

Experience, Education, Vaccination: The New Qualifications for Job Seekers

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FULL TEXT

Companies are devising vaccination policies for new hires along with rules for their existing employees.

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If you want to get a job at Leslie's, a pool and spa retailer with more than 900 stores across the country, you need to be vaccinated against the coronavirus. The company, which employs more than 5,000 people, never publicized the policy, but job applicants will find it among the requirements there.

Leslie's is one of a growing number of employers that now ask for proof of vaccination from job candidates, alongside the usual qualifications like education and experience. Most, like Leslie's, say they will make exceptions for health and religious reasons.

After the Food and Drug Administration granted full approval to the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine this week, such mandates are expected to become more common. That creates uncharted territory for both employers and job seekers, with privacy, politics and health intruding into the already intense process of filling –or landing –a new job.

The share of job ads that require new hires to be vaccinated have nearly doubled in the past month, according to the job-search site Indeed. (These remain a small fraction of overall listings, however.) LinkedIn is “exploring new ways” for job seekers to learn more about companies’ vaccine requirements, said Suzi Owens, a spokeswoman for the site.

Companies are devising vaccination policies for new hires along with rules for their existing employees, and those aren't always the same. Many employers are willing to impose stricter guidelines for applicants –Leslie's requires vaccinations for all new hires but not all existing employees. Making vaccination a requirement for getting a job could encourage those who are reluctant, or it could further solidify the class divide, as vaccination rates fall largely along socioeconomic lines. (Or both.)

Corporate vaccine mandates have divided the country. In a recent Gallup poll, 52 percent of workers said they were in favor of mandates (36 percent “strongly”), versus 38 percent who were opposed (29 percent “strongly”). Even companies that don't require inoculations are making it increasingly difficult to remain unvaccinated: Delta Air Lines said this week that unvaccinated employees would be required to pay a \$200-a-month surcharge to stay on the company health plan, starting in November. These shifting, and increasingly stringent, policies will inevitably become a more routine feature in job interviews.

Verifying the vaccine status of job applicants “is taking a lot of time and resources for employers, unfortunately,” said Dr. Neal Mills, the chief medical officer at the professional services firm Aon, who is already advising companies on their options. There is a “continuum” of ways to check someone's status, he said, from a simple attestation to proof of vaccination on an app that syncs with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention databases.

If unvaccinated candidates apply for jobs that require time in the office, even only occasionally, “some companies say they're just not able to hire them for the role,” said Dawn Fay, a senior district president in New York for the

recruiting firm Robert Half. She has also worked with companies that tell unvaccinated candidates that “you’ll be remote as long as you can” but subject to testing, masking and distancing rules if or when they go to the office. And it’s not just a company’s own vaccine policy that recruiters need to take into consideration. Goldman Sachs announced this week that it would require proof of vaccination for anyone entering its U.S. offices. That filters down to clients, contractors and others who do business with Goldman, and firms with similar policies. Goldman declined to comment on whether it plans to ask candidates about their vaccination status in job interviews, or if that status will be a factor in hiring decisions.

‘I don’t want any of those people working for me’

The companies that now require vaccination for job applicants run the gamut.

Ormat, an energy company based in Nevada, requires vaccination for a job as a welder. The National Football League says it’s mandatory for a job as a freelance seasonal art director. Good Relations, a “lovers boutique” in California, requires it for a job as a sales associate.

Melinda Myers, the chief executive of Good Relations, said the requirement was in part a response to high Covid-19 infection rates in Eureka County, where the retailer is based.

“Our hospitals are full,” she said. “There’s a lot of anti-vax people at the farmers market. And then we also have conservative political people who are anti-vaxxers. And I don’t want any of those people working for me.”

She didn’t require proof of vaccination for her staff of six, who she said were all fully vaccinated. “I know these people well enough to know they were telling me the truth,” Ms. Myers said. But she will verify the status of new hires “because I don’t know them,” she said.

Job seekers who oppose vaccine mandates have begun to tailor their searches accordingly. The conservative social media website Gab started a No Vax Mandate Job Board, which had about 31,000 members as of Friday. A job website called Red Balloon began last month to “connect employers who value freedom with employees who value it too.”

“We’re taking a stand against this mandatory vaccine trend,” Red Balloon’s founder, Andrew Crapuchettes, said in a YouTube video. “In today’s tight labor market, there are good companies with strong work cultures who want to hire dedicated employees regardless of their health care choices.”

Stephen Gare, a network technician in Florida, started a group on LinkedIn for employers and unvaccinated people to connect. “I’m concerned that there could be a lot of people not wanting to get vaccinated that would be out looking for a job,” Mr. Gare said.

Mr. Gare, who is not vaccinated, is not currently looking for a job but may have to if his company introduces a vaccine mandate, he said. “I would do whatever it takes to live without getting the vaccine,” he said.

It is legal for employers to require vaccines for both current and new employees. And labor lawyers say that companies are allowed to take vaccination status into consideration in most of the country when screening job applicants, even if no formal mandate is in place, because vaccination status is not protected under the Americans With Disabilities Act. But they could still be hit with litigation or run into political opposition as some states pass measures to restrict or ban vaccine mandates.

“You’re going to see that the career trajectories of people will be impacted based on their status,” said Ian Schaefer, a partner at the law firm Loeb & Loeb who specializes in labor issues and has been advising companies on their Covid policies. “And so far, that’s completely permissible.”

‘Part of the prescreening process’

The biggest hurdle to vaccine mandates in some industries is the shortage of labor. Few large retailers, for example, have announced mandates for frontline workers over fears of mass departures. And as businesses ramp up for the holiday rush, mandates for new hires have also been rare.

Walmart will offer vaccinated hires in its stores the same \$150 it gives to current employees who get the shot, the company said, but it will not require applicants to be vaccinated to get a job. A spokesperson for Target said the retailer wouldn’t take vaccination status into consideration when vetting candidates.

Whether an applicant’s vaccination status matches up with an employer’s policy “is becoming part of the

prescreening process," said Amy Glaser, an outsourcing lead at the recruitment firm Adecco. She estimates that one in three calls that her recruiters in Jacksonville, Fla., a Covid hot spot, have fielded from candidates has included questions about vaccine policies. But with corporate policies changing so quickly, a company's stance at the beginning of the recruitment process may change by the end.

Gabriela Elliott, who works for the county government in San Diego, has been looking for other jobs as she prepares for her temporary position to come to an end. She has been looking for a professional role, in any industry.

"I'll take whatever I can get with full-time benefits," she said.

While Ms. Elliott isn't planning on putting her fully vaccinated status on her résumé, she may bring it up in conversations with recruiters if the time seems right.

"In an interview, I think, I might be able to sneak it in," she said, "if, you know, I thought it might make a difference."

What do you think? Should companies require new hires to be vaccinated? Let us know: dealbook@nytimes.com.

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