

CORONAVIRUS

The new normal: PTO, bonuses being used to get employees to take vaccine

Kyle Schnitzer February 9, 2021



Getting employees safely back in the office is the number one goal for all business in the year ahead. With the rollout of [various COVID-19 vaccines](#), the path is clear: get the jab and get back to work. Normalcy might be a ways away, but some semblance of life before the coronavirus pandemic will take form in 2021 if vaccination rollout goes as planned.

That all depends on whether everyone is compliant with getting the vaccine. A [recent study by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington School of Medicine](#) found that only 52% of Americans said they will get the COVID-19 vaccine, leaving a quarter on the fence about getting it, and another 23% saying they won't get it at all. [Research conducted by the Pew Research Center](#) found that two-in-ten Americans are "pretty certain" they won't get the vaccine, according to research released in December.

Vaccination is the key to herd immunity. NPR said scientists think that [between 70% and 85% of people](#) need to be immune from the disease before reaching herd immunity. Estimations for when that can be reached will be reach vary, as

Dr. Anthony Fauci said in December that it could be [reached by the fall](#) and that some sort of normalcy can occur by the end of the year.

But getting people vaccinated and [back into the office](#) is harder than you think. You can be exempt from getting the vaccine for religious purposes. You also may not want to be vaccinated.

However, some companies have gone beyond encouragement to get their employees safe and vaccinated by offering them incentives to get the shot. Fast food chain McDonald's recently said it will [offer corporate and corporate-owned store employees](#) four hours of paid time off if they get the vaccine. Instacart, Tradeer Joe's, and Dollar General [also plans to pay workers](#) to get the shot.

Whether it's \$100 or offering additional time off, Rob Wilson, president of Employco USA, a national employment solutions firm, told Ladders that offering employees incentives to get the vaccine benefits both employee and employer.

"From a company standpoint, your end goal is going to reduce the number of sick days and really get your business back open and int full force with people back in your company," Wilson said.

A [recent study by Blackhawk Network](#) found that one-third of workers said they will agree to get the COVID-19 vaccination for as little as \$100. Compensation could be a way to easily encourage employees to go out and get vaccinated. It's been argued that [paying incentives to people to receive vaccinations won't work](#), but Wilson said it's an effective way to get people safe and back in the office.

The two most popular options he's seen from companies is offering additional time off — from paid time for three-to-four hours — to offering gift cards, which isn't a tax liability to employees.

Bonus vacation time can also be an option, Wilson said.

How can you approach your employees with incentives?

It's always going to be a matter of how you say it, not what you said. Some employees are going to be hesitant and maybe opt not to get vaccinated. Others may be exempt for religious purposes.

Either way, it's important to note to offer incentives correctly. Wilson said that either communication the message through human resources or outsourcing it to a company that can craft the message can be smart ways of going about offering incentives for the vaccine. Even senior management can send out a memo to let employees know the offer is there.

"The end goal is to get your business open and try to get everyone back to normal or whatever that new normal is. But whether you're giving someone a gift card or making it mandatory, you're adding a little more liability to your business," he said.

"If you're offering money for someone to get the vaccine, someone could have an adverse reaction to it which opens up some corporate liability, whether as a worker's comp claim or a liability claim against your business."

For companies considering the incentives, think about budgets. Wilson said the most cost effective method is a one-time payment or offering a set amount of paid-time off.

"Depending on a business, maybe it's an extra day or two of vacation," he said. "But you have to look at it from a financial standpoint and see what makes sense for your business."

Getting vaccinated can be a closer solution to returning to some normalcy in the coming months and years, but it's hard to say that every company is going to have all employees vaccinated. The reality is that many will have to deal with employees that are vaccinated and employees that aren't vaccinated, which sets up a working landscape that calls for continued social distancing and mask wearing.

"Some companies have looked at moving people who didn't get vaccinated to a different section of your office," Wilson said. "But then you potentially have discrimination issues — that's a bigger issue. You're going to have to keep social distancing and requiring masks until the pandemic is under control."