



Report on IOE Conference on Covid-19: What Employers Need to Prepare for Next

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What is the employer's role related to the vaccine rollout? How do employers manage health and safety concerns when staff members choose not to be vaccinated? What other preventive measures should be taken besides vaccines? Is global vaccine distribution happening equitably? When and how will staff be able to begin cross-border travel? Are the other preventative measures still required?

These are some of the questions WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and ILO Director-General Mr Guy Ryder answered during the IOE Digital Conference on next steps for employers in Covid-19 response in February 2021. The leadership from the Confederation of German Employers' Associations, International Trade Union Confederation, The Adecco Group, and the United States Council for International Business were also part of this high-profile event.

The full Conference can be viewed [here](#) on IOE's YouTube channel.

This Report provides an overview of the main outcomes from the Conference along with supplemental information in boxes that expands on issues raised. The aim is to provide **the most up-to-date information on the role of employers in relation to promoting health measures together with the latest thinking on areas of concern** to employers including restart of cross-border mobility.

Context

Employers have made huge efforts to adapt to the pandemic, to ensure that businesses survive and that the health and wellbeing of workers are protected. **Undoubtedly, COVID-19 will continue to deeply impact the way companies engage with employees, customers, and other stakeholders on how to organise the working environment after the pandemic.** On the economic and social front, there has been an extraordinary **uneven response** to the pandemic with poorer countries and the business that make up the backbone of their economies being left behind, and as recovery kicks in the international community needs to do better to support the recovery of these countries.

Prevention measures

Conference panelists urged governments to continue to urgently develop **other preventative measures** to enable less developed countries, which cannot access vaccines as rapidly as needed, to respond effectively.

Measures to prevent transmission of COVID-19 that apply to all workplaces and all people at the workplace include frequent **handwashing** or disinfection with alcohol based hand sanitizer, **respiratory hygiene** such as covering coughs, **physical distancing** of at least 1 meter or more according to the national recommendations, **wearing of masks** where distancing is not possible, **regular environmental cleaning and disinfection**, and **limiting unnecessary travel**. Clear policies and messages, training, and education for staff and managers to increase awareness of COVID-19 and the prevention of its transmission are essential. The management of people with COVID-19 or their contacts is also critical e.g. requiring workers who are unwell or who develop symptoms to stay at home, self-isolate and contact a medical professional or the local COVID-19 information line for advice on testing and referral. Additional measures can be taken in work areas at higher risk.

Vaccines

The WHO Director General made it clear that the development of effective vaccines is a powerful tool to end the pandemic but is only a piece of the puzzle. **Vaccines complement but do not replace basic public health measures, like as testing, contact tracing, physical distancing, masks, and hands hygiene.**

Other points raised by Dr Tedros and panelist Dr Katherine O'Brien, WHO Director Department of Immunization, Vaccines and Biologicals:

- Information about whether these vaccines prevent infection is **still to be determined**.
- **Despite being vaccinated** and protected from the disease, **you may still pose a threat to others.**

- **Will a booster shot be required?** Are current vaccines sufficient or will booster shots be needed (either because of a limited duration of immunity or because of strains changes that the existing vaccines that we have are not adequately effective for strains that are emerging)?
- **No evidence so far to underpin a policy around whether people under 18 of age should be vaccinated** (simply because absence of information).

Current vaccine issues open to WHO revision

The following vaccine elements are still being studied, as more evidence emerges WHO's advice may be revised:

- Efficacy of vaccines in limiting SARS-CoV-2 transmission, including for variants of SARS-CoV-2
- Duration of protection
- Timing of booster dose
- Protection of vaccines against asymptomatic infection
- Timing of vaccination before travel
- Possible exemption of people who have antibodies

Vaccine distribution

Of the 128 million vaccine doses administered in February 2021, more than **three quarters** of those vaccinations are in **just 10 countries** that account for 60% of global GDP. The Conference heard the call of all panelists that the pandemic is **not going to end** if we do not a better job in terms of **equity of vaccination**. Changes are required to the protocols for how vaccines are being distributed and the behavior of countries that have **bilateral deals limiting or harming the equitable distribution** of vaccines worldwide. The Confederation of German Employers expressed a strong need for **further increasing international cooperation on distribution**. Europe is an exporter of vaccines, which is not the case of other countries, open borders are clearly an answer to address the challenge of vaccines distribution at the global level.

This triggered global leaders to call for a solution that would accelerate the development and manufacture of Covid-19 vaccines, as well as diagnostics and treatments, and guarantee rapid, fair and equitable access to them for people in all countries. **COVAX** was launched in April by the WHO, the European Commission and France in response to this pandemic. COVAX is a global solution co-led by the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), Gavi and the WHO, alongside key delivery partner UNICEF, to **ensure that people in all corners of the world will get access to Covid-19 vaccines once they are available, regardless of their wealth**. It will achieve this by acting as a [platform](#) that will support the research, development, manufacturing and delivery of a wide range of Covid-19 vaccine candidates. All participating countries, regardless of income levels, will have equal access to these vaccines once they are developed.

IMF projections

According to the Director-General of the [International Monetary Fund](#), 9 trillion dollars is what we can gain between now and 2025 if we accelerate vaccination across the world. Of this, 60 per cent would go to low-income countries and emerging markets and 40 per cent would go to advanced economies.

ILO Latest Assessment

According to the [International Labour Organization](#), in 2020, 8.8 per cent of global working hours were lost relative to the fourth quarter of 2019, equivalent to 255 million full-time jobs. In the pessimistic scenario, labour market recovery in 2021 will be much slower and working-hour losses will remain at the high level of 4.6 per cent (relative to the last pre-crisis quarter), equivalent to 130 million full-time jobs. This scenario assumes slow progress on vaccination in particular, a prolonged serious impact of the pandemic in general, and lower consumer and business confidence. Combined with potential shortfalls in fiscal stimulus, job creation is limited. In this scenario, working-hour losses will not be recuperated in all countries, except high-income countries.

Business and Covid-19 responses

As a general policy, WHO does not recommend mandatory vaccination in businesses. It is much better to provide wide and easy access to vaccination, ensuring that people who need to be vaccinated are vaccinated. **IOE, in consultation with its members, developed a set of principles** to guide its awareness raising efforts on the range of responses to Covid-19 and guide its work with other organisations.

IOE framework of engagement

Raising awareness of the range of Covid-19 responses including vaccination is predicated on the three following principles:

- The need to **fully respect the personal choice of any individual not to be vaccinated**. The aim of any engagement should be to help workers/individuals to make informed decisions, but not to patronise, coerce, or manipulate them. **Freedom of choice must be paramount and any employee opting out of vaccination programmes should not be discriminated against;**
- Important as it is to inform, educate, exchange on, and advocate for effective treatment, it is **equally important to advocate for equal and fair access to treatments, medicines, and vaccinations for workers, employers, and individuals in developing economies**, as well as for the most vulnerable everywhere. It is **critical and urgent to tackle the serious shortages of vaccines and medicines in many regions;** and
- **The response to Covid should be wider than vaccination**, to include scientifically proven preventative measures and effective treatments. **Response is not limited to a single vaccine or group of vaccines; it is also about understanding and putting in place effective measures to prevent transmission and related diseases.** This means raising awareness of the existence of proven/WHO-approved preventative measures, and of the diversity of vaccines and treatments available worldwide, now and in the future.

Workplaces can be considered safe places by employees, making them confident about getting vaccinated there. Examples of employer organisation efforts to support preventive measures include the **German Employers Confederation. They are offering work sites to be transformed into vaccination centers when necessary**, building a bridge between companies and policy decision makers. **USCIB has launched the**

Business CONVINCE initiative to promote preventive measures, such as testing and vaccination, at the workplace. CONVINCE calls on business to:

- Listen to employees' needs and concerns about the impact and prevention of Covid-19;
- Follow the latest public health guidance to protect employees, workplaces, customers, and communities from Covid-19;
- Promote vaccine literacy with the latest scientific evidence on vaccination benefits and risks;
- Encourage vaccine confidence and uptake;
- Advocate for accessible, equitable, and timely vaccination of employees; and
- Engage with communities, schools, faith-based organisations and public health leaders to stop the spread of Covid-19.

Importantly, employers have a **vital role to play** in calling for vaccine equity and for a sustainable response and recovery that foster safe working conditions and the physical and mental health of employees. Employers also can play a key role in preventing and slowing the spread of COVID-19 within the workplace beyond vaccines by **strengthening the communication around the importance of protective measures and safe behaviors**.

Role of employers and employer organisations

The Conference heard how employers and employer organisations need to consider how they can best contribute to decreasing the spread of the virus and lower the impact in workplaces. Panelists agreed that **guidance** is key. This means that each must coordinate closely with health officials at all levels to obtain timely and accurate information to inform appropriate responses.

Best practice awareness-raising: Example of the Employers Confederation of the Philippines

Executive Labor Updates:
Employers and Workers in the Times of COVID-19

**Safety in the Workplace:
Why COVID-19 Vaccination is Important**

26 March 2021 (Friday) | 9:30am to 11:30am PHT – via Zoom

SCAN THE QR CODE OR
VISIT THIS LINK TO REGISTER:
bit.ly/covidproofworkplace

Registration Fee:
ECOP Member - FREE 1 Slot (Php 200.00 for additional pax)
Non-member - Php 290.00
*Participant's slot is confirmed upon receipt of the registration fee.

Hear from us! DOLE's recently issued Labor Advisory No. 3 or "Guidelines on the administration of COVID-19 vaccines in the workplace"

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The Department of Labor and Employment of the Republic of Philippines stated in March 2021 that vaccination should not be made mandatory and those who refuse to be vaccinated should not be discriminated against, however, covered establishments and employers shall endeavor to encourage their employees to get vaccinated. The Employers Confederation of the Philippines has

organized a specific webinar for its members on "Safety in the Workplace: Why COVID-19 Vaccination is Important".

Other steps proposed included:

- Offer guidance **to extend health and safety measures at home** constitutes an important element to keep the workforce safe, healthy and productive.
- **Coordination** with health officials at all levels is critical to obtaining timely and accurate information to inform appropriate responses and avoid "infodemic" (too much information including false or misleading information during a disease outbreak).
- **Regularly communicate** on measures employers are taking to manage the risk of contagion at the workplace will also contribute to having a workforce that feels safe when returning to workplaces.
- Employers and employer organisations should engage in frequent consultations on the measures to be taken with the **Works Councils**, the health and safety committees, **the trade unions**, and the **workers** themselves. This will increase support for and observation of the measures.
- To maintain trust with employees, **employers also must be clear that they do not always know the answer.**

Separately, the head of the German Employers made an urgent call to the ILO to become a center of **skilling and reskilling**. Life-long learning and vocational training is even more important now. It would be a second failure for employment and business if the talent needed after COVID are not available.

Steps to restart cross-border mobility

Representatives from the business sector reiterated their public position that to the extent possible, global value chains must be kept open during the pandemic. We should not be limiting free movement of goods and people for more than necessary.

To open economies and enable cross-border mobility, **mutual recognition of testing results will be of crucial importance**. The Conference was informed that **to date, there is no COVID-19 International Health Regulations (IHR) requirement for vaccination**.

WHO position on proof of vaccination

The current WHO position (March 2021) on COVID-19 proof of vaccination calls on Member States to not introduce requirement of proof of vaccination or immunity for cross-border travel as a condition for entry as there are still critical unknowns regarding the efficacy of the vaccination in reducing transmission and limited availability of vaccines. They will revisit this position in three months.

Should a requirement of proof of vaccination for international travelers be introduced in the future, the recording of proof should be based on four key design principles: Equitable; Accessible; Scalable, flexible and Sustainable; and Privacy protecting. This could include digital formats, but paper certificates should also be supported. Formats that could be adopted globally are currently being explored.

The WHO also issued these words of caution: Testing for travel cannot replace public and social measures for epidemic control. Negative results from pre-travel testing cannot guarantee that

travelers are free from infection at the time of travel. In fact, negative results may generate a false sense of security.

Recognising that it may be required at some point, the WHO is working on a governance framework and specifications for a digital vaccination certificate that may be implemented on digital platforms for possible use at national and international levels. This is currently (April 2021) in the drafting process in case of the eventual need for such a certificate.

IATA Travel Pass

Governments need to be confident that they are mitigating the risk of importing COVID-19 to re-open borders without quarantine and restart aviation. To address this challenge, The International Air Transport Association (IATA) is working on a digital platform for passengers, an interoperable and open access solution based on open standards that would:

- Enable passengers to find accurate information on travel, testing (and eventually vaccine) requirements for their journey.
- Enable authorized labs and test centers to securely send test results or vaccination certificates to passengers.
- Enable passengers to find and register testing centres and labs at their departure location which meet the standards for testing/vaccination requirements of their destination.
- Enable passengers to (1) create a 'digital passport', (2) verify their test/vaccination meets the regulations & (3) shares test or vaccination certificates with authorities to facilitate travel.

The EC's Digital Green Certificate

The European Commission has proposed (17 March 2021) to create a Digital Green Certificate to facilitate safe free movement inside the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Digital Green Certificate will be a proof that a person has been vaccinated against COVID-19, received a negative test result or recovered from COVID-19. It will be available, free of charge, in digital or paper format. It will include a QR code to ensure security and authenticity of the certificate. The Commission will build a gateway to ensure all certificates can be verified across the EU, and support Member States in the technical implementation of certificates. Member States remain responsible to decide which public health restrictions can be waived for travelers but will have to apply such waivers in the same way to travelers holding a Digital Green Certificate. To be ready before the summer, this proposal needs a swift adoption by the European Parliament and the Council.

The discussion about whether certificates of immunity – or vaccination passports, should be introduced is ongoing. Some tourism-dependent countries have already opened to people who have received a Covid-19 jab. Among the first in Europe, **Denmark** has begun using a "Coronapas" as the key to a plan to gradually reopen the country by the end of May. Available via a secure application and in paper format, it currently allows entry into certain shops by proving that the

bearer is either fully vaccinated, has already contracted Covid-19 with a positive test from two to twelve weeks ago, or has tested negative for less than 72 hours. This document should enable Danish people who have received the 2 doses of Covid-19 vaccine to travel for work, avoiding health constraints such as repeated tests and the quarantine required when returning from certain countries.

Silent emergencies

The Conference heard about the “hidden” fallout of the pandemic on people’s wellbeing and economic activity. One of these – and the most worrisome – is the **psychological effect** of the crisis that is emerging. Conference panelists expressed concern that managers are not sufficiently trained to assist with mental health issues. As awareness increases, more effort is being given to assisting managers will responding to mental health issues in the workplace.

Another little-noticed phenomenon on the rise is **gender challenge** due to the pandemic. Recent statistics are showing that women are leaving the labour market to care for home-bound children, mainly due to the lack of specific support. The Conference heard how there must be a concerted effort to reverse this trend.

The Conference heard about the **digital gap** that exists between white-collar and blue-collar jobs. Several panelists said that more needs to be done to prepare the latter to remote work or partly remote working. This needs to be done to not only protect these individuals but also to prepare them for the future of work.

There are numerous questions that remain and others which are emerging particularly in relation to legal issues. The questions raised and the responses to them may vary according to the national context.

Some outstanding legal issues

Should workers at risk be subject to mandatory vaccination? Can employers unilaterally mandate employee vaccination in a collective representation setting? Can workplaces require that workers take vaccination as a condition of employment? Are employees entitled to reimbursement for the cost of the vaccination? Is there legal protection to be exempted from being vaccinated (e.g., conscientious/religious objection, disability accommodation, pregnant women, etc.)? What are the data privacy implications?

The Covid-19 crisis is in constant motion, requiring agility and resilience to respond effectively. The information in this document is valid at the time of publication. While many of the issues will remain relevant for a long period, others may be resolved or modified in the shorter term. IOE is closely monitoring the situation, updating its response and remains committed to assisting our global network with this ongoing crisis and navigating the way to recovery.



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