

U.S. employers ratchet up the pressure on the unvaccinated

By ALEXANDRA OLSON
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Employers are losing patience with unvaccinated workers.

For months, most employers relied on information campaigns, bonuses and other incentives to encourage their workforces to get the COVID-19 shot. Now, a growing number are imposing rules to make it more onerous for employees to refuse, from outright mandates to requiring the unvaccinated to undergo regular testing.

Among employers getting tougher are the federal government, the state governments of California and New York, tech giants Google and Facebook, the Walt Disney Co. and the NFL. Some hospitals, universities, restaurants, bars and other entertainment venues have also started requiring vaccines.

But the new measures are unlikely to affect many of the millions of unvaccinated Americans.

Many of the companies that are requiring shots have mostly office workers who are already largely vaccinated and are reluctant to work alongside those who aren't.

In contrast, major companies that rely on low-income blue-collar workers — food manufacturers, warehouses, supermarkets and other store chains — are shying away from mandates for fear of driving



John Minchillo/The Associated Press, File

An employee manually assembles a circuit-board element on Wednesday, April 28, 2021, at a Nanotronics manufacturing center at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in the Brooklyn borough of New York. Matthew Putman, CEO of Nanotronics, said in July 2021 he agonized over his decision to impose a vaccine mandate on his more than 100 employees, who have mostly been working onsite throughout the pandemic. As it turned out, nearly all of his workers were already vaccinated, though he dreads the prospect of having to fire any holdouts.

away employees and worsening the labor shortages such businesses are facing.

Tyson Foods, for instance, said about half of its U.S. workforce — 56,000 employees — has received shots after the meat and poultry processor hosted more than 100 vaccination events since February. But the company said it has no plans to impose a mandate to reach the other half.

Walmart and Amazon, the country's two largest private employers, have also declined to require its hourly workers to get vaccinated, continuing to rely on strategies such as bonuses and onsite access to shots. But in a potentially pow-

erful signal, Walmart said employees at its headquarters will be required to get vaccinated by Oct. 4.

The biggest precedent so far has come from the federal government, the nation's largest employer. President Joe Biden announced last week that all federal employees and contractors must get vaccinated or put up with weekly testing and lose privileges such as official travel.

The federal government has said it will cover the costs of the weekly tests. As for other employers, insurance may pay for such testing at some workplaces but not others.

Biden's decision could

embolden other employers by signaling they would be on solid legal ground to impose similar rules, said Brian Kropp, chief of research at consulting firm Gartner's human resources practice.

But Kropp said some companies face complicated considerations that go beyond legalities, including deep resistance to vaccines in many states where they operate.

Retailers like Walmart might have a hard time justifying vaccine requirements for their workers while allowing shoppers to remain unvaccinated, Kropp added. Stores have mostly avoided vaccine requirements for customers for fear of alienating them and because of the difficulty in trying to verify their status.

In surveys by Gartner, fewer than 10% of employers have said they intend to require all employees to be vaccinated.

But a shift is building amid frustration over plateauing vaccination rates and alarm over the spread of the more contagious delta variant.

On Monday, Aug. 2, the U.S. finally reached Biden's goal of dispensing at least one shot to 70% of American adults — but a month late and amid a fierce surge that is driving hospital case-loads in some places to their highest levels since the outbreak began. The president had hoped to reach his target by the Fourth of July.

The Union Square Hos-

pitality Group, a group of New York City restaurants and bars founded by Danny Meyer, is now requiring employees and customers to be vaccinated by Sept. 7.

The San Francisco Bar Owner Alliance, a group of about 300 bars, made a similar decision following a meeting where "the thing that stood out was anger and frustration" toward vaccine holdouts, said founder Ben Bleiman.

While some companies fear vaccine mandates will drive workers away, the pandemic itself is also causing absenteeism. Bleiman said he recently had to close his bar for a night after his bartender, who was fully vaccinated, tested positive and a replacement couldn't be found.

Some employers are concluding that requiring vaccines is simpler than trying to come up with different rules on masks and social distancing for the small number of unvaccinated employees.

BlackRock, the global investment manager, is allowing only vaccinated workers into its U.S. offices for now and said people will be free to go maskless, as local health guidelines allow, and sit next to each other and congregate without restrictions. The firm said 85% of its U.S. employees are vaccinated or in the process of getting shots.

Matthew Putman, CEO of New York-based high-tech manufacturing hub

Nanotronics, said he agonized over his decision to impose a vaccine mandate on his more than 100 employees. As it turned out, nearly all of them were already vaccinated, though he dreads the prospect of having to fire any holdouts.

"I hate the thought. But if it has to happen, it has to happen," Putman said. "I lost a ton of sleep over this but not as much sleep as I've lost over the fear of infection."

Other mandates could provide a clearer test of the potential for employee backlash.

Hospitals and nursing home chains, for instance, are increasingly requiring the vaccine. So far, such mandates have survived legal challenges. More than 150 employees at a Houston hospital system who refused to get the COVID-19 shot were fired or resigned after a judge dismissed an employee lawsuit over the requirement.

Atria Senior Living, which operates more than 200 senior living communities across the country, was among the first to mandate vaccines for its staff in January.

It worked. Nearly 99% of Atria's 10,000 employees are vaccinated, and only a tiny fraction quit over the requirement, said CEO and Chairman John Moore.

"Our residents deserve to live in a vaccinated environment. Our staff deserves to work in a vaccinated environment," Moore said.

SCHWAB

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While the second phase is being completed, the customer service and administrative offices will temporarily move to a mobile office space outside.

Along with construction, the company has hired new employees to reduce wait times.

"We've hired multiple new employees, five in the last three months with the idea of just trying to do everything we can to keep our customers happy and to keep them on the road with as little downtime as possible," Stebar said.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Construction ramps up Tuesday, Aug. 3, 2021, at the La Grande Les Schwab on Adams Avenue.

OXARC

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"We need a bigger facility, something that's more effective for what we want to do," Sean Loudon, OXARC manager, said. "We're expanding our steel and culvert pipe supply, so we need a bigger facility, and other avenues we want to do right now that we just don't have the capacity for."

The company has been expanding its resources in recent years and now has 20 locations and 300 employees across Idaho, Washington and Oregon.

"We're going away from renting and going to owning," Loudon said. "We bought this property last August. We're starting to duplicate the stores everywhere on properties that the company owns."

The expanded building will be an upgrade from the much smaller OXARC location in Island City, which the business has lived in since 2005.

The La Grande management has been looking for a new location for five years, according to Loudon.

The new facility will have a larger parking lot and more administrative

offices. The store currently has five employees, which will likely increase with the new move.

With less than two months until completion, the main priority is working with subcontractors on inspections inside the building and working on trim on the outside of the building.

There have been few delays in the construction, according to Teeter.

"There's a lack of drivers, just some shipping delays, but it's been going pretty well," he said. "We just hope we continue to receive shipments of materials."

DROUGHT

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The survey suggests age as a factor in determining who is concerned about water management. Around 63% of people age 18 to 44 said they are somewhat or very concerned while around 74% of those older than 45 were concerned.

Concern also increased with education — 60% of those with only a high school diploma said they were concerned with the number rising to 76% of those with a college diploma.

Party affiliation also played an important role in how people felt about water management — 78% of Democrats said they were somewhat or very concerned while 61% of Republicans fell into this category.

Survey respondents had a variety of opinions about the management of groundwater by farmers and ranchers. Subsidizing water-efficient irrigation systems received the strongest support among mitigation strategies, along with increasing the state budget for groundwater research to ensure

MORE INFORMATION

The Oregon Values and Beliefs Center, a nonpartisan charitable organization, has partnered with Pamplin Media Group and EO Media Group to report how Oregonians think and feel about various subjects.

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future availability. Both fell into the so-called tier-one support category for having the support of 70% or more of survey respondents, according to the Oregon Values and Beliefs Center.

"It's notable that neither proposal involves more restrictions or limitations on agricultural water usage, but rather encourages and facilitates proactive solutions," according to the survey. "Both proposals do, however, necessitate larger financial investment from the state."

Tier-two proposals to conserve water — those that had 50% to 60% support — include proposals to require groundwater users to submit annual usage reports to regulators (59% overall support) and to require meters on all groundwater wells (54% overall support).

Proposals that received the least amount of support include capping total water use and creating a market allowing users to buy and sell portions of their allotments. These received just 35% total support. They also received the greatest amount of opposition, with 46% of respondents saying they oppose the proposals.

The proposal to prohibit wells that deplete surface water received the highest percentage of unsure answers (21%), which indicates lower levels of awareness on this issue, according to the survey.

The largest gap in the survey was found in opinions about a proposal to require meters on all groundwater wells. Just 40% of rural Oregonians support this proposal compared to 60% of urban Oregonians. The report notes that this is not surprising given that groundwater wells are more

common in rural areas.

The survey also broke down the responses by ethnicity. It summarized that Black, Indigenous and other Oregonians of color differ from white Oregonians only slightly in their level of overall concern

about how surface and groundwater are managed. White Oregonians were only slightly more concerned — 69% vs. 64%.

There were minor differences between ethnic groups in whether they supported state funding

for groundwater research. However, the groups tended to align when it came to solutions. The results varied only a percentage point or two in most response categories, according to the Oregon Values and Beliefs Center.

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