaccine, although the response might not always be as effective as desired.

We understood, based on these considerations, that few people would qualify for medical or even religious exemptions. To demonstrate our respect for other people's specific beliefs and liberties, we still intended to allow such exemptions but required valid documentation to support their noncompliance.

Related: Report: United Airlines is Losing Millions By Keeping Unvaccinated Employees on Paid Leave

The results

Over time, we did have people contract Covid. But clear expectations and procedures allowed us to achieve an 85 percent vaccination rate. What we saw was that most of the Covid cases were among the few employees who were not vaccinated.

We felt confident, based on these results, that the vaccines were beneficial. We finally told our team that they had to be vaccinated by September 1. I interviewed the "hold-out" employees myself. Most of them told me they were concerned for medical reasons. Just one percent of the workforce – only two employees – acclaimed religious exemptions.

In the end, just four percent of our team said they'd never take the vaccine. We achieved a final vaccination rate of 99.5 percent, with just two employees — one of whom previously had Covid and therefore has antibodies — refusing the shot. Those unvaccinated workers wear masks and get tests weekly. People were relaxed knowing how high our vaccination rate is. The individuals who stayed with us became more committed and aligned with the same beliefs. The culture grew stronger because of that.

We didn't have a single case for months.

Our situation changed when the more contagious Omicron variant hit. Roughly 20 percent of our team ended up getting ill, and with test kits initially in short supply and CDC guidelines in flux, we tweaked our policy to mandate employees with Covid stay home until they were symptom-free and tested negative. Thanks to contact tracing, though, we know that almost all of those new cases came from outside the office during family gatherings over the holidays.

The symptoms people experienced were generally milder, as well. We attribute the lack of severity to the fact we got everybody vaccinated. Had we not been proactive about setting clear, company-based policy about it, the result might have been much grimmer.

The choice of who you'll cater to is yours

As we tried to navigate the vaccine situation, we realized that we had a choice to make about whether we'd cater to the majority or minority. We ultimately didn't believe that it made sense to marginalize the majority by listening only to the smaller group of people who were against it.

Was that choice the "right" one? Every company's situation is

unique. For us, though, as the saying goes, the proof is in the pudding. We’re still willing to return to working remotely if cases begin to spread with community transmission.

But, our experience, combined with research from leading medical institutions, shows that COVID-19 vaccines are safe and can be a strong safeguard in returning to the workplace. Review the most current scientific data you have to decide how to proceed in your own business, and if the numbers give you a green light, be confident and take it.

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