



BACK TO THE OFFICE

According to a survey by HeadHunter, 22% of employees in Russia say they are willing to get vaccinated to be able to go back to work.

In early December, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova announced the launch of a mass vaccination campaign against COVID-19 across the Russian regions, while the Russian Ministry of Health added that those in direct contact with other people should be at the front of the queue for a jab, including frontline staff in the retail and service sectors. Entrepreneurs and representatives of business associations interviewed by TASS said that they would recommend vaccination to their employees in most cases.

THE MOST UNSAFE PLACES IN AN OFFICE ARE CROWDED AREAS WHERE EMPLOYEE DESKS ARE LESS THAN TWO METRES APART. WITH 30% OF EMPLOYEES IN MOSCOW WORKING FROM HOME SINCE OCTOBER, OFFICE SEATING HAS BECOME BETTER SPACED OUT AND SAFER

According to a survey commissioned by TASS from the HeadHunter recruiting platform, 22% of employees at Russian companies say they are willing to have the vaccine so that they can get back to work. 21% of these would prefer a Russian vaccine, compared to 24% who would prefer a foreign vaccine. Only 11% believe it is safe to get vaccinated against COVID-19 before tests are completed, while 66% say the opposite.

A recommendation or a hard-and-fast rule?

Roman Valchuk, head of the representation of the National Fitness Society in the Sverdlovsk Region and owner of the Drive Fitness chain, is one of the executives supporting full vaccination. He says that most of his employees have already expressed their willingness to get vaccinated.

“We have recommended employees across our chain to get vaccinated. I don’t see much value in testing and think vaccination has more potential,” said the businessman.

“A scenario where we force workers to get vaccinated before they are allowed to return to the office is out of the question, since according to the Constitution, vaccination is voluntary in our country, but employers can recommend vaccination. We also already know that people are often asymptomatic, so regular testing of those who continue to go to work every one or two weeks (depending on the industry) can keep offices operating safely. A single, high-quality PCR test performed by a healthcare professional is sufficient to tell with a 97%–99% accuracy whether a person has the disease or not. Their accuracy is independent of the test’s cost or country of origin. It is important to check for a Rospotrebnadzor certificate when buying a test,” said Yevgeny Timakov, Chief Doctor at Lider-Meditsina healthcare centre and paediatric infectious disease doctor.

He also stressed that employees should stay at home if they develop any cold or flu symptoms. The most unsafe places in an office are crowded areas where employee desks are less than two metres apart. With 30% of employees in Moscow working from home since October, office seating has become better spaced out and safer.



Entrepreneurs and representatives of business associations said that they would recommend vaccination to their employees in most cases. Photo: Anton Novoderezhkin/TASS

Staying at home

HeadHunter's survey also revealed that 23% of respondents have colleagues who come to work sick on a regular basis. Only one third of respondents state that their employers send sick employees back home (55% among top managers). 56% continue to go to work without taking sick leave if they get a cold or flu but do not have a fever. Meanwhile, only 21% of working job seekers say their current employers require employees to take sick leave if they have a cold or flu, but 41% said it only happens if the cold or flu is serious. 38% of respondents say that their employers do not require sick employees to take time off.

YEVGENY TIMAKOV

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13% of respondents whose companies test for COVID-19 said that testing is done at the expense of employees themselves. 28% say that a test was taken only once, and will not be repeated, while 20% stated that testing is done once a month.

However, Sergei Mironov, Ombudsman for the Restaurant Business, notes that, in his experience, most employers in the restaurant business are attentive to the health of their employees and, even if they save on tests, send them back home at the slightest symptom of a cold or flu. "Regularly testing employees is quite expensive for an industry going through times as tough as these. But I see that conscientious restaurant businesses send their employees back home at the slightest symptoms of flu. Also, after lockdown was lifted, Rospotrebnadzor issued a directive prescribing restaurants to test 10% of their employees for COVID-19 every month, and most Russian restaurants met it," said the ombudsman, who also supports the idea of recommending vaccination to employees.



A single PCR test performed by a healthcare professional is sufficient to tell with a 97%–99% accuracy whether a person has the disease or not. Photo: Sergei Savostyanov/TASS

Marina Alekseeva, Chief Human Resources Officer at Kaspersky, also said that their employees should stay at home and call a doctor if they show any cold and flu symptoms. Fourteen days of self-isolation and working from home are also prescribed for anyone who came into contact with people who went on to test positive for COVID-19.

“Every two weeks, we offer our employees voluntary COVID-19 tests, even if they have no symptoms. This can be done directly at our headquarters in Moscow: a mobile laboratory comes to us to do the tests. Our people can also take the test for medical reasons (cold and flu symptoms, contact with a confirmed COVID-19 case) as it is covered by our voluntary health insurance programme. Most of our employees will continue working from home until the year-end at least. At their workplaces, employees need to keep social distancing, and we also provide them with masks and hand sanitiser bottles. Those who do choose to work from the office have their temperature taken at the entrance and throughout the day on a mandatory basis,” said Alekseeva.

“AS SOME EMPLOYEES OF RUSSIAN COMPANIES MOVED TO WORK FROM HOME, WE DID NOT SEE ANY GROWTH IN THE NUMBER OF CORPORATE CLIENTS TESTING EMPLOYEES FOR CORONAVIRUS,” NOTED TAMARA SILKINA, LABORATORY TECHNOLOGY DIRECTOR AT THE GEMOTEST LABORATORY

“As some employees of Russian companies moved to work from home, we did not see any growth in the number of corporate clients testing employees for coronavirus,” noted Tamara Silkina, Laboratory Technology Director at the Gemotest laboratory. Current figures show it is about 25%–30% of workers per day. “Regulatory documents set the share of people to be tested as a percentage or a multiple of the total headcount, depending, among other things, on the type of business. For example, employees of healthcare institutions are tested on a weekly basis, while frontline medical staff at infectious disease hospitals are tested twice a week. Our corporate clients come from various business areas including banking, retail chains, fashion houses, factories, sole proprietors, private schools and the hospitality industry. The laboratory uses both domestic and imported tests, the key difference between them being whether they are fully or partially automated. For example, Russian tests are partially automated,” said Silkina.

Disease prevention through testing

“It is easier for small companies to sign a good deal with a laboratory and set aside a small monthly budget than to struggle with the consequences of a positive case of COVID-19 among their staff,” believes Anatoly Meshcheryakov, CEO of the Sokroma hotel chain in St Petersburg.

“We have 32 properties around St Petersburg, all run by 28 employees. All our employees visit the office in one way or another and communicate amongst themselves. This means risk, and a certain responsibility to our guests: we do not want to spread the infection, as after all it would lead to the closure of our hotels. It is easier to take preventive measures than to clean up the consequences of a virus outbreak. So, we decided to test the entirety of our small team once or twice a month for the virus. We have a contract with a healthcare centre for thirty thousand roubles. Before coming to work, we check everyone’s temperature and provide them with a full set of PPE,” said Meshcheryakov.

By early autumn 2020, regular employee testing for COVID-19 had been rolled out by Georgy Chumanov, CEO and co-owner of IceBox Fitness and a member of the National Fitness Society. “In September, I invited the lab to the club and we did PCR tests for the entire team. All 50 employees turned out to be healthy. Since then, I run tests every two or three weeks, testing employees who have the most direct contact with the public. We also have a mandatory requirement for employees who go on holiday or a business trip to have a medical check before coming back to work. A single test for an employee costs two thousand roubles,” said the businessman.



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“The antigen test is an excellent solution for mass screening employees at any company or business,” explained Pyotr Martsinyuk, Head of Special Projects at Avivir, a distributor of test systems.

“Using a rapid antigen test, you can detect the COVID-19 virus in its pre-symptomatic and initial active phases. These tests have actually replaced PCR tests in Europe. The antigen test has the same timing requirements as the PCR one, that is, the test needs to be taken within five days after your potential exposure to the virus or the onset of symptoms: this is when it can detect the active virus that can spread to others,” said Martsinyuk.

He also stressed that any irregularities in testing or sample storage, the use of the wrong components, or improper swabbing directly affect the outcome and lead to a higher risk of incorrect results, which is counter-effective in combatting the pandemic and ensuring high-quality, accurate screening. Therefore, only qualified healthcare professionals should be administering the test.

