

Open enrollment: It's about more than insurance

For as long as employees have received insurance through their employer, there has been an open enrollment period for employee benefits. Over the years, employers have developed highly organized systems to ensure that employees renew their benefits on a yearly basis and that they are aware of the services provided. Whether through a paper-based process or via a modern digital platform, employers are able to efficiently and effectively get the majority of their employees to sign up each and every year.

Where employers are lacking however, is in getting employees to understand and utilize the services and benefits available to them. Perhaps ironically, data reflects that healthy employees tend to sign up for benefits early and then utilize them more, while less healthy employees often pick their plans on the last day of enrollment, and subsequently, use their benefits less.

This represents a problem for employers because as health care costs have skyrocketed over the years, employers repeatedly see a large chunk of their potential earnings directed toward employee health care. This has led employers to design a new process for open enrollment to educate and engage employees.

Employers are recognizing that this period is one of the few times each year that they get to communicate with *all* of their employees, particularly in regards to their benefits. Instead of simply focusing on “checking that box off,” they are instead promoting employees’ Total Rewards, which enterprise technology and cost-efficient communications systems have made easier than ever before.

Similarly, employers are also realizing that this is the time of year to not only highlight all of the benefits available to employees, but also promote healthy lifestyles and necessary behavioral changes. As such, open enrollment represents an important opportunity for employers to shift employee behaviors towards living healthier lives – which employers can leverage to increase productivity and lower costs across the board.

Historically, January has been the best time to focus on health and wellness; after all, it’s the New Year and everyone loves making New Year’s resolutions about their health. The industry sees a familiar pattern of employers managing open enrollment in the fall, focusing messaging on healthy living in January... and then by summer, the initiative would often be stagnant until the next open enrollment period.

Open enrollment is a critical opportunity for employers to engage with their employees, but before they’re able to do so, they must understand that employee health and wellness is a long-term, always on - *ongoing* initiative. The big challenge for employers is getting their wellness program to stick, and this has created a sense of apathy in the industry – many employers just use the wellness program provided by their insurer or consultant as an annual ritual designed to bring marginal results. In order to properly engage employees, particularly for large-scale employers,

the wellness program must be personalized and optimized so that it targets each employee's individual needs and simplifies their access to their benefits.

What keeps many employers up at night is how they're going to reach the last 10 to 15 percent of employees and engage them, but this is the wrong mindset to take. Employers will throw thousands of dollars at their wellness program in the form of supplementary HSA contributions or premium reductions, but once these are distributed, engagement drops off dramatically. This is because the program itself is not tailored to their employees' individual needs.

If, on the other hand, HR practitioners focus their efforts on developing and utilizing a platform that centralizes all employee benefits into one location and tailors those benefits to specific population segments, program engagement will increase, improving participation in healthy activities, reducing absenteeism and presenteeism driving productivity up and health care costs down.

For example, many employers deploy programs designed to reduce heart disease or that help their employees control diabetes, but this only serves to target at most 10 to 15 percent of their workforce. Employers must instead utilize a program that provides employees with the tools to drive engagement with something like a benefits dashboard that everyone can use and also can find programs that improve their overall health and help them manage *any* particular condition or illness.

One of the most common barriers to wellness program success are skeptical executives and managers. Tailoring a wellness program to target specific population segments can serve as a powerful method of getting employees to participate in the program, but what about those in charge of deciding whether or not to have a wellness program in the first place?

Measuring the return-on-investment for a wellness program remains a challenge for HR professionals, but rather than focusing on actual health care costs, encourage executives to examine program engagement instead. Engaging leadership to focus on workplace culture and middle management with proper tools to manage their teams with wellness goals brings accountability to your efforts that *can* be measured.

For too long, employers have based wellness program success on a quarter-by-quarter or year-by-year basis. To truly see the impact of healthier living, employers must take a long-term approach. Instead of simply tracking costs, track how employees are eating better, how they are engaged with team activities and challenges or how they are exercising more or if they are tracking their vitals and remotely monitoring family member's health.

As few as two heart attacks or a single organ transplant among a workforce can have a dramatic impact on yearly health care costs, and those variables cannot always be controlled. That's why engagement (which is a factor employer can control) gives managers the ability to focus on what matters most: instilling long-term healthy behaviors in their employees and their families.

As open enrollment quickly approaches, consider shifting from a short-term, “check-the-box” approach, to one that encourages employees’ engagement with their families’ health and wellbeing and has a meaningful long-term impact. health care costs can be unpredictable, but this is one of the few chances each year to communicate with every single employee at a company.

Take advantage of this time and teach employees about all the tools available to them to improve their holistic wellbeing. After all, you have selected all those benefits are a part of their total compensation for all of the work they do for the year. Let’s take a long-term view but maximize the impact with proper enrollment communication.

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