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Vaccinations, Mandates and the Future of Work

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BRUNSWICK

Since December 2020, the Brunswick Group Americas Employee Engagement Practice has been closely tracking how employers are addressing workforce questions around the COVID-19 vaccines.

As the Delta variant spreads and infection rates tick back up, many companies are delaying their re-opening plans, reinstating mask mandates, and considering – or implementing - vaccination mandates for employees.

Many decisions early in the pandemic had to be made quickly and with a high level of uncertainty. Leaders did not have the luxury of assessing employee sentiment and response. Now, they have an opportunity to look back at the data to see what has worked well in decision making and communicating with employees throughout the timeline of the pandemic.

In this note, we present a summary of the questions and approaches that companies, organizations and communities are using to guide their decisions in three key areas:

- **Vaccine Mandates:** Are employers mandating employees or customers get vaccinated? To what extent are employers implementing COVID-19 testing in their workplaces and retail locations? How will boosters be considered?
- **Future of Work:** How is the vaccine rollout affecting where and how employees work? To what extent are employers requiring employees who had shifted to working remotely during the pandemic to return to the in-person workplace? How are employers engaging employees to ensure they remain inspired, committed, and engaged?
- **Employer / Employee Relations:** How are corporate leaders weighing in on questions of trust in the vaccines? How are companies working to ensure equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines for their employees, customers, and communities? To what extent are companies making social contributions around the vaccination effort?

Also included is a summary of trends within key sectors. **For complete access to our work tracking corporate responses to the pandemic, please contact eeus@brunswickgroup.com.**

Considerations

Vaccine Mandates

The advice on mandates and personal vaccination disclosure rules from government, school systems and companies are highly fluid. For leaders who confront these issues, grounding their thinking in data from the past 18 to 24 months can make decisions and communications in the near and long term clearer and more effective. When making determinations in mandates and key workplace decisions, consider the following questions:

- How have you been talking about security and safety up to now? Take an analytical approach to internal feedback and survey results from the last year to determine what decisions and messages resonated with employees.
- What matters to your employees? Assess employee sentiment and response through internal and external communications channels to identify key areas of risk and opportunity.
- What is common practice in your industry? Survey external audiences and peer groups to determine what is most important in how decisions are being made now, and in the future.
- Do you have a clear storyline for any change in policy? Communicate transparently the reasons, benefits and implications behind decisions taken.

Future of Work

Employees are uncertain about returning to offices given the rise in 'breakthrough' cases, driving many companies to push back their office re-opening plans, some by months or even into the new year. Many are also working with new hybrid, remote and in-office structures and processes.

A majority of companies point to the benefits of in-person collaboration and companionship which cannot be experienced while working remotely. But many are considering changes to office layouts, team structures, communication style, and expectations around the number of days employees must be in the office.

While there may be sound business reasons for an employer to incentivize either in-person or remote work, employees will expect those new rules to be made clear and applied consistently across the workforce. Failure to do so could exacerbate the "great resignation," which has seen millions of workers quitting their jobs as they re-evaluate their career goals in light of the pandemic.

As employers try to balance different interests and needs, they should consider how best to:

- Facilitate opportunities for dialogue with clear topics, parameters, and outcomes. Dialogue does not always mean a blank slate for any topic to be raised, but properly facilitated, it can lead to clarity on what is driving employees to make the choice to stay, what would motivate them to leave and what support they need.
- Index what employees believe is central to the corporate culture. Look across cultural dimensions - environment, fulfillment, ethics, purpose, and advancement – and then double down on the most important elements to ensure that as decisions are made and the ways of working change, the organization stays true to its cultural roots.
- Establish a change communications plan that keeps critical issues – like safety, security and mental health - at the front of the communications agenda.

Employer / Employee Relations

The pandemic has changed how employees think of their employers and what they expect from their leaders. The trends that were emerging before the pandemic – employees expecting more from their employers and joining together to demand change – are now more widespread, frequent and diverse.

Employees have seen their CEOs and leaders speak out in new ways, going above and beyond in providing support and access to employees regardless of their location, and opening their virtual doors to ensure that employees were not left behind. There is a risk that, as leaders shift back to in-person settings, the opportunities that have been offered to those working in new ways will lessen.

Employers can take the lead in strengthening their relationship with employees by:

- Setting clear principles and communications about equality across how employees will be heard, treated, recognized and rewarded.
- Facilitating sessions with leaders to ensure alignment in messaging, tone and cultural drivers in the future ways of working – and along the way with each new change milestone.
- Celebrating and recognizing employees, as well as establishing intentional moments for employees to obtain access to leaders equally in virtual and in-person settings.

Conclusion

Today's uncertainty, coupled with concerns around vaccine equity and disclosure, employee resignations, and workplace transitions, increases the need to evaluate – and continuously re-evaluate - workplace cultures.

As these trends accelerate through the second half of 2021, the key takeaway for employers and business leaders is simple: employees matter more than ever.

By following the guiding principles of putting humans first, ensuring a strong foundation of value-based communications with employees, preparing and consistently updating scenario planning and establishing proactive platforms for employees to take positive actions, companies can be well positioned to weather ongoing historic transitions.

For more thought leadership from Brunswick's Employee Engagement specialists and to connect with our team, please visit our [website](#) or email eeus@brunswickgroup.com.

Notable trends within key sectors in the first half of 2021

Financial Services

J.P. Morgan and Goldman Sachs were most vocal about wanting employees to return to the office full-time, with notable parallels between their announcements. In March, both companies stated that they expected summer interns to be able to work in-person at their offices. At the end of April, J.P. Morgan set a date for its U.S. offices to reopen (May 17th), followed by Goldman's announcement a week later that its U.S. employees would return to the office on June 14th. Along the same lines, Bank of America told their new hires to expect to work in the office, Jefferies said it expected workers to decide to return to the office "en masse" in September and Morgan Stanley announced they would be "very disappointed" if staff are not back in its Manhattan offices by September. Further, both J.P. Morgan and Goldman announced in June that they would require their employees to share their vaccination status with their employer.

However, the sector as a whole was split in terms of attitudes toward return-to-work. Particularly in the UK, banks leaned towards hybrid-working models, with plans to that effect announced by HSBC, Lloyd's, NatWest, and Standard Chartered (all of whom will either reduce or repurpose their office footprint), as well as Deutsche Bank and Bank of Ireland.

Consumer Goods

Compared to other sectors, announcements from Consumer Goods companies tended to relate much more to vaccines than return to work. This naturally reflected their business models, particularly those of retailers, where most employees cannot work from home. In terms of vaccination policy, most announcements from consumer goods companies aimed to encourage and incentivize vaccination rather than mandate it. The one exception was Saks, which in May required employees to be vaccinated before returning to the office.

Many of these companies also ran national campaigns to incentivize the public to get vaccinated. For example, Anheuser-Busch, Budweiser and Samuel Adams all offered free beverages; and Target offered \$5 coupons. For their own employees, the most common incentive was financial bonuses, with Walmart offering \$75, Amazon and Kroger offering \$100 and Lidl offering \$200 each to employees who show proof of their vaccination.

Finally, some major consumer entertainment brands including Disney and Major League Baseball temporarily turned their entertainment parks into mass vaccination sites in the early Spring – a significant and highly visible social contribution to the national vaccination effort.

Healthcare & Life Sciences

The healthcare sector has naturally been at the epicenter of the pandemic since the first outbreaks of COVID-19. Healthcare workers were both on the front lines of the crisis as well as instrumental in developing and distributing the vaccines as they came to market. Many healthcare workers were considered essential workers and received priority access to the COVID-19 vaccine before workers in other sectors. Because many healthcare workers never had the opportunity to work remotely, the focus for employers and workers in this sector was mainly surrounding access to and uptake of the vaccine, rather than the return-to-office questions facing many other industries.

One main discussion point within this sector was the availability of the vaccine to front line healthcare workers and whether employers could mandate vaccines to healthcare workers.

More recently, a judge dismissed an employee lawsuit opposing Houston Methodist Hospital's policy mandating employees be vaccinated. Following this, 153 workers of the health system either resigned or were fired – pointing to how other similar conflicts at healthcare employers, if not also employers in other industries, may be resolved.

Technology/Media/Telecoms Sector

Prior to COVID-19, many tech companies already allowed their employees to work from home or “anywhere” – making the transition away from the office during the pandemic less abrupt for tech employees than workers in other sectors. As such, tech companies have announced return to work plans geared more towards remote work compared to companies in other sectors. Dell and Google have in particular leaned more toward plans for majority-remote work, with Dell announcing that 60% of its workforce will ultimately work primarily from home and Google announcing that 20% of its workforce would be able to apply to permanently work from home. CEOs of Zoom and Amsys Group stated early on that they were unlikely to have workers return to the office before 2022. Facebook said it would let all employees work remotely even after the pandemic as long as their jobs can be done outside of an office.

Additionally, throughout the pandemic, several tech companies moved outside of their normal activities to assist with the national vaccination effort. Google made one of the largest recorded social contributions to the national vaccination effort coming from a public company, committing \$50 million to partnerships with public health agencies to inform underserved communities about the vaccine, and \$150 million to promote further education and support for the equitable distribution of the vaccines.

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