

HR Survey: Delta Variant, Vaccine Mandates Deter Employees' Return to Office



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Full transcript

Rob Parsons:

Welcome to the Paychex HR Leadership Series. We're here to help you keep your finger on the pulse of HR by bringing you smart conversations with the thinkers and newsmakers in our industry. I'm your host, Rob Parsons. I lead the content team here at Paychex, and my goal is to provide you with useful information and practical insights and hopefully, more than a little inspiration.

Joining me today is Jeanne Meister. Jeanne is founding partner of Future Workplace, an HR advisory and research firm. Paychex has teamed up with Jeanne to launch a research series dedicated to investigating employees' top concerns, priorities and predictions, as the modern workplace continues to evolve. Today, we'll be discussing her latest findings around vaccines and the return to the office. Jeanne, welcome to the podcast.

Jeanne Meister:

Thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here. I'm really excited to talk about this series of research that Paychex is doing with Future Workplace. We're conducting a survey of 630 workers that are employed in companies from 20 workers all the way to 500 workers. And what's really interesting, Rob, is that we're segmenting each survey by generation, by industry, by type of work environment someone is working in. And so we're looking at all the different angles and really keeping on the pulse of HR, as you said.

Rob Parsons:

And I love it. I love—I think it's going to be so helpful to our listeners to get some of these insights around what employees are thinking. What's in their head? We see polls around the general public, but this concept of employer and employee has a little different dynamic.

Jeanne Meister:

Absolutely.

Rob Parsons:

So I know we've already done a survey around employee loyalty, but you and the team did a quick turn on a topic that's really timely right now: vaccinations and the return to the office. What jumped out at you with this study, which is really just a couple weeks old?

Jeanne Meister:

Yes, it's not even four weeks old, actually. And we jumped right on it. And a couple of things jumped out. One, the level of discomfort employees are feeling in returning to the office or in-person work—whichever that may be—31% of employees actually stated their comfort level with in-person work has declined due to the delta variant. And we see that in the media, day after day, hour after hour, how the delta variant is surging across the United States. And this is causing anxiety and uncertainty about returning to in-person work. The second big finding that jumped out conducted with these 630 workers is that 24%, a quarter of them, say they would quit their job if they had to get the vaccine as mandated by their employer.

Jeanne Meister:

Now we asked this question just prior to the FDA approving the Pfizer vaccine. So, we think this is an important question to keep asking. It brings up all sorts of issues, namely, if you did decide to quit, would you be eligible for unemployment benefits? And the answer, clearly, with a lot of the lawyers that have piped in on this issue is no, because just like any other corporate policy, let's say you were required to take training for ethics training or any kind of corporate policy training, and refused, that would also impact your ability to get unemployment. Now, granted, you may have, you may be exempt for religious or medical reasons, so that also has to be taken into account, but it shows that workers are still uncertain about the vaccine amid the surge of the delta variant.

Rob Parsons:

It's really a challenging environment for companies. I know even months ago, when the vaccines were first released and we were talking with attorneys about mandatory policies, and it really does get to be a really tricky situation. When you talk to employees, did you see any difference in generations? Did different ages feel differently about the vaccine or about discomfort about returning into the office? What did you see there, Jeanne?

Jeanne Meister:

Yeah, well, it's interesting. First of all, Gen Z led the generations saying that their discomfort level had increased more than other generations about returning to in-person work. So I thought about that for a while and I said, "Logically, it might be that someone of the Boomer generation would have increased discomfort level." But I think Gen Z workers are so comfortable with technology and they don't feel there's any impact on their productivity. They're able to navigate seamlessly between one technology tool to the other, that they're most likely saying, "Let's leave well enough alone. You know, the delta surge, I'm fine. I'm doing my work. I prefer not to resume in-person work in the midst of all this delta surge with the vaccine." So there was that, for sure. The other really interesting generational difference was we asked another question about, "Okay, if 24% of the, of the workers said they would quit if they had to have a vaccine, what were some of the incentives to get the vaccine that employers could offer their workers?"

Jeanne Meister:

And 27% said the sort of obvious: a financial bonus to get the vaccine. There have been endless creative ways that employers have been entering lotteries, actually giving you a hundred dollars to get the vaccine. But there were some surprises here. First, Gen Z led all the generations in both, 40% favoring, a cash bonus to get vaccinated, but Gen Z also thought that there was, one of the incentives to get the vaccine was to return to an office social setting and leave the isolation of their home office. Actually, 24% saw the ability to return to an office as actually an incentive. "Well, if I get the vaccine, I can, you know, I'm welcomed back into the office."

Jeanne Meister:

But I think what's also interesting was that the second incentive was paid time off—20% said paid time off. And what, really, this is addressing is not so much paid time off to get the vaccine, but paid time off if you get a reaction to the vaccine. Some people have a medical reaction of either a day or two of not feeling that they can go to work. And right now, a quarter of Americans in private industry do not have any paid sick leave. So the issue is really, "If I get the vaccine, what are the implications on my job for a couple of days following the vaccine?" So I think getting workers vaccinated really needs to be the mutual goal of the federal government, the state government, as well as employers, and a lot of issues come into play here.

Rob Parsons:

For sure. And it really does, it does lead to that question of, "What can you do to ensure that I'm going to be in a safe work environment? Right now, there's a whole bunch of people that maybe aren't vaccinated. There's going to be cases, I know there's breakthroughs. It's not worth the risk, even with the benefit of the social setting and connecting with people. It's just not worth the risk, because I don't see everybody's on the same page. I don't see everybody's doing the same thing. I don't see what you're doing as an employer to ensure our safety."

Jeanne Meister:

Yeah. And so we asked workers also, what *could* your employer do? What are some safety measures that your employer *could* take to make you feel that you're going, that you're returning to a safe and healthy workplace? And mask mandates, regardless of vaccine status, was the preferred safety measure by 41% of the workers. And so this, people are getting used to wearing masks after 18 months, right? And 41% say that's the preferred, second is physical distancing, of course. And then, temperature checks—which we're all very used to by this point.

Rob Parsons:

For sure. This is obviously, and you talked about, we're going to keep asking these questions. This is obviously a very fluid situation for HR leaders to try to manage through. What's your advice for handling all this uncertainty?

Jeanne Meister:

Well, I think there's a couple things employers can do. First, they can really survey their workforce. Just like Paychex has surveyed this sample of 630 workers across various industries and segmented them, I think employers can really do the same. There are, really, there are mounting employee concerns. We are living in a time of heightened uncertainty. And a survey like this will really lead to more of a two-way dialogue, right? I also think that developing a communications plan and sharing with your workers, what are you doing to keep them safe, in addition to mask mandates and physical distancing, what else are you doing? Maybe improved ventilation or air filtration systems that you've put into place, temperature checks, whatever you're doing, employees that are about to return to the office really need to know this. And then finally, I feel very strongly that leaders should support a culture of well-being, and really recognize how stressful this time is for everyone returning to the office and maybe still dealing with homeschooling

Rob Parsons:

That's absolutely the case. There's a lot of talk about returning and not a lot of talk about why, or what else are you going to do? Because this is not as easy as everybody's making it sound. It really is a challenge, and I really appreciate these data points and this information that you're providing. Thank you so much for joining the podcast today, Jeanne.

Jeanne Meister:

You're so welcome, Rob. I look forward to our next podcast.

Rob Parsons:

I know I do too. I'm curious what you're going to uncover in the next study.

Jeanne Meister:

Thank you.

Rob Parsons:

And thank you to all of our listeners. I encourage you to visit paychex.com/worx. That's paychex.com/W-O-R-X, to see a full breakdown of the research, along with Jeanne's suggestions and recommendations. And be sure to stay on the lookout for future studies. We'll be running them often and quickly to bring you the very latest data so you can make the most informed decisions for yourself and for your company. And of course, we'll be having Jeanne as a podcast guest to get her insights firsthand. Thanks again, Jeanne.

Jeanne Meister:

Thank you so much.

Rob Parsons:

And thank you all. Please stay happy and healthy.

Speaker 3:

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