

Major U.S. Airline Will Let Unvaccinated Employees Come Back to Work This Month

As Covid-19 cases continue to trend downward, some companies are reconsidering employee vaccination requirements. United Airlines, for one, informed staff on Thursday that it will allow unvaccinated workers to resume their roles on March 28, as first reported by *Wall Street Journal*.

CNBC additionally reported that in a note to staff, United's vice president of human resources Kirk Limacher said the dip in new infections and hospitalizations and relaxed masking requirements in many cities indicate the pandemic's threat is diminishing and the airline can "safely begin the process" of incorporating vaccination-exempt employees back into the workforce. "Of course, if another variant emerges or the Covid trends suddenly reverse course, we will reevaluate the appropriate safety protocols at that time," he added.

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United's policy change is particularly notable given the airline's previously strict stance. Last August, it announced U.S. employees could be fired if they weren't vaccinated against Covid. The airline had said that less than 4% of its approximately 67,000 U.S. staff were unvaccinated, and of those that were, roughly 2,200 who were approved for medical or religious exemptions would be placed on unpaid leave or in non-customer-facing roles, while roughly 200 without exemptions were terminated and ineligible to return.

Six employees sued to block United's vaccination order in September. A federal judge in Texas upheld the airline's mandate in November, but last month, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the federal judge must reassess the the employees' case. United sought to vacate the court's ruling and reject the appeal in light of dwindling Covid-19 infections and its new policy.

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United isn't the first major company to change course regarding vaccination requirements in recent months. Following a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that blocked the Biden administration's vaccine-or-test rule for workplaces with 100-plus employees, Adidas, Starbucks and Intel announced they would no longer enforce vaccination mandates.

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