

Business News: United to Let Unvaccinated Staff Return to Their Jobs

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FULL TEXT

United Airlines Holdings Inc. will allow workers who haven't been vaccinated against Covid-19 for religious or medical reasons to return at the end of this month, according to people familiar with the decision.

The move permits staffers with exemptions from the carrier's vaccination requirement for its U.S. employees to return from unpaid leave or from the noncustomer-facing roles they were allowed to apply for as an alternative to their regular jobs, the people said.

United said in August last year that its 67,000 U.S. employees would have to be vaccinated against Covid-19 or face termination, making it one of the first U.S. companies to impose such a mandate.

The airline's employees overwhelmingly complied with the requirement.

United has said it fired more than 200 employees who refused vaccination, and they won't be brought back, the people said.

An additional 2,200 employees had argued that they had religious or medical reasons not to be vaccinated. Those workers were generally put on unpaid leave unless they opted to apply for non-customer-facing roles. They will now be able to return to their former roles starting March 28, the people said. Newly hired workers will still have to be vaccinated, one of the people said.

The carrier's mandate drew accolades from President Biden and made the airline a lightning rod for criticism among some politicians, including Republican Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas. United Chief Executive Scott Kirby has said he believes the policy was a critical safety measure that halted a string of employee deaths. He told employees in January that it likely saved the lives of eight to 10 employees.

Most other major U.S. airlines didn't go as far as United in enforcing vaccine requirements, stopping short of terminating employees, reassigning them or putting them on leave.

United has said that it would factor in case rates and levels of community Covid-19 transmission to decide when to allow its unvaccinated workers to return, and that it would re-evaluate those metrics every 30 days.

The airline's move to allow the employees back – which could still be reversed if conditions change, according to one of the people – coincides with declining Covid-19 cases since the winter's Omicron-driven peak. Many restrictions aimed at curbing the virus's spread are now being rolled back.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has eased its guidance for masking indoors, and states and cities have been dropping rules requiring masks and proof of vaccination in indoor spaces. Hawaii on Tuesday became the last state to announce plans to drop its indoor mask requirement later this month.

United's mandate also faces a lawsuit brought by employees who objected to being placed on unpaid leave as part of their religious or medical accommodations.

A three-judge panel of the Fifth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals last month ruled 2-1 in favor of two such United employees.

Credit: By Alison Sider

DETAILS

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