



Episode 7 – Employer perspectives on implementing benefit policy changes

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SPEAKER: You're listening to Talking Heads, a Willis Towers Watson podcast series featuring interviews with senior leaders on the most pressing human capital and benefit-related topics.

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KEVIN NEWMAN: Hello. My name is Kevin Newman, and I lead the Health and Benefits practice at Willis Towers Watson. Today, I'm delighted to introduce a panel discussion which took place at our recent future-gazing webcast on emerging health care trends. We're joined by Cali Gold-- Cali is Head of People for YuLife-- and also Paul Caldwell. Paul is the Health and Well-being manager at Co-Op. My colleague, Lucy McGrath, will host this roundtable discussion. So Lucy, over to you.

LUCY MCGRATH: Paul, welcome. Thank you for joining us. We've just heard from Matt that the acceleration we've seen in the digital mental health services in the last 12 months is a trend that's set to continue and a pace. Paul, I know this is an area that's been a huge focus for you in the team at Co-Op given the challenges your employees have faced since the start of the pandemic. I'd just be really interested to hear what you think about the growing complexity for employees in this area given the sheer number of employer-funded support services they may now have access to.

PAUL CALDWELL: It's incredibly hard. Given that anyone can set themselves up and tout themselves as an expert makes it really hard for an employer to cut through. There's no consistent standards, no consistent governance around these services. It's great to see lots of innovation, but it makes the task for an employer really, really hard. There's lots of overlap between EAPs and some of the digital services that are coming through, so you've got virtual GPs. You've got lots and lots of over-gamified apps.

Yeah. The challenge-- real hard. I would say to anyone that's thinking about it right now, don't be afraid to ask some hard questions. Make procurement your friend. Ask for some help.

LUCY MCGRATH: Cali, from your perspective, what are you seeing at YuLife?

CALI GOLD: I think the key thing that a lot of employers are having to do is speak to their employees more so than ever. Get in touch with what your people are looking for. Buzzwords

like mental health and hybrid working all have a really relative meaning depending on the industry you're in and where your employees are. YuLife has taken a slight turn for the better to now attract a diverse pool of people globally. The complexities and challenges with that means that we're operating in a space that is more unfamiliar than the norm because we have to get in touch with different cultures, different economic climates, understanding employment law in certain jurisdictions to make sure that we can comfortably hire people, get them through a robust, comfortable interview process and integrate them into a business that is very quickly scaling and doing so through a pandemic.

So that touches on numerous challenges. But more concrete in terms of what we're seeing is we are small enough to engage in a very deep level with each of our employees and understand the challenges that they're facing, whether it's working from their bedroom and sitting on their bed for the last 18 months to someone whose family member would have passed away, and really using both technology and changing some of the policies that we've got to try and benefit and look after each of our employees.

PAUL CALDWELL: And you're right, Cali. Getting to know your people is the most fundamental part. The smaller you are, the easier it is. But it's not impossible for a large organization. The you know, the more agile you can be, the quicker you can make decisions. It's really, really important.

LUCY MCGRATH: And do you both feel that as employers, you've been adding more of these emotional well-being services into your stable of providers over the last 12 to 18 months, or do you feel actually, the focus has been more on maximizing what you have and ensuring employees can know where they need to go, can access what they need?

PAUL CALDWELL: For us, a little bit of both. We added virtual GP to our offering. That had some element of emotional well-being attached. But fundamentally, it was more about getting people to use the things that were there, talking to people about the things that they were facing into, being very situational. So you may be feeling, here are the things we've got to help, as opposed to just here's a number, here's a number.

CALI GOLD: Yeah. During the pandemic, for example, we brought in professional coaching, but coaching that also taps into a lot of personal and emotional problems. So we funded and are paying for everyone to have professional coaching twice a month. We also involved-- prior to the pandemic, actually, but saw that more people are using it-- a well-being budget. So people have access to a certain amount of money on a monthly basis to put towards something that may make them feel better, whether it's a Zoom exercise class or a dance class or whatever it is. It's something that they can personally put to good use.

And simultaneously, we took a good look at our parental leave policies and brought in things to create more comfortable and generous policies, especially as people are more at home now. We look to offering people a lot more paid leave when they have children and offering that paid leave up until a child is five years old as opposed to when someone has a newborn. So we wanted to make sure that people just have more time to put towards actually being with their families.

LUCY MCGRATH: That's really fantastic, Cali. Really great to hear. So thinking about emotional well-being, clearly, it's really high on the agenda for all UK employers. And you've both talked about the importance your businesses are placing on it and supporting employees,

particularly at the moment. I think it's really interconnected with the topic that I'd like to explore with you both next. So we know from our Emerging Trends Survey results that UK employers are really focusing in and broadening their strategy in the DE&I area. And key life events that employees have is forming a really big part of that focus.

So Cali, you've just mentioned the changes you've made at YuLife with some of your policies. I was really excited to hear about some of the work that you and the team have been doing. What I'd actually really love to hear your views on are, what do you think of innovation amongst the traditional UK health care providers? So are they doing enough to address that growing employer demand for services and benefits for family and reproductive health?

CALI GOLD: Look, the pandemic has definitely exacerbated and, I think, thrust the whole agenda to the priority list of all employers. And I think that's traditional global companies and smaller startups. It's definitely-- if it's not-- it's definitely, I know, on the agendas of your well-being and HRD members in various companies. I think the challenge is the effect and goal of what it is we want to see take so long to actually actualize and tangibly see the effects. So when you've got businesses with employees of 20,000 30,000, 40,000 people, putting in the implementation of these changes and seeing the outcomes and the effects can take years. And so I think there is such a need and a consistent requirement to put these not just on the agenda of leadership teams, but actually think about what it is their message is and what their goal is and think about, if the goal is going to take four to five years to actually see, how quickly then do we need to move and operate?

And also, what is it that we are trying to achieve? Is it remove the gender barrier even more and create parental leave policies? And I think that's something that YuLife feel quite proud of doing. We don't have maternity and paternity strict policies. We simply have parental leave policies. And that's something that will apply to any person who has a child who wants to take time off, whether that's through adoption or surrogacy or childbirth.

And so it's one thing having these policies in your agenda, but it's actually thinking about what it is you want to achieve. And then, as I said, how long is your outcome going to take to actually see? Alongside with that, we put in very recently a miscarriage policy. And I was inspired by New Zealand when they put something out for their entire nation. And it made me think that how are we, in the 21st century, still quite backwards with thinking about things like this?

And this was quite a complicated policy to put together because on one hand, it's very hard to put one policy that's going to cater for all. Again, we wanted something that wasn't going to just focus on one specific gender. There was a recent study done that the NHS put out, and they said that both partners obviously suffer a loss. And 20% of birth-giving partners will endure some sort of post-traumatic stress. So it's not a gendered issue, again, when both parties are going to suffer physical, mental, or emotional stress. So we did put in a policy that allows people to take a certain number of days off, but my primary agenda was to give people a platform to be able to talk about their experiences, tell their managers they may need time off, tell them they may need some therapy, or whatever it is, some sort of support that hopefully we can contribute and benefit to.

And ultimately-- and I'm very happy to talk about the challenge, but we were offering days for something that actually is quite traumatic for a lot of people. And on the flipside, I

thought, well, if we had a policy that allowed certain employees to take off potentially three weeks or a month, if not more time, would that be quite damaging? Because some people, I know, having spoken to them firsthand, said, well, I wanted to get back into the workplace. I wanted to feel very busy, actually.

Having had a policy, maybe, where I was told to take three weeks or a month off would be difficult because it would question whether something was wrong with me if I didn't want to take off that amount of time, and my employer had put in a policy that stated we are offering a month or three weeks off for people that have endured a miscarriage. And so I think it's a really case-by-case basis and, obviously, a very sensitive issue. But I think employers need to be aware that they need to ensure that their people managers are comfortable talking about this subject if they're faced with it, more so comfortable doing it on Zoom or on Teams and perhaps not doing it physically with your team members, and also being very mindful that it's a case-by-case basis. Some people may face traumatic stress six months after experiencing something like this.

And to be perfectly frank, it was only when we rolled out this policy that certain employees contacted me on a one-to-one basis and shared their experience having gone through this during the pandemic, highlighting that it was a very lonely, complicated time for them. So yeah, to answer your question, Lucy, there's so much going on in this whole space. But as I said, I think companies can do so much more to think about what goes on with such a complex issue, whether it's parental leave, whether it's providing a space to think about the people that are going through a miscarriage and actually providing not just time or resource, but just the ability to have the conversation and remove the stigma around these topics.

LUCY MCGRATH: Yeah, I think that's so important. It really is. It's the stigma and taboo piece and being able to actually have a conversation in your workplace and feel safe and comfortable to do that. Paul, I know that Co-Op have done a lot in this space as well, so I'd be interested to hear from you.

PAUL CALDWELL: Yeah, that's right. There's a big piece of understanding your people again. So what's the capability of your leaders, and are they equipped to have the conversation? And therefore, do you need a policy? So we decided we do need a pregnancy loss policy because we know that some of our managers aren't comfortable talking about it. They need some guidance. They need a little bit of prescription.

But our policies are written in a way that are quite flexible, so they give them enough slack to be able to deal with on a case-by-case basis with some great guidance. I know your original question asked about traditional providers, and I know the PMI market isn't really responding. It's quite a typical exclusion not to cover things like pregnancy loss or menopause. But also with mental health, there's lots more innovation coming in the space. So there's an emergence of providers that are providing services to employers to meet the needs in the space.

LUCY MCGRATH: Yeah. It almost feels like, actually, it's those providers that are innovating outside of that traditional market who are likely to drive the force of change and perhaps make the traditional health care providers and insurers do something more.

PAUL CALDWELL: And as is usually the case, Lucy, the health care providers are often the last to respond. The little agile startups drive the market. But that's not a bad thing.

LUCY MCGRATH: No, not at all. And actually, I think, as I've listened to you both speak-- and it's something that I know from conversations with clients and also with individuals who are going through challenging times-- a lot of employee expectation is more around feeling heard and seen and comfortable and safe rather than actually having a paid-for benefit provision. So it's just fantastic to hear that both of you as employers are responding to those employee needs and requirements. It's really great.

So broadening this out to the two areas we've been talking about to employee health and well-being more generally, what do you both think would be-- or do you see as the biggest challenge for UK employers in the next 12 months? Paul, we'll come to you first for that one.

PAUL CALDWELL: I mean, there isn't one. There's definitely three-- economic recovery, so financial well-being, mental health, so the lag from the pandemic, people getting treatment, but also physical health and the NHS waitlist. And any employee has got to pick what they want to be famous for, what they want to go after. You can't go after everything. You just can't succeed at going after everything. You need to know your people, what will have the biggest impact, what are the things you want to go after, and go after it.

LUCY MCGRATH: Cali, from YuLife's perspective or from your perspective?

CALI GOLD: I want to offer something by completely agreeing with what was just said. I think financial well-being is a huge cause for concern across the country, specifically speaking constantly to potential new employees as we are heavily recruiting. And as I mentioned, globally at the moment, we're seeing that as a driver, people want real certainty. And that's probably quite a challenge when startups are recruiting. They're more risky, and people want to be more risk-averse.

And I think just slightly, if I break down the aspect around mental well-being and mental health is making sure our people managers are fully supported and coached as well as possible and looking after their teams in a remote environment. I think hybrid working will be and is a complicated measure to implement and carry out. It comes with a lot of challenges. And I think we're all learning at the same time. And I think some businesses will take to it far better than others.

I still find it hard to believe that global traditional law firms and investment banks are not going to return full time to the offices. Traders and economic drive, I think, is going to, in some ways, suffer if we don't have a very hard line of what hybrid working means and then ensuring everyone has the capabilities to carry out that style of working. Especially as a manager, I think you take it for granted where you perhaps had your team operating around you for 10, 15 hours a day, and you could closely get in tune with what's going on, whereas now, your perhaps 30-minute meetings on Zoom with certain people in your team means you're probably having quite a transactional conversation about what's going on and very little in-tune conversation around how the individual is actually feeling.

And unless you're someone that's very forthcoming around your emotions and what's going on, managers are going to be so not in touch with what's happening around them. And as we know-- I think 87% of UK employees are more loyal to an employer who looks after their well-being. So how are we looking after our well-being if we can't always see what's going

on with our people? And those are one of the key things I'm really challenged and concerned about.

PAUL CALDWELL: And you have to give time and space for it, don't you, Cali?

CALI GOLD: Definitely.

PAUL CALDWELL: Be a bit vulnerable. Be prepared to say, do you know what? We might get this wrong, but we'll try, and we'll learn as we go. And if you've got their best interests at heart, then people see that and respond really well to it.

CALI GOLD: Yeah, I agree completely. And also, as you say, it's allowing people just to come to work with their authentic self, whomever and whatever they are. And we've already touched on diversity policies, but it's just making sure that if you've got that foundation, as you say, and your heart's in the right place, and you're leading with compassion-- we will make mistakes, we will learn from them, and that's all we can keep doing.

LUCY MCGRATH: I think that's really great to hear, and I think it's really great advice for people who are watching today. You just need to be really frank and open and honest with people that, actually, you're learning as you go in the same way that they are. So we're all in this together. And that's just the best messaging I think you can possibly give.

So just before we close, I'd really like to ask you both one final question. So just short answers for you both. What has been the most impactful change in your eyes that your business has made for employee benefits in the last-- or support-- in the last 12 months? Cali, I'll ask you that one first.

CALI GOLD: I think I've already touched on it, but definitely, I think the most meaningful benefit of the last 12 months has been both the parental leave policy, which, as I said, has removed any possible stigma to association with gender and has broken that down, parental leave that has extended to anyone with a child under the age of five, specifically because scientifically speaking, children developing between the ages of 0 to 5 have a huge amount of impact in how they're framed, and secondly was absolutely the miscarriage policy. I'm very proud and humbled to work with founders of the business that were extremely open and positive in wanting to push having a policy like this.

So as a business that is about life insurance and well-being, it's great to see that we are not just providing a lip service or a product to our customers, but actually, internally reflecting what it is we believe and offering that to our staff. But it doesn't stop there, and I can't tell you what the next six to 12 months will bring. But I think that's definitely been our most successful and positive policy in the last six to 12 months.

LUCY MCGRATH: Thank you. And Paul, from your side?

PAUL CALDWELL: So two, and I'll be very quick-- the mental health manager training for all of our managers. We've reached 2,500 of our 4,000 managers face to face, albeit through Teams, 2 and 1/2 hours. It's our number one rated course of the year. It's been outstanding, and it's really set the foundation for us. But the second one is wave stream, so a pay advance, the ability to access salary between paydays. And our colleagues on the front line in our food

stores in particular say it is a game changer. It's something that they've never seen before, but it's having such a positive impact on helping people manage their money.

CALI GOLD: I love that. That's amazing. You're going to have to tell me offline more about that because I haven't heard about that scheme. That sounds incredible.

LUCY MCGRATH: Just fantastic, completely different things, but all four of them, you should both be super proud of the work that you're doing for your employees. That's just phenomenal. So really, just to close, thank you both so much for your time today. Really insightful comments and insights into what you're doing as two very different businesses, so it's been a pleasure speaking to you both. And I'm sure everybody who's watching and listening today have got a huge amount from it, so thank you.

KEVIN NEWMAN: Cali, Paul, thank you so much. And I echo Lucy's comments there. I have no doubt the listeners will have benefited from those insights.

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LUCY MCGRATH: Thank you for listening to this edition of Talking Heads. For more information, visit our Insights page on willistowerswatson.com.

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