

HR Survey Results: Workers' Top COVID Variant Concerns



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Rob Parsons:

Welcome to PULSE, a Paychex HR podcast where HR professionals find insights on today's top issues and inspiration to build and lead effective teams in a healthier workplace. I'm your host, Rob Parsons.

Rob Parsons:

Welcome to the podcast everyone. Rob Parsons here. We're joined again by Jeanne Meister, Founding Partner of Future Workplace, and now Executive Vice President of Executive Networks, an HR peer network company. Jeanne's teamed up with us here at Paychex to research employees' top concerns as the modern workplace continues to evolve. Today we're going to be discussing what she's found out about employee thoughts and reactions around all the new COVID variants. Jeanne, welcome back.

Jeanne Meister:

Thank you so much for having me, Rob. It's a pleasure to have these discussions with you right after we finish our research.

Rob Parsons:

I know it's always fun, and it seems like we're learning more and more about employees, and more and more about how to manage these situations. You know, the Delta and Omicron variants were really disruptive. We were back at the office, and then things got a little murky, and this whole issue's been harder for HR professionals to manage. It looks like it's going to be an ongoing challenge. Is that what you're seeing?

Jeanne Meister:

Yes, I think it's starting to ease up. Right? We have some cities, and states, and employers, lifting mask mandates. But I think there's this overall uncertainty and anxiety about, will there be another variant? If yes, when, and how's that going to impact me and my family?

Rob Parsons:

Yeah, I think we are, I think many of us are starting to accept that this is the new — I hate saying the new normal — but we're just going to have to manage this, and manage it intelligently, and with some emotional sensitivity, because there are some concerns amongst employees. And you saw a variety of different concerns. What would you say was the biggest takeaway?

Jeanne Meister:

The biggest, by far, concern among our sample of 601 workers who work in small- to medium-size businesses, we conducted this survey in the last week of January, was bringing the COVID variant back home to their families. They were very concerned about, will they get sick themselves at work? Will they bring this home to their family and maybe extended families? Other concerns were, what's going to be the impact of my employer? How will my employer fare going through this continued uncertainty? To what now — Rob, I know it's hard to believe, but we're going on exactly two years with March of 2022. So I think we as HR leaders have to be really sensitive to what this means to a worker who is trying to do their best job and going back to their workplace, but has continuing concerns.

Rob Parsons:

You know, that's an excellent point about the employers Jeanne. I think it impresses upon me even more how important it is that we in the HR world do everything we can to make sure the workplace is safe. Make sure things can go uninterrupted, and make sure we can keep the doors open, because we all depend on these jobs, and it's a critical thing. It's something I think in the research you even saw concerns about specific segments like single parents.

Jeanne Meister:

Yeah. Single working, single parents with schoolchildren at home are my heroes. You know, I think they have gone through so much in the last — let's say 23 months — having to navigate COVID, the variants, their job, perhaps working remotely for the very first time in their lives. And then having, in some cases, to manage homeschool for their children. So the segment, and we did segment it for the first time Rob, with asking our workers were they a member, a parent with schoolchildren at home. And single working parents with schoolchildren at home feel the most vulnerable. They're very concerned, even more concerned, about bringing the variant home to their children, their families, and they have multiple concerns. The other big concern was possibly losing their job. You know, how will their company fare amid this continued uncertainty?

Rob Parsons:

And even negotiating all those issues you pointed out is a huge challenge. I'm having trouble managing one French Bulldog puppy here. I can't wait to get back to the office and be much more productive, quite frankly. So I can see how a single parent can really have a challenge.

Jeanne Meister:

I echo that. I'm having a lot of trouble with my Mini Labradoodle who's now very accustomed to me working in my home office, and she's in for a big shock, Rob.

Rob Parsons:

That's for sure. That's for sure. You know, another thing I found interesting, it's always the case as a parent of a 24 year old, I know Gen Z always has its own story to tell. They have a unique perspective. They have unique life experiences already very much dominated by this pandemic. They stood out this time as well with your research, didn't they?

Jeanne Meister:

They certainly did. When we asked the question, "What are you most concerned about," we segmented the findings by generation. Right? And Gen Z, these are individuals born after 1997, and it's fair to say they sort of came of age, right, in their 20s, 20 and 21, during the pandemic. So they have the least exposure to how to navigate the hills and valleys of life, which gets complicated as you get older. So their biggest concerns, the most concerned, about losing their job. Right? 40% were concerned about losing their job. But the other two percentages were really interesting.

Jeanne Meister:

They were the most frequent group to say that they would look for another job. Over 30% said they were going to look for another job because they didn't know how their company was going to fare during this variant. And then what was really interesting is that 33% said they were just going to get a side gig. They were going to sort of wait it out, keep their job. And you read about this, the number of people that have full-time jobs and an almost full-time side gig. That's what came out here, that Gen Z was managing their bets, if you will.

Rob Parsons:

Yeah. That's so interesting because they're managing a challenging time of life as it is. Trying to get your foot in the door, trying to get employed, trying to find a good company, trying to find a career even. You're going to move around a little bit, you're going to bang around a little bit, under the best of circumstances.

Jeanne Meister:

Yes. Yeah, absolutely. And I would say they're the most vulnerable. Now, if you look statistically at all the research with thousands of Gen Zs, it's very consistent, right? Gen Z is the most prone to being impatient, and looking for their next opportunity fairly quickly. And now when you enter and overlay the pandemic going on for a year and a half, and now the Delta variant, and the Omicron variant, they're really managing, "Maybe I should keep this job and get a side gig, because who knows what's going to happen?"

Rob Parsons:

You know, that's exactly it. And that's another thing I think we need to keep our eyes on because we need good ... we need good "raw material" coming in, so to speak, into our workplaces. And if they're too impatient, or if we aren't giving them opportunities soon enough, then perhaps shame on us.

Jeanne Meister:

Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. Yes.

Rob Parsons:

Any last thoughts to share? It was just such an interesting time for the research and questions. Anything, last thoughts to share with the audience?

Jeanne Meister:

Yes. I think because Gen Z really came out in this piece of research with being at risk of leaving their employer, I think this is the time when employers should do a couple things. Number one, they should definitely have sentiment surveys. What is the sentiment of their workforce by generation? They should do some training with managers, how to have some check-ins on a regular basis with all the team members with really focusing also on Gen Z now that we know overall they could be prone to leaving their job amid already the Great Resignation. Right?

Jeanne Meister:

Then finally, Gen Z is really motivated for, what's that next career move for me? What are some new training and development opportunities? How can I move within a new job role within the same company? So really for managers this is their opportunity to be transparent on having these career journey discussions with your team members, and really look at your youngest team members as they're the ones that really need it the most.

Rob Parsons:

I love that. Transparency is becoming one of just my ... It's a little cliché, but it's cliché because it's so true, so valuable. I think even when we were talking about single parents and people scared to bring the virus home to their families, transparency about what we're trying to do, how we're trying to help, how we're trying to mitigate the risk, how we're trying to help everybody succeed, is so important. Thank you. Thank you so much, Jeanne. This was a great episode today.

Jeanne Meister:

You are very welcome. Thank you for having me Rob.

Rob Parsons:

And thank you to all our listeners for joining. You can read Jeanne's article, have a summary of the research results, and it'll have her insights and recommendations that goes along with it, much more in depth than what we were able to cover today. It's paychex.com/worx. That's paychex.com/W-O-R-X. Finally, we'd love you to tell us what you want from the podcast. You can visit payx.me/pulsetopics to submit guests and topic ideas. And that one's [P-A-Y-dot-M-E/pulsetopics](https://payx.me/pulsetopics). We've actually gotten a few good suggestions already, good guests. They'll be coming up in the next few episodes. I think you'll all find them very interesting. So everybody, thank you all for listening. We really appreciate you. Please stay happy and healthy.

Announcer:

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