



SAFER

Case Study on Vaccine Requirements

Company: United Airlines

Interviewees: Kirk Limacher, vice president of Human Resources Services
Sasha Johnson, vice president of Corporate Safety

Number of Employees: ~84,000

Interview Date: January 27, 2022

This case study reflects information obtained at the time of interview.

Background

The National Safety Council knows vaccines are the safest, most effective way to slow COVID-19 transmission and prevent hospitalization and death. To provide the safest possible workplace, thousands of private employers have implemented policies requiring their workers to get vaccinated against COVID-19. These requirements have largely remained in place even after the Supreme Court blocked an OSHA Emergency Temporary Standard that would have obligated all employers of 100 or more workers to ensure those workers are vaccinated against COVID-19 or present a negative test at least weekly.

United Airlines is a major global airline that strongly promoted COVID-19 vaccines among its workers before ultimately issuing a vaccine requirement in August 2021. Today, 99.9% of its 68,000 U.S. employees have been vaccinated (excluding those with an approved exemptions).

The National Safety Council (NSC), in partnership with Health Action Alliance (HAA), spoke with United Airlines employees Kirk Limacher and Sasha Johnson, to discuss the planning, processes and results of the company's vaccine requirement. This case study reviews best practices to share with other employers for use during the COVID-19 pandemic or in future public health crises when implementing a worker vaccine requirement.

Planning and processes

SAFER Vaccine Requirement Spectrum



According to the Council’s [Vaccine Requirement Spectrum](#), various levels of vaccine requirements exist for companies to put in place depending on their workforce’s risk. United Airlines implemented and maintains a “hard” vaccine requirement. Even prior to FDA approval, as vaccines first became widely available, United began a broad and extensive communications campaign providing factual information to employees about the importance of vaccines, creating opportunities for people to speak with health experts about their vaccine questions and building forums for peers to share why they got vaccinated. To remove barriers to access, United distributed shots at on-site vaccination clinics.

United Airlines’ approach to vaccines was guided by its emphasis on safety, both in connection with the pandemic and otherwise. (For example, it was the first airline to require all passengers over the age of two to wear masks while on the airplane.) Accordingly, United chose not to initially provide monetary incentives for vaccines. “We wouldn’t normally provide incentives for being safe. It’s core to our mission. There’s no bonus for being a safe airline. So giving an incentive to get the vaccine didn’t make sense to us,” Limacher said. Instead, the company incentivized vaccinations a different way. For example, flights to India, where COVID-19 cases had spiked, were only available to vaccinated crews during periods of 2021 to ensure crew safety. Ultimately, a vaccine incentive was rolled out to all U.S.-based employees after incentives were bargained with specific union groups and to maintain parity across employee populations.

SAFER

After all of the outreach to workers about vaccines, United's employee vaccination uptake plateaued at the same time as caseloads nationally were falling in summer 2021, and executives thought they might not need to issue a requirement after all. Then, the Delta variant hit.

Putting the requirement into effect

Saddened by United employees dying at a rate of roughly one per week, CEO Scott Kirby and his executive leadership team decided unanimously to require vaccinations.

"We did not make the decision based on any government directive or outside influence. So that made it clear to execute since it was based on our principles. We made the call, we owned the decision," Johnson said.

United began the process by requiring new hires to get vaccinated, then extended the policy to current employees. Throughout the period before the vaccination deadline, United again took a multi-tiered approach to vaccine education, from trainings and town halls where employees' questions were answered, down to discussions held in airport breakrooms, one-on-one sessions and more.

"Every leader knew they would need to be prepared to talk about it in the field, and that it would be part of everybody's everyday role to talk about it," Johnson said. "And we answered every question out there, though us telling people it was safe was not nearly effective as when someone with a medical background not paid by United did. Having doctors available for those conversations made a big difference."

When United announced its vaccine requirement on Aug. 6, 2021, just under 60% of its employees were vaccinated against COVID-19. By the Sept. 27 deadline, that figure was 99.7%. Only a very small number of employees (approximately 200 in a workforce of 68,000, or 0.3%) were terminated for failing to meet the vaccine requirement. According to Limacher, the data did not support claims that employees would quit their jobs if required to get vaccinated.

Limacher also noted that United is fully compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act and Title VII. Workers exempted from the vaccine requirement were granted accommodations ranging from the mandatory wearing of KN95 masks, twice-weekly testing for some roles, and temporary unpaid leave for others until pandemic conditions meaningfully recede (as defined by specific numerical metrics). Employees granted a religious or medical exemption are not counted against the 99.7% compliance rate.

Results, impact and lessons learned

United's policy has been broadly successful in reducing hospitalization and death due to COVID-19. In the later months of 2021 and into 2022, the world was dealing with an increase in cases from the Omicron variant. United Airlines has not been immune to the Omicron wave, with 30% of its employees at one location contracting COVID-19 in late December 2021. However, the vast majority of its workers who contracted the COVID-19 virus were able to return to work sooner and more safely than those unvaccinated.

When asked about the biggest lessons learned along the way, Johnson said with United having such a diverse population, she would have put an earlier emphasis on the intimate, informal and one-on-one conversations the company engaged in after announcing its vaccine requirement, and would have held more in-person conversations with medical experts from diverse backgrounds.

United Airlines has stood firm on its decision to require vaccinations and will maintain its policy even in the absence of a government mandate. Johnson and Limacher point to this voluntary choice to require

SAFER

vaccinations as a reason so many employees respected the company's decision and its continued commitment to safety.

The company's decisive action to require vaccinations, and the success of that requirement, has made United a leader in COVID-19 workplace safety. It will continue to be a positive example to other companies as it navigates its policies around vaccines and COVID-19.

NSC and HAA will continue to produce case studies on organizations and their vaccine policies. As new COVID-19 cases emerge, NSC is committed to bringing employers resources on how to best keep their workers safe during the pandemic. A variety of helpful resources can be found on the NSC [SAFER website](#), including information on vaccine requirements, how to talk to employees about vaccines, managing a mixed vaccinated workforce and more. NSC also contributed to an [Employer Decision Tool](#) with HAA that offers the latest health, legal and other considerations to inform companies' decision-making to safely reopen workplaces.

About

National Safety Council: The [National Safety Council](#) is America's leading nonprofit safety advocate – and has been for over 100 years. As a mission-based organization, we work to eliminate the leading causes of preventable death and injury, focusing our efforts on the workplace, roadway and impairment. We create a culture of safety to not only keep people safer at work, but also beyond the workplace so they can live their fullest lives.

Health Action Alliance: The Health Action Alliance is a joint initiative of the Ad Council, the CDC Foundation, the de Beaumont Foundation, the National Safety Council and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation—in partnership with Meteorite. Together, we work to promote COVID-19 prevention and vaccination, advance health equity, strengthen business resilience for future pandemics, and support employee mental health.

United Airlines: United's shared purpose is "Connecting People. Uniting the World." In 2019, United and United Express® carriers operated more than 1.7 million flights carrying more than 162 million customers. United has the most comprehensive route network among North American carriers, including U.S. mainland hubs in Chicago, Denver, Houston, Los Angeles, New York/Newark, San Francisco and Washington, D.C. For more about how to join the United team, please visit united.com/careers and more information about the company is at united.com. United Airlines Holdings, Inc. is traded on the Nasdaq under the symbol "UAL".