

Walmart orders staff to vaccinate against COVID-19



Bentonville, July 31 (RHC)-- Walmart Inc., the largest private employer in the U.S., is requiring its headquarters and regional staff to be vaccinated by Oct. 4, joining Google in instituting a policy that may set a standard for corporate America as the highly contagious Delta variant continues to spread.

The mandate covers all campus staff as well as market, regional and divisional employees who work in multiple facilities, Chief Executive Officer Doug McMillon said in a memo Friday. A spokesman couldn't immediately say how many of the retailer's 1.5 million-person U.S. workforce will be affected.

Walmart separately told its frontline store and warehouse associates Friday to don masks again, and doubled the cash incentive it's providing for employees to get vaccinated to \$150.

"The pandemic is not over, and the delta variant has led to an increase in infection rates across much of the U.S.," McMillon said in the memo. "We have made the decision to require all campus office associates and all market, regional and divisional associates who work in multiple facilities to be

vaccinated by October 4, unless they have an approved exception.”

Walmart will be closely watched by other corporate leaders grappling with the myriad challenges of getting white-collar employees safely back into offices while also looking after their frontline employees in stores, factories and distribution centers. This week, Alphabet Inc.’s Google said it will require workers coming back to its offices be vaccinated, and Apple Inc. has delayed its return-to-office to October and began urging store workers to wear masks again.

Within minutes of Walmart’s announcements, rival grocer Kroger Co. said it would encourage even vaccinated staff and customers to wear masks in stores. Retail locations have become the inadvertent battlegrounds for the broader cultural and political brouhaha over mask-wearing, with some confrontations between staff and customers becoming violent over the past year.

For big employers, extending vaccine mandates from office workers to frontline staff will be difficult. At Albertsons Cos., the vaccination rate of store workers is running close to the national average, Chief Executive Officer Vivek Sankaran said this week. That’s about 60%.

But it’s not just corporate titans making moves: The 230-person public-relations consultant BerlinRosen has implemented a vaccine requirement for any employee wanting to enter its three offices, according to Chief Operating Officer David Levine.

Walmart’s CEO said there’s a “small percentage” of employees who can’t get vaccinated due to medical or religious reasons, and the spokesman said they “must follow all social distancing standards, wear a mask while working, and receive weekly COVID-19 testing provided by Walmart.”

If Walmart employees claim a medical or religious exemption but don’t receive approval, they will be suspended for a set time period in order to receive the vaccination. If employees still decline inoculation, they’ll be fired.

Employees at the company’s Bentonville, Arkansas, campus — which is in the midst of a complete architectural overhaul that won’t be complete until 2025 — have been gradually coming back to offices with the intention of returning to pre-pandemic staffing levels after Labor Day. Now, though, McMillon said he might need to adjust that timing.

Walmart’s new mandate will be applied to all new hires in the affected locations, the company said. Management is also limiting business travel to mission-critical trips, which could dent the resurgence of air travel if its policy is followed by other big companies.

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