

BUSINESS INSURANCE

Editorial: Vaccine mandates brew more dissent

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Keeping track of the changing safety requirements for COVID-19 can be dizzying.

Take my local bar. Like most businesses it closed in March 2020 and then reopened last summer, after adding some outside seating. A few weeks later, it allowed patrons to sit inside with the expectation that they kept their masks on between gulps and rigorous cleaning protocols were enforced. Gradually, the masks disappeared, except for entering, leaving and visiting the facilities, and disinfectant wipe downs were less frequent. Then, as the Delta variant took hold this summer, mask enforcement became stricter again and since last month the host requires customers to show proof of vaccination before entering. And this is for an establishment that sells one product: beer.

Employers at larger companies with more complex operations are having to make tougher and more nuanced decisions and constantly adapt to the changing circumstances, such as whether to enforce vaccine mandates or regular tests.

An increasing number of companies are getting comfortable with the notion that while to be vaccinated or not is a choice, they, too, can make choices regarding vaccines — within the parameters of the law — including whether to make them compulsory for some or all workers.

And as employers grapple with the long-term effects and costs of COVID-19, as we report on page 4, they are likely to be even more concerned about curtailing the spread of the disease in the workplace.

Even before the U.S. Food and Drug Administration announced last month that it was granting full approval for the Pfizer vaccine, one survey found that close to 50% of employers said they were more strongly considering a vaccination mandate.

Barring any scientific setbacks, it's hard to imagine that the trend toward such mandates will be reversed. Legal victories, including a federal court dismissing a suit by workers against Houston Methodist Hospital after it required vaccinations, also appear to have emboldened employers. With only a little over half the country fully vaccinated, though, more resistance is almost inevitable, especially when you look at the big geographic differences in vaccine take-up.

As more employers reopen workplaces and push harder and harder for workers to be vaccinated before they are allowed on the premises, they face a huge task in persuading the doubters and in making accommodations for people who have other reasons not to get a shot. It's one thing to tell a consumer to go elsewhere if they don't abide by your rules but it's quite another to take away a person's livelihood.

Expecting people to simply conform with requirements will likely be futile amid so much change and the fact that people are still coming to terms with the virus. We should not forget that less than two years ago no one had heard of COVID-19, even though now everybody knows its name.



