

How Employers Can Reduce Vaccine Hesitancy

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Boston Globe/Getty Images

Summary. Employers have a central role to play in the drive to persuade people to get vaccinated against Covid-19. This article offers 12 strategies that leverage the power of behavioral economics.

Vaccines can only end this pandemic and prevent even more death and economic disruption if enough people get them, allowing a country to achieve herd immunity. Employers can play an essential role in achieving that goal by embracing the tenets of behavioral economics to combat vaccine hesitancy.

Emphasize stories over statistics.

When the global death toll of the pandemic exceeded 2 million people in January, journalists made valiant attempts to help us wrap our minds around the scope of the crisis, saying, “It’s as if 10 of the world’s largest commercial jets fell out of the sky, every day for an entire year.”

While this figure is jaw-dropping, statistics or graphs fail to capture the agonizing reality of losing a parent, sibling, neighbor, or coworker. Employers should offer a platform for employees who may be willing to share their story of loss or becoming seriously ill from the virus. This will not only help employees heal emotionally but also has the power to encourage them to take action. People are more likely to believe they can get sick or infect others after hearing this happened to someone they know personally.

Focus on immediate rather than long-term benefits.

People place far more value on what they can attain immediately, so the promise that a vaccine can lead to the end of pandemic restrictions months or years from now is not enough to motivate action. Communications should focus on immediate benefits, like those who are vaccinated can return to the grocery store or hairstylist with less worry they could bring infection home to their family. But emphasize that even those who are vaccinated should continue to wear masks and distance until we reach herd immunity.

Stress that vaccination will be necessary for some activities.

In their employee communications, organizations should certainly emphasize the primary benefit of getting vaccinated: avoiding getting sick and spreading a deadly illness to family, friends, and coworkers. However, those communications should also point out other benefits — for example, vaccines are likely to be required in the future for future domestic or international travel or even to attend concerts or sporting events.

Protect employees from any loss associated with getting vaccinated.

Be sure vaccination itself doesn't cause employees to suffer a loss. Some employers are offering the equivalent of two to four hours of pay so that hourly employees do not suffer a financial loss when they take time away from work to get vaccinated. There should be no out-of-pocket cost to the recipient.

Use social networks.

Humans like to do what their friends and neighbors are doing. This makes social networks a powerful tool to encourage vaccination. For many, the workplace remains one of their most important social networks. Just as many influencers show videos of themselves receiving the vaccine, employers can put stickers on ID badges and vaccine sites can distribute easily visible buttons to those who are vaccinated.

Using social networks to promote vaccination will be especially important in communities of color, where a long history of medical discrimination has led to a higher rate of vaccine hesitancy. That's why it's important to highlight that a Black woman, Kizzmekia Corbett, was one of the key scientists who developed the Moderna vaccine, and that the first vaccination in the New York City was administered to and by Black health care workers.

Make getting vaccinated easy.

Getting the vaccine should be easy. Appointments should be simple to book by phone or online and should be offered at as many locations as possible, including employer sites when increased supplies of vaccines make that possible. In the United States, employers can cover fees for administering the vaccines in both the medical and pharmacy benefit. Employers can create calendar holds for on-site vaccination if that becomes available. This is especially important for the second shot of two-dose vaccines, which should be given in a narrow time window. Behavioral economists call this “choice architecture.”

Seek commitment.

There’s a reason political campaigns ask voters to sign cards committing to voting or supporting a candidate. Once we have publicly stated our position, we are more receptive to *confirmation bias*, meaning we seek out information that confirms our point of view and overlook information that doesn’t.

Employers should encourage their employees to sign up for vaccinations as soon as they are eligible, even if there is a wait. And executives and other influential leaders should express their commitment to being vaccinated, even if they are not yet eligible.

Don’t mandate vaccines before they are widely accepted.

The U.S. Equal Opportunity Employment Commission allows employers to mandate vaccines if necessary for workplace safety but requires consideration of religious or medical objections. However, that doesn’t mean this is a good time for a vaccine mandate. Let’s not force people to declare their opposition to the vaccine when almost a third of the population says they want to wait and see how the vaccine is working. Those who aren’t willing to get the vaccine just yet will likely be much more amenable at a later point when they see their friends, coworkers, and families gaining benefits from the safe vaccines and when they need to show proof of vaccination for recreational or other non-work activities.

Frame choices to highlight the value of the vaccine.

Provide context to help employees understand the value of vaccinations. Some employees might worry that the vaccines have only early use authorization rather than full approval from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, and therefore are risky. Explain to them that the vaccines have already been given to tens of millions of people with minimal negative results. Complication rates remain very low, and no deaths have been definitively caused by the vaccines. Meanwhile, there have been more than 500,000 deaths from the pandemic in the United States and more than 2.5 million globally.

There are now unfortunate reports that some are refusing certain vaccines because of early reports that they are less effective than others. Remind employees that the Pfizer, Moderna, Astra Zeneca and Johnson & Johnson vaccines have all been shown to decrease hospitalizations by more than 99%. We have begun talking about an increase in “vaccine confidence” rather than a decrease in “vaccine hesitancy.”

Overcome the tendency to underestimate common risks.

Individuals are subject to *optimism bias*, which means they believe that they are less likely to suffer a bad outcome than statistics would suggest. For instance, smokers continue to smoke even though they know that cigarettes lead to premature death, and stock car racers continue to race even though they know that life-threatening accidents are common.

With Covid-19, many underestimate their risk of being exposed or having a severe case or lasting effects if infected. In their communications to encourage vaccinations, employers can overcome this bias by focusing on decreasing the risk of transmitting the illness to loved ones and pointing to herd immunity as a necessary step to return to the many activities we miss.

Avoid overwhelming employees.

When we are presented with too many choices and too much information, we often freeze and revert to a default of making no choice at all. Shoppers offered too many samples at a store actually purchase fewer sampled items.

The torrent of information about Covid-19 might also paralyze employees and decrease vaccination rates. Employers should provide easily understood information about why, how, and where they can get vaccinated. Vaccination will be a choice, but let's make it an easy choice.

Be fair!

People hate unfairness, even if they themselves aren't harmed by the inequity. Leaders should model their enthusiasm about getting the vaccine but make sure that vaccines are quickly offered to frontline workers and those at highest risk. A retailer would not want to vaccinate its executive board chairman while leaving cashiers unprotected! If companies are administering vaccine, they should offer it to all similarly situated employees as supplies allow. The appearance of unfair administration of vaccine not only opens employers to negative press but also could also lead angry employees to forego vaccination.

The Covid-19 pandemic represents the greatest public health challenge in a century. To combat it, we need to increase public acceptance of safe, highly effective vaccines. By using the behavioral economic toolkit to promote vaccination of employees and their families, employers can help us achieve herd immunity and thereby prevent further illness, death, and further economic disruption.

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