

Covid confusion reigns: unvaccinated staff are a thorny issue for employers



Travellers wait to verify their Covid-19 vaccination status as they check-in for a flight. Picture: AFP

Covid confusion reigns in corporate Australia with concerns extending to how track and handle staff vaccination and health records and how to treat staff who won't play ball.

While companies maintain flexibility over where people work, tension is avoided for the moment, but more class-action claims on behalf of staff who don't want to declare their status or lose their job are inevitable.

This month's BHP Mount Arthur coal case where the company won the right to stand down workers who declined to be vaccinated is the first of potentially many cases.

The era of rapid testing as an alternative also underlines the need for companies to maintain precise data at a time when workplace flexibility is stressed with many suggesting three days in the office a week.

New state-of-the-art offices like the Bunnings national support centre near Melbourne's Royal Burnley golf course will house its 1400 head-office staff in an environment both covid friendly and designed to encourage collaboration.

Collaboration is between head office staff and remotely with the stores, with on-site film production facilities to showcase new products and ideas.

The centre features the use of materials such as brass which is claimed to have natural antibacterial properties and tries to avoid "high-touch areas".

It also includes a range of spaces “to help our team members reconnect and recharge, including a large cafe with outdoor terrace and BBQs, basketball half court and a wellness room where yoga and Pilates classes will be held”, says Bunnings.

The retailer asked staff to log onto its workday platform to log vaccination status but over a dozen people declined and their employment is potentially in question.

The creators of a new software platform **vaxxvault** allows companies to collect vaccination and testing records of all staff in a specially encrypted format which protects privacy but also allows bosses to track records and tests.

The purpose-built platform offers a user-friendly dashboard to track staff in any outbreak.

The selling points include a secure platform and ability to track tests results as rapid testing becomes the norm.

The new **vaxxvault** software is aimed at taking the complexity out of covid monitoring for large companies with diverse workforces and has attracted some interest from the likes of Macquarie group, BHP, KPMG and the AFL.

The Victorian and NSW governments have eased some employer issues by a strict rule requiring head office staff to be doubled vaxxed, to enter the office or attend office functions.

Different state rules compound the potential problems.

Every company contacted, said the vast majority of staff have no problem with that demand and in fact support it.

It's the handful of staff who refuse to comply and then questions over how to ensure staff are actually vaccinated, because at the end of the day we are dealing with private medical records of individual employees who deserve to have such information remain private.

Companies like Nufarm, which has just 20 per cent of staff in Australia, have worked overtime to ensure staff in places like Indonesia are vaccinated and ironically the only concerns have emerged in jurisdictions like the USA where privacy rights are well entrenched.

Some of the big banks have tried to minimise records by checking vaccine status on a divisional basis with the direct reports telling their boss, who in turn passes the information up the line.

IAG and CBA staff have to confirm vaccination to get into the head office.

Small business has the problem that if they are a corner coffee shop with 10 staff, existing workers may refuse to provide details, yet patrons are required to show proof. New staff are not an issue because if you want to the job then you need to prove your status.

That said, these are issues which most bosses are not used to dealing with.

Big head-office employers like the accounting firms have surveyed staff who are overwhelmingly supportive but are dodging a fight for the moment by allowing staff who don't want to declare their status to work from home.

At some point this is untenable and staff who are not fully vaxxed won't last and that is where problems escalate.

John Durie