

Reader survey: Business community divided over mayor's vaccine mandate

Brian Pascus December 21, 2021



Credit: Bloomberg

The employer vaccine mandate Mayor Bill de Blasio issued this month has polarized businesses, according to a poll of *Crain's* readers.

The policy, announced Dec. 6, would require workers in even private businesses to receive at least one vaccine dose before showing up for work Dec. 27.

According to a *Crain's* survey of 178 business owners, partners, C-level executives and staff members, roughly 54% agree with the mandate, while 46% disagree.

In the survey, conducted Dec. 7 to 9, 84% of respondents said they've been vaccinated; 76% of those who said they were unvaccinated said they will remain so, regardless of the mandate.

"I support the mandate because of safety and precautions, and the best practice is to do what you can to help yourself and the people around you," said Robert Schwartz, owner of Eneslow Shoes and Orthotics, which has 22 employees at its two stores in Manhattan.

Others surveyed said the mayor's employer mandate goes too far.

"I really think it's pushing the envelope for companies to be mandated, regardless of size," said Patricia Hemsworth, who works at a small insurance brokerage. "It's like he's coming out with all kinds of stuff at the last minute."

De Blasio, who reached his term limit, will leave office at the end of the year. Mayor-elect Eric Adams has not said whether he will pursue the same vaccination policy.

[The omicron variant](#) of Covid-19 wasn't even on the radar of most New Yorkers when de Blasio announced the employer vaccine mandate in the first week of December.

New York state has set records for the number of Covid-19 cases during the past four days, with 23,391 reported Sunday.

The rising rate of infections has put the employer mandate in a new light for some business owners, who say it's even more practical and needed now.

"It's a whole new world again," said Jeffrey Schwartz, managing partner at Schwartz Sladkus Reich Greenberg Atlas, a Manhattan law firm with 87 employees. "I feel like it's Covid all over again, frankly."

Schwartz said everyone in his office received their vaccinations by the end of the summer, and everyone returned to in-person work the first week of November. But once the omicron variant began to spread last week, he chose to send all but seven people home.

"We decided that we'd close the office for the last couple of weeks of the year and have a skeleton crew, for fear of what's going on," he said. "We'll wait and see what happens with the world and if we'll come back."

Bess Freedman, chief executive of Brown Harris Stevens, said of the mayor's mandate, "It's very responsible. We think it's important, and we insist people are vaccinated." The real estate firm employs 1,500 agents and other staff members.

Freedman said her firm has been requiring proof of vaccination and masks for employees to work in the office, city mandates aside. The company now is asking those who feel sick to not come in.

Even with those measures, Freedman acknowledged, omicron might complicate things going forward.

“A lot has changed,” she said. “That’s the craziness of Covid. Every time it seems like you turn the corner, and then when you get there, you’re taking two steps back to where you were before.”

Of those participating in the *Crain’s* survey, 61% said they would not be comfortable working around unvaccinated colleagues in an office setting; 34% said they would be comfortable, with 4% answering inconclusively.

New Yorkers have by and large been vaccinated. Statewide, 94.5% of adults have received at least one vaccine dose, with 82.4% completing the vaccine series, according to state Department of Health data. Among adults in the city, 90.5% have received at least one dose and 82.5% are fully vaccinated, according to the city Department of Health.

The de Blasio administration published [details of his order](#) Dec. 14. More than 184,000 businesses across the city are required to document proof of at least one vaccination shot from each employee or risk a fine. Employees then would be required to show proof of a second dose within 45 days: by Feb. 10.

The administration has required proof of vaccination from municipal employees since Oct. 29.

The lack of coordination from the outgoing de Blasio administration and [the incoming Adams team](#) has left some in the business world a little unsettled.

De Blasio’s “really overstepping himself,” Hemsworth said. “He should just back off and give Adams a chance to get in office, and allow the individual companies to come up with some sort of reasonable plan on their own.”

De Blasio [announced](#) his employer vaccine mandate while Adams was visiting Ghana. Since the mayor-elect has returned to the city, he has given conflicting messages on whether he will continue an employer mandate upon taking office Jan. 1.

In a Dec. 14 interview with News 10 New York, Adams said, “It’s about the science.” He said he will have his team evaluate the data once they take office, before making a final decision on whether to continue the private-employer mandate.

The mayor and mayor-elect have not been on the same page. During a news conference yesterday, de Blasio said, “Omicron moves fast. It’s very transmissible” and added, “We have to move faster.” Later the same evening, during an interview with CNN, Adams said, “Covid is here. It is going to be here with us, and we must learn to live with it in a smart way.”

“The room is still so dark in terms of what they’re telling us,” Schwartz said. “I don’t know what to believe exactly.”

The mayor-elect’s communications team told *Crain’s* it did not have an update on his previously stated position.