

The Right Benefits Can Help **Counteract Employees'** **Financial Stress**

As health care and related core benefit costs increase, so does the financial squeeze on your company and your employees. Add to the mix a competitive job market, with unemployment holding steady at 3.8 percent, you're faced to up the ante of your recruitment and hiring strategies. Now is definitely the time to embrace new, creative ways to get and keep that top talent through progressive benefits, while offsetting the rising cost of healthcare.

For the past six years the year-over-year increase in health care premiums has held steady at 5 percent, making the total increase 55 percent for average family premiums. Who can keep up with this? Health care costs are inflating faster than wages are growing and now represent 12 percent of total take home wages—that's a 100 percent increase from 30 years ago.

Rising health care costs intensify the financial worries of employees, and the collateral damage of personal financial stress often bleeds into the workplace — reducing productivity and directly impacting your organization's bottom line. A Price Waterhouse Cooper report found that nearly 50 percent of employees who are worried about their financial health spend at least three hours each week dealing with personal financial issues on company time. And, only 39 percent of Americans said they would be able to cover an unplanned expense costing \$1,000.

It's no surprise that employees believe basic benefits, such as healthcare, should just be part of their compensation package. However, the amount that organizations are paying toward this benefit continues to skyrocket, companies who pay a lower percentage of health insurance premiums versus their competitors will likely experience a negative impact on their employee recruitment and retention efforts. So how can you differentiate in a smart, fiscally responsible manner?

When Progressive Benefits Go Viral

Finding and matching creative, progressive benefits to the personal goals of your employees has been shown to help fuel optimum engagement and enrollment rates. To achieve this, it's critical to involve and empower your entire team as you evaluate and select new benefits. You'll find that their needs will vary depending on age, family status, and career experience — and you might be surprised to hear what actually is most important to them.

If you've been following the news lately you may be familiar with the Amazon employees calling themselves "Momazonians." These employees are petitioning for a back-up childcare benefit, which they believe will enable women to advance in the workplace if they are not the ones who constantly have to juggle time in the office versus time caring for children because of daycare, illnesses, school closures, or any number of other situations where one parent needs to stay home with a child rather than go into the office. And, their message has gone viral.

Childcare is just one example of a progressive benefit that some of the most in-demand companies to work for are exploring to support their employees, including Microsoft, Apple, and Starbucks. Willis Towers Watson reports that 69 percent of employers consider progressive benefits to be a very

important part of a compensation package. This research also categorized critical-illness insurance, identity theft protection, pet insurance, and student loan refinancing and consolidation programs all in high-demand and are often part of an expanding selection of voluntary and supplemental benefits.

These progressive benefits all have one thing in common — they help employees safeguard their financial security, an issue that is top of mind for many employees and is a big part of creating a positive long-term effect on their lives and well-being.

Profitable Progressive Benefits

Personally appealing benefits that are tailored to employees needs have the biggest impact on employee happiness. Ninety-one percent of employees rate non-traditional benefits as important part of their job satisfaction. In fact, 73 percent say benefits that fit their lifestyle needs increase their loyalty to employers, according to Willis Towers Watson's 2018 Emerging Trends Survey. Most of all, employees want benefits that help them avoid the stress and anxiety that result from balancing work and personal priorities.

One offering in this area that continues to rise to the top is identity theft protection. This is because an identity or cyber crime can wreak havoc on anyone's life — it's a highly personal attack, and, according to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), there are two new victims every second. It can take up to six months and hundreds of hours to recover after an identity theft incident—time and distraction that can directly impact an employee's productivity, as well as that of their team members. Victims also report feeling severe emotional stress and depression, often in addition to suffering a financial loss.

Employees and their employers are becoming increasingly vulnerable to these types of crimes through Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) policies, and the general ubiquity of mobile-first strategies. Malware that targets mobile device is one of the fastest growing threats to cybersecurity, and human error has become the top cause of data breaches within an organization.

So, what can you do to protect your employees' well-being and financial and digital profile? An effective program of identity theft protection coupled with mobile cyber security can empower employees to thwart identity thieves and avoid the years of frustration and financial ruin that can ensue. And, when an identity crime does happen, you'll want your employees to have access to an elite team of certified experts who know how to recover their identity back to pre-event condition. Show your employees that you are looking out for their best interest and not just protecting their identity, but also, the digital fibers of who they are and all that they've built.

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