

Educating and Inspiring the World at Work

APRIL 2019

WORKSPAN



ONE SIZE DOESN'T Fit All

*Benefits Engagement
Through Increased
Communication*

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Our clients pose the same question every year: “Our employees don’t even know about all the benefits we offer, nor how they work. So how do we get their attention, especially at a time when decision-making is critical, like annual enrollment?” Our response: Annual enrollment is simply an event with a transaction. No doubt there’s a lot to prepare for leading up to it, but the notion of “getting ready for annual enrollment” now means engaging your employees all year long in their benefits programs by implementing a thoughtful communication strategy that not only informs, but engages by connecting with employees on an emotional, as well as a rational, level. The fact is, it is not uncommon for employees to lack awareness of the programs and resources their employer offers, let alone understand how those programs support them and their family’s health and well-being. Employers can help by using modern communication approaches to reach employees in new ways.

Let’s face it. Benefits today can be complicated. As employers offer more choice in the types of benefits they provide — health plans, voluntary benefits, wellness programs, health savings accounts (HSAs) and flexible spending accounts (FSAs) — decision-making has become more complex. It’s nearly impossible for employees to sift through, compare and truly

understand a large array of options in just two or three weeks. Annual enrollment is the time to make decisions but not the time to learn about benefits programs. Employees need to hear about their programs throughout the year so they can make the connection between their decisions, their overall health and their finances. This requires a shift in the way we communicate and how often.

What’s Behind the Shift?

Several factors are prompting employers to move away from the annual one-size-fits-all onslaught of benefits communications in a short timeframe to more of a marketing approach that gets employees’ attention and helps them see what’s in it for them. Because employee benefits are typically not fully appreciated — and often underutilized — employers need employees to make a fundamental shift in how they view and use their benefits. Today, many employees only think of their benefits at annual enrollment and when they need their benefits the most, like when they are diagnosed with a serious illness, have an accident or experience a major life event, such as having a baby.

This shift in the role of communication from *inform* to *engage* can help change employee attitudes and perceptions about benefits and the organization they work for. And, it can change employee behavior,

like getting employees to use their programs, saving in an HSA or utilizing an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) — potentially resulting in improved health status and lower health-care costs. The key is to ensure that employees understand what they have and to think of their programs as a way to support their current and future well-being needs.

Furthermore, the stakes are higher financially when it comes to choosing benefits. With deductibles rising, the impact of making uninformed decisions can be substantial as employees take on greater accountability and bear far more financial risk than in the past. It is therefore essential to develop a yearlong strategy for how and when to deliver well-being messages. This ongoing communication effort will not only prepare employees to make the right decisions for them during annual enrollment, but will also support everyday decisions about how to use their programs to support and enhance their own well-being. Essentially, we are taking a strategic and methodical approach to help employees connect the dots between benefits and their personal well-being, and between total rewards and their employee experience.

The expectation of today's diverse, multigenerational workforce is that total rewards and benefits programs are delivered via a "consumer-friendly" experience similar to what they've come to expect in their personal lives. Employers have a sizeable gap to bridge here, as our research shows that a mere 39% of employers say they deliver benefits programs in a way that provides a consumer-grade experience.¹ The good news is that many employers are looking to evolve their communication strategies to better engage employees, while at the same time looking to modernize total rewards programs to keep up with the ever-changing workforce and talent needs.

Evolving Your Approach

Where do you start? Begin by thinking about benefits communications as a yearlong effort with annual enrollment as just a point in time, rather than the center of the plan. Next, consider taking a more holistic approach to your communication to broaden the scope to integrated well-being. The key objective of benefits programs is to maintain and improve the health of their employees and their families, and it's crucial to recognize that it takes much more than 30 days to change behavior or improve well-being. It requires a sustained, ongoing dialogue with your employees.

Our research reveals how the different aspects of wellbeing — physical, financial, emotional and social dimensions — are linked, and when employees struggle, it can have important business implications. For example,

employees who are troubled by their finances are twice as likely to be in poor health as those who declare themselves financially "unworried." This results in considerably higher stress levels, higher claims costs, more absence and presenteeism, as well as significantly lower levels of work engagement.²

These findings underscore the importance of taking an integrated view of well-being that focuses on the needs of the whole person. By communicating in this context, employees will better understand how their benefits programs connect to various well-being challenges they may be facing. It's also important to recognize that employees are in different places along their well-being journey at different times, which makes it critical to meet them where they are.

Meeting Employees Where They Are

Through the combination of communication strategy, data and technology, employers can meet employees where they are by delivering meaningful messaging in innovative ways.

Segmentation is key. Communication is less effective when delivered in a one-size-fits-all fashion, because not every employee shares the same situation. Segmenting your employees can range from targeting key groups based on dimensions — such as career stage, health status or age — to personalization at the individual level, and anything in between. One creative way to segment your workforce is by looking at a wide range of data inputs and characteristics, including demographic information, preferences, attitudes and behaviors, to create personas or representations of key employee profiles. For example, Joey, in his mid-20s, is just starting his career, paying off student loans while also developing saving habits, gaining a better understanding of any health risks and learning how to effectively manage stress. At the same time, Nadine, a mid-career employee with a young family, needs to increase her retirement savings, avoid spending unnecessary time and money on medical issues, and protect her family against a range of possible eventualities. Using segmentation, we can tailor messages to be more meaningful and relevant, which results in a higher likelihood of the employee engaging.

Technology is the other part of the solution. The ability to deliver unique messages to different employee cohorts requires the effective use of technology. In fact, our research shows that organizations that use technology well segment their employees, understand their preferences and communicate different messages to different audiences.³ However, only 32% of employers say they use digital technology to execute their



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communication strategy to meet employees where they are. Not only is it essential to have the right technology — such as a personalized communication platform or a portal — in place, but it is just as important to understand how to use it effectively to tailor your approach.

Additional considerations to evolve your communication approach include:

The messenger. Leaders must play an active role in articulating and demonstrating the organization's commitment to the well-being of employees and their families. Communication must start from the top to drive a culture that cares and explains why well-being matters, as well as the importance of making the right decisions about your programs.

Decision support. As part of their messaging, employers will want to help employees break down the factors that come into play when making benefits decisions — not just when enrolling in them, but when using them too. By showing comparisons and profiling situations based on key personas, employees can identify with the scenario and make a decision that is more closely based on their needs and preferences. It's also important for employers to encourage the use of available tools and resources and point out which tool to use when. For example, cost estimator tools can be helpful at annual enrollment to understand exactly how much money will be deducted from employees' paychecks for various benefits.

Channels and media. A compelling story can fall flat if it doesn't reach employees at the right touchpoints. But reaching and engaging the different segments of the workforce requires a mix of channels and media that include text messaging, email, portals, social media, apps, and videos, as well as traditional print. Technology platforms most commonly used to communicate total rewards — including benefits — are intranets (72%) and HR portals (54%), followed by social media (36%) and mobile apps (22%) at the more advanced end of the spectrum⁴.

Moreover, employees expect to be able to access their content on the device of their choice, regardless of

whether it's a smartphone, tablet or personal computer. Your well-being communications must be part of a seamless, anywhere-anytime experience.

Metrics. How effective is your communication strategy? It's critical to define what success looks like at the start. This ranges from activity-based metrics like visits to a portal and open rates of emails to behavioral measurements like improved engagement or increased utilization rates. Luckily, employers have an array of tools at their disposal to assess the results of their communication efforts, including employee engagement surveys, pulse surveys and focus groups. To support the ongoing communication strategy, smart employers use these metrics to adjust and refine the approach and messaging along the way.

A New Competitive Advantage

Our research indicates that two-thirds of employees around the globe agree that employers have a role to play in encouraging them to live healthier lifestyles. This starts with getting the word out and connecting with employees at appropriate touchpoints throughout the year.

Using communications not only to inform, but to engage, will help change how employees perceive the role of benefits in their journey to becoming healthier and more financially secure, as well as socially and emotionally balanced. This yearlong approach can enhance the employee experience, help improve productivity and serve as a source of competitive advantage. **ws**

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¹ Willis Towers Watson Modernizing Total Rewards Survey (2018).

² Willis Towers Watson Global Benefits Attitudes Survey (2017/2018)

³ Willis Towers Watson Modernizing Total Rewards Survey (2018)

⁴ Willis Towers Watson Modernizing Total Rewards Survey (2018)