

WAVE THREE

Time to Future-Proof Your Workplace

Opinion Piece by Dr. Elaine Chin



About Dr. Elaine Chin

Dr. Elaine Chin, MD, MBA (U of Toronto) is one of Canada's leading wellness and prevention doctors. She has been on the leading edge of transforming healthcare through the power of personalized medicine and has been helping patients take a more proactive approach to their health and well-being.



We're at a critical inflection point of the COVID-19 pandemic. Just over 40 per cent of Canadians have now had their first vaccine shot and things are looking up despite some politicians coming up short on delivering effective public health messaging, deploying rapid COVID-19 tests in workplaces, and developing vaccine passports. But what we're learning is that the virus is resilient. New strains are evolving and taking their toll, and vaccine hesitancy remains a very real challenge.

The stark reality is reaching herd immunity above 80 per cent will likely remain an elusive goal, and as the virus mutates and continues to target those who haven't been vaccinated, we're likely to see this pandemic evolve into what public health officials are calling an endemic. Such a reality should raise the bar for companies to step up and take a leadership role when it comes to looking after the wellbeing of their teams and getting the economy back on its feet.

So while the focus right now may be on reopening and stabilizing business operations, as we rebound from lockdown, leaders need to embrace back-to-work strategies that include vaccine incentives, workplace immunity passports, and personalized mental resiliency programs if they want to help their teams regain their sense of physical and mental resilience.

If businesses want to be part of the solution, it will require a different kind of leadership. One grounded in compassion and empathy for team members who may not be clinically depressed but rather languishing from grief, fear, anxiety, and feeling aimless. Leaders must embrace challenging conversations backed up by a bold business continuity strategy to enable their teams and customers to interact in person again.

Let's start with communication. Now more than ever, an overwhelming number of employees want to hear from their organizations about their vaccination policy. This message came through loud and clear in a survey we recently conducted at Innovation Health Group on behalf of a number of small-to-medium size companies across many sectors who want to gauge their employees' vaccination sentiment.

The survey was the first of its kind in Canada to look at back-to-work protocols and where employees sit on the question of mandating vaccines and immunity passports.

One of the key takeaways was more than 88 per cent of employees said their employers have yet to communicate a coherent COVID-19 vaccination policy to help get them back to the workplace. It's an eye-opening finding that helps to underscore that now more than ever, employees need to know and feel that their employer is providing effective health and safety support before they are willing to return to their workplace.

While those we surveyed continue to have concerns about the safety (41 per cent) and efficacy (44 per cent) of COVID-19 vaccines, 84 per cent of employees have decided to get their vaccines. What was most disheartening to me as a physician was discovering that health practitioners (20 per cent) were the least sought out source of information about the vaccines. Yet, we can only assume as a group we are more trusted than traditional and social media.

Our survey also tackled two uncomfortable questions. Should vaccines be mandated to create a higher herd immunity amongst team members? And can we use digital passports to monitor immunity in the workplace?

We discovered an opening for leaders to explore the mandating of vaccines, while recognizing the legal concerns in certain types of workplaces for presenting such a policy. A majority (62 per cent) of employees would favour a mandated approach because they would feel safer returning to work.

Vaccine passports are another idea that has generated much debate. Instead, I propose we narrow the scope and introduce a workplace immunity passport to support leaders in documenting their workplace vaccination and immunity status.

So we asked the question in our survey and found nearly 90 per cent of respondents were in favour or interested in considering having a digital app or immunity passport to store their vaccination certificate information. They were equally willing to share their vaccination status anonymously with their employer as a means to ensuring workplace safety.

Many businesses have already invested in screening COVID-19 protocols. It just makes sense to use digital technology to monitor vaccination status in the workplace as well. In addition, organizations should consider offering antibody testing to employees. Knowing that their vaccines have effectively mounted a strong immune response with a high antibody count provides peace of mind.

The other missing piece to help employees to flourish by easing their stress of fully returning to the workplace is to begin offering mental resiliency programs that are personalized. Monitoring variables that contribute to stress and finding solutions to reduce them, including one-on-one health coaching, is crucial to helping individuals reduce their sense of sadness, fear, and anxiety. As we ramp up our economy again, organizations cannot afford to have team members return to the workplace emotionally impaired.

There is still hope that 2021 will be the year we break the back of this virus and the transmission of COVID-19. But the reality is it will be some time before wearing masks, physical distancing, and limited travel become a thing of the past.

Government has done what it can to contain the virus, and we have all become armchair quarterbacks as public health policies seem to shift from day-to-day. It's now time for the private sector to step up, as the stakes have never been higher. Leaders must take bold action to contain the virus and secure their teams' health, safety, and well-being.



Dr. Elaine Chin
MD, MBA (U of Toronto)

