

## Companies launch mandatory vaccination policies and experts expect more coming

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*Published Friday, August 13, 2021 4:09PM EDT*

Some private sector companies are implementing policies requiring Canadian employees to be fully vaccinated to visit the office or participate in staff meetups — and at least one expert expects more businesses to follow suit.

Tobi Lutke, chief executive of Ottawa e-commerce giant Shopify Inc., said this week on Twitter that any staff members meeting up will need to show proof that they are fully vaccinated. Lutke said he made the decision “because science.”

Shopify isn’t alone. Google chief executive Sundar Pichai has asked anyone working in its U.S. facilities to be vaccinated and said the company will expand the policy to other regions in the coming months.

Such moves comes as vaccination rates are stalling in Canada, the dangerous Delta variant is spreading across the globe and the federal government is seeking additional ways to protect the country.

The Canadian government announced Friday that federal employees must be vaccinated against COVID-19 and said it expects employers in federally-regulated industries, including banks and airlines, to launch the same policies.

There are close to half a million people who work directly for the federal government, a Crown corporation, the military or the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and nearly a million more in federally regulated industries such as airlines and banks.

“It’s going to be a start of a big wave because all my executives have been saying, ‘I just want somebody else to do it first,’” said Dr. Elaine Chin, the founder and chief medical officer at the Executive Health Centre and Innovation Health Group.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, she has had discussions with corporate leaders about their policies and urged them to adopt vaccination mandates.

Many resisted the idea at first because vaccine supply was low in Canada and they worried about enforcing a policy centred around a shot that not all staff could access.

Chin also heard from large employers who believed that if they mandated vaccination, between five and 10 per cent of their staff would oppose the policy, seek another job or sue for constructive dismissal.

“They would say, ‘We are just too big of a company to take on that heat, but we will wait for the government to take that lead,’” said Chin.

“I would have these heated discussions with them and say, ‘You sit here and tell me that you want to have a safe workplace, but the safest workplace is a fully vaccinated one.’”

As vaccine supply and talk of the Delta variant surged, several companies, including Sotos LLP, moved toward formal policies.

The Toronto law firm, said Chin, is requiring its staff to be fully vaccinated before anyone can return to the office after Thanksgiving Day.

“What surprised me was that so many of our people confidentially thanked me for being bold by doing the right thing to ensure the office was safe as it could be,” said John Yiokaris, a partner at the firm, in a white paper Chin published on COVID-19 policies.

Chin, who was formerly Telus Corp.’s chief wellness officer, recommends employers seek a doctor’s note from staff that can’t be vaccinated detailing why.

Employers should accommodate workers who have allergies to vaccine ingredients, high-risk pregnancies, are at risk of blood clotting or dealing with stem cell transplants, chemotherapy and radiation, she said.

“But if someone comes in and says, ‘I am confident that it’s going to make me and my children lizard people,’ that is not a good reason,” she said, in a tongue-in-cheek reference to misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines.

Chin took the policy even further at her office and started testing staff weekly.

Everyone was negative the first week, but the second week, someone fully vaccinated tested positive.

While fully vaccinated people can contract the virus, medical officials say they are much less likely to have severe symptoms, need to be hospitalized or die from COVID-19.

Chin is proud of her policy because she has staff living with people completing dialysis, visiting elderly family members or planning vacations and they were able to protect their loved ones because the company identified a positive case.

She shares her office’s experiences because she believes employers have an obligation to keep their workplace safe and quell the virus as much as they can.

She said, “Each of us is not safe until everyone is safe.”

*This report by The Canadian Press was first published Aug. 13, 2021.*

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