



Episode 11:

A pivotal moment in benefits

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Jill Knoke: For the first time in 10 years, benefits actually scored in the top three reasons for employees to stay at an employer or to leave and go to a different employer. In this tight labor market that we're in, it's a great opportunity for employers to really lean in on their benefits.

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Announcer: You're listening to Benefits, with Purpose!, a WTW podcast, where benefits delivery experts help employers navigate the world of health and wealth benefits and deliver purpose to their people in the moments that matter most.

Jason Dalbec: Hello, my name is Jason Dalbec one of the leaders in our Benefits Outsourcing business here at WTW. I'll be your host today on today's episode of Benefits, with Purpose! entitled, A Pivotal Moment in Benefits. Joining me today is Jill Knoke the leader of our Health and Welfare business at WTW.

Jill Knoke: Hey, Jason. Thanks so much. I'm happy to be here.

Jason Dalbec: Thanks, Jill. And my other guest is Annie Rzepecki, one of WTW's Employee Experience thought leaders in the industry.

Annie Rzepecki: Hi, both. Thanks for having me.

Jason Dalbec: Thank you both for joining me. It's great to be here today. And when I think about this, together, collectively, the three of us have over 70 years of experience in the industry. And so, I'm really looking forward to this conversation today.

Wow, I guess congrats to employee benefits for having their moment to shine in such a pivotal time for employers. Jill, why don't you start us off. What's going on?

Jill Knoke: Well, thanks, Jason. This is a really great time to be in benefits. And I wanted to share that recently, we performed a survey of employees around the world that really focused on employee attitudes. One of the areas of focus was attraction and retention. And I think what we found was that pay is always the number one reason people either stay at a job or might go to a new job.

But the pivotal moment here is for benefits is that, for the first time in 10 years, benefits actually scored in the top three reasons for employees to stay at an employer or to leave and go to a different employer. In this tight labor market that we're in, it's a great opportunity for employers to really lean in on their benefits and use their benefits to attract and retain those key employees that we're all fighting for.

And in addition to that, retirement benefits really scored highly. Six in ten employees actually cited that their employer's retirement benefit was a key reason that they stayed at their current employer, and over half of those surveyed said that they would be willing to forgo more pay for a more generous health care plan. So, we do feel like this is a really pivotal time for benefits in today's economy and market.

Jason Dalbec: Interesting. Thanks for sharing. So, as I think about that, what areas do you think employers should focus on?

Jill Knoke: In these uncertain times, I think employers should really focus on areas that they can guarantee benefits or where they can guarantee certainty, comfort, or stress relief. For example, it could be matching dollars in a 401(k) plan. Or if an employer has a pension plan, they should ensure that communication is really clear. In fact, we are an employer, and this is something that we've been talking about with my peers is that we need to advertise our pension plan or advertise our retirement benefits, advertise our match. Because these are guaranteed benefits that employees should really be aware of and could make or break their decision to leave or stay with a company.

In terms of health and welfare benefits, it could mean ensuring employees understand if there's a retiree medical benefit in the future. Clearly, retiree medical benefits are something that many employees are concerned about. So, if there is a retiree medical benefit in the future, whether or not it's subsidized, could be really important.

And in terms of emotional and physical wellbeing, I think that is a huge area right now. Just thinking about and promoting flexible work environments, EAP, or other emotional and wellness programs are really important. We are living in a very stressful world right now. So, anything that alleviates stress or could be seen as a positive benefit that resonates with that employee is going to be very key. And I think employees more than ever are saying that benefits that meet their needs and provide a superior experience are more likely to stay at their employer than if they didn't have those benefits.

Jason Dalbec: Annie, Jill makes some really good points about benefits and the focus on wellbeing. What thoughts do you have as it relates to the employee experience in attraction and retention?

Annie Rzepecki: It's a good question. And we're finding that employers who are focused on wellbeing generally have higher levels of engagement and retention. A really good example of this is that we worked with a health care system in the Midwest that like others had been experiencing burnout, turnover, huge dip in morale. And to top it off, their employees, especially their frontline caregivers, were not using all the great wellbeing and lifestyle programs that this employer had worked so hard to put into place over the last few years. So, for them, instead of having a typical mail-to-home brochure communication that had a laundry list of all the programs, vendors, phone numbers, benefits that they had in place, they came up with this really cool idea of a care package. So, they really aligned with how they knew their employees were feeling, how they had heard that their feeling, and everyone just felt like they needed support, they needed a breath of fresh air and to feel like they were being taken care of for a change.

So, they designed this really cool communication that, yes, it was a mail-to-home brochure, but it was designed to look and feel like a care package. So, you fold it open, it had a bow on the front. And inside, it was really simple, easy, great imagery to look at, and it prioritized in a more human way the programs that these folks could access.

So, for example, instead of listing the laundry list of programs, they highlighted the free grocery delivery service that they had recently put into place. The new sleeping app that they were providing access to, back-up child care services. And then they directed people from that brochure to a new wellbeing portal that they had designed also to organize information in a more human way, so you drop down to topics like, I'm having trouble sleeping, or I'm really stressed.

So just that shift in the way that they conveyed the same information but just from a more human place and prioritizing what they knew was top of mind for these folks just made a huge difference. So that's one of my favorite examples of how companies are thinking about this differently.

Jason Dalbec: I love that example. And it's also got me thinking about what are employers doing around engagement when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion and attraction and retention.

Annie Rzepecki: Yeah. It's really important for that to be intentional about developing inclusive communications. So, saying things like fertility benefits instead of infertility coverage can go a long way, for example. Making sure that your use of visual photography represents various groups and demographics of employees. Thinking about accessibility standards so that people with color blindness or other impairments have options for how they interact with your communication.

And then specific to attraction and retention, just thinking holistically about the population of people that you're trying to get to. Certain benefits or concepts will be more important to some groups than others. So, when you're designing your benefit solutions and thinking about your communications, this concept, that's not new, but it's definitely more prevalent now, is creating personas to represent the various aspects of your population and then using those to do a gut check to make sure that all of these groups find value in benefits that you offer or the way that you're conveying or packaging that information. Because we know that people will be more likely to leave the organization if they don't feel like the benefits provided resonate with them and their needs.

Jill Knoke: Jason, if I could just interject for a moment, this makes me think of something that we're really seeing in terms of prevalence lately, and that's an interest in lifestyle benefits. And what a lifestyle benefit really means is that you're able to create a benefit that is unique to an individual. So oftentimes, we're seeing an employer give a lump sum of money to all of their employees, the same amount of money. But then that employee gets to choose how they want to spend it. And most often what around it is that it should be related to something health and wellness.

But what we've seen in one employer is just a positive impact from this - there's a story where an employee was at lunch, and they came up to one of the benefits professionals and said, "I love this lifestyle benefit. I'm a mom, I work full time, I have small children, and I hate laundry. Every weekend, I feel like I spend all my time doing laundry. And I took that \$1,500 that you gave me, and I bought a laundry service."

And she feels like she got a new lease on life. She's just got all this time back. She spends time with her children. It's just a really positive benefit, it resonated directly with her. It was something that was important to her. And she never wants to leave this company now. She feels like they're giving her benefits, giving her opportunities to spend money to provide benefits for her and her family that means something to her. And that's different, right?

Back to the D&I, those benefits are going to be unique, somebody who has children that are young and doesn't want to do laundry is different than somebody who's maybe an empty nester and has time for laundry or not as much laundry. So, I think this is where lifestyle benefits could really be a positive impact for employers.

Jason Dalbec: That's a great story, Jill. Thanks for sharing that, and the insight into how lifestyle benefits can really help shape the portfolio of benefits that employers are offering. Annie, let's turn for a moment. We're hearing from a lot of employers lately that it is harder than ever to cut through the noise and communicate benefits and the access to benefits in an engaging way, so employees understand what they have available to them. What new communication trends are out there and that you're seeing in the market?

Annie Rzepecki: Well, we've actually learned a lot about employee behavior and communication over the last couple of years in particular. The main thing to remember is that success requires this omnichannel approach, meaning that we need to be dripping messages throughout the year across multiple vehicles in multiple ways.

For example, some people want their information in 140 characters or less. Others want to maybe dig into a video or an article on their own time. And then there's others that really value the human connection above all

else. They want to talk with an actual human person and ask their questions. And so this omnichannel trend isn't new, but it has evolved.

For example, if you think about QR codes. A couple of years ago, those weren't as prevalent. But now, we're all used to seeing QR codes as menus at restaurants or takeout places that we go to. So, companies are now using those and blending QR codes into their own kind of old school promotional communication vehicles, like posters are still a thing, mail-to-home postcards are still a thing. But now, those things might have QR codes on them so that they're still environmentally around, but an employee can scan that code and dig into more information on their own device.

So we're seeing other creative things, too, like elevator wraps with messaging, for example, signage on floors or window clings. So, for those that are back in a workspace, these kind of environmental reminders for employees throughout the day with these little communication nudges.

Jason Dalbec: It's interesting to me to hear the omnichannel concept has remained the same, but the tactics within have evolved. Let's talk a little bit more about that. Can you share more with our audience?

Annie Rzepecki: Yeah. So, another example specific to benefits is we've seen a really positive response from virtual benefit fairs. So, think a few years ago, there were actual in-person fairs with desks or booths that you could walk up to and pieces of paper or brochures that vendors representing different programs could hand out to employees.

Now, we've been able to bring all of that online, so employees can interact with the full suite of benefits but do so at their own pace, from their own device, through a platform that's hosted by their employer. So, they might be able to interact like by signing up for a webcast, There is live chat capability. They can look at videos. They can share all this with their spouse, their families from the comfort of their home if they want to.

We've also seen a lot of progress with online administration, benefits administration and communication tools. Things are getting way more personalized and meaningful and thought about more as a virtual entrance into the world of benefits rather than just sort of transactional, here's a yearly process where you enroll in your benefits. For example, I can log into a site that knows exactly who I am, it knows which benefits I'm eligible for, which benefits I'm already participating in. And on top of that, I might even get a personalized or tailored behavior nudge that encourages me to increase my 401(k) contribution, for example.

So, this idea of the virtual entrance or gateway to benefits is becoming increasingly popular for even pre-hires and candidates, too. So, employers are giving access to those that haven't yet joined their organization to give them a taste of what it would be like to work there, get a sense of the culture, and on top of that, quantify the value of the benefits package that they would receive if they were to accept an offer there.

Jason Dalbec: So, Jill, as I think about our clients and their employees, how are you seeing all this play out in the benefits administration space with them right now?

Jill Knoke: We're seeing employers engage in this omnichannel approach to get their employees to engage in their health care decisions and that concept that Annie used earlier, to nudge employees to engage in their health care decisions is really important. And I would say, we have one employer that's taking it to a different level. And I think it's really intriguing and interesting, and that is that they have an app. And employees use this app all day every day for their normal business daily activities that they have to go through, whether it's checking their schedule, checking in for work that day, checking out of work that day.

And what this employer is looking to do is to push more health care information and health care decision-making information to that app. So, we're not replicating the information on the app with the information that we provide, but we're pushing content to them, so that they know that they're in an open window today, whether it's annual enrollment or a new hire window or had some life change. And they can click right from the app and go to the enrollment site.

And it's a really great way, I think, of getting employees to know that there is really one spot that they can go to and see their benefits information. And it's the same app that they go to all day every day for their other information. And I think it could be really turnkey as we move forward in terms of benefits administration.

I think the other area, though, that I wanted to mention just in terms of an omnichannel approach is how employees use benefits. And clearly, there is the online aspect of it, but we still believe strongly in our Service Center as well. And we believe so because benefits are hard, and people are going through tough situations oftentimes when they need their benefits.

And there are times when you just need that person on the other end of the phone to provide some empathy for you or tell you what to do or give you options or direction. Or it could be that employees might not be able to speak English or read English, and so the Service Center has language lines available for them to use. This is another alternative for people to pick up a phone and make that phone call and get the care and the help that they need.

We're also seeing an increased usage of chat. So, chat could be whether it's a virtual assistant, where there's a database behind it that is answering questions, or it could be a live Customer Service Representative that's chatting with that employee. And what we really believe is that the key is to meet employees where they are. Everybody is in a different space. And so how do we make sure that we provide enough opportunities to communicate with employees, kind of that omnichannel approach that Annie spoke to, to really meet in people where they are, ensure that they can get the right answers to their health care decisions that they have to make going forward.

Jason Dalbec: Well, knowing employees are viewing benefits as one of their top reasons for leaving or joining an employer, now is the pivotal time for employers to think about how to engage and recruit employees and ensure employees know the benefits that they have available, how, when, and where to access them.

This has been a very insightful conversation. And I'd like to thank our guests Jill Knoke and Annie Rzepecki. It's been a pleasure talking with both of you.

Annie Rzepecki: Thanks for having us.

Jill Knoke: It's been great, Jason. Thank you.

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Jason Dalbec: And I'd like to thank our Benefits, with Purpose! listeners. We appreciate you joining us. Make sure you subscribe for future episodes. And we look forward to having you back next time.

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