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INSIGHTS FOR HR PROFESSIONALS

4 Lessons Learned From Open Enrollment During the Pandemic

The pandemic presented many learning opportunities for organizations as they pivoted and learned how to be resilient during uncertain times. The 2020 open enrollment season was one such opportunity, and many employers rose to the challenge by exploring new ways to engage and educate their employees about their benefits.

With open enrollment approaching and hybrid/remote workplaces still a reality, employers can use last year's experiences to shape their open enrollment planning and processes. This article discusses key lessons from last year's open enrollment season that can increase plan participation this fall.

1. Employees Want—and Need—Holistic Benefits

As the name suggests, employee benefits work best when designed to provide holistic employee support. Unfortunately, many benefits offerings are not created with holistic support in mind. In the past, employers could offer basic, one-dimensional benefits. Those days are long gone, and the pandemic may have been the turning point. The pandemic has hurt employees' mental, physical, and financial wellness. Employers have a unique opportunity to support employees and make it easier to get help through their benefits.

Beyond needing holistic support, employees might be expecting new benefits, particularly if their plans changed very little in the past year. According to a survey from WEX, 85% of employers said they didn't change their 2021 offerings due to the pandemic. It appears many employers kept their benefits packages during an uncertain year.

If employers are ready to revamp their benefits, the following are the top perks employees are looking for right now:

- Telecommuting
- Flexible or hybrid scheduling
- Greater compensation
- Mental health resources
- Caregiving benefits
- Developmental opportunities

If employers are unsure about employee preferences, they might consider surveying employees or encouraging managers to discuss open enrollment during one-on-one meetings to better understand how employees are doing and which benefits they find most valuable. Employers' overall goal should be to establish meaningful offerings and resources for current and prospective employees.

2. Open Enrollment Planning Needs To Begin Sooner

The most successful open enrollment campaigns engage employees' months before enrollment opens. That means organizations need to start reviewing their offerings sooner rather than later so there's ample time to develop and execute a successful open enrollment strategy or campaign. During the pandemic, employees leaned heavily on employer-sponsored mental health resources, employee assistance programs and other virtual resources. Simply put, benefits mattered even more to employees last year. This year, employers have the opportunity to showcase the perks available to employees as soon as possible to thoughtfully engage and retain employees.

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Furthermore, there's a massive wave of turnover expected by the end of 2021. That's even more reason for employers to start early and get ahead of turnover by previewing new or enhanced benefits with employees. The pandemic allowed many people to rethink their values and make major life changes—possibly including finding new jobs. Many employees are staying in their current roles to collect a steady paycheck and keep household finances stable. That is, until the pandemic is over. Workplace stressors—worsened by the pandemic—are likely to blame for this turnover. Additionally, compensation, benefits and work-life balance are top reasons why employees are job hunting this year, so it's critical for employers to offer competitive benefits.

And don't worry about communicating too soon about enrollment. Research shows that repetitive messaging and reminders increase the odds of an employee seeing enrollment information and understanding the upcoming benefit changes and how they work.

Open enrollment this year provides a fantastic opportunity for organizations to combat turnover by proving they have gone above and beyond to support employees with top-tier benefits offerings. Especially this year, the earlier employers can start their open enrollment processes, the better the participation and employee retention potential will be.

3. Virtual Open Enrollment Tactics Are Effective, Regardless of Remote Work

The pandemic undeniably pushed employers to digitize open enrollment processes. Consider the following WEX survey results:

- For 2020 enrollment, 67% of employers delivered open enrollment education differently due to the pandemic. Tactics included virtual open enrollment fairs, live webinars and online chats during scheduled times to help address employee questions.

- Of those employers that added virtual engagement methods to their open enrollment strategy, 85% said they will continue to do so in the future.

Virtual open enrollment fairs successfully educated and engaged employees, both remote and on-site. Employees have embraced many activities and processes as they've gone virtual or digital, so it's not necessarily a surprise that employees have generally accepted virtual enrollment as well.

That's good news for organizations that offered virtual open enrollment opportunities, as they can optimize and improve for this coming season. To determine employees' appetite for information and enrollment details, employers might consider surveying employees for feedback on virtual enrollment components. Survey results can drive not only enrollment communications but also any ongoing benefits education throughout the year. This is the year to show up for employees year-round to keep them engaged and supported in the workplace, potentially increasing employee satisfaction and retention. Organizations operating in a hybrid workplace model may also yield great results by offering both in-person and virtual open enrollment events.

If employers don't have an existing benefits website available, they could consider building an internal digital destination, so employees have a year-round benefits resource. HR departments can post evergreen partner resources and continue to share any other relevant benefits updates.

Furthermore, if employers have yet to switch to virtual open enrollment, but plan to, they must allow extra time to properly implement new technology or platforms in advance of open enrollment. Focusing on the employee experience can help keep employees engaged in the enrollment process and keep morale high. Benefits administration technology can help streamline decision-making and other processes, explain benefits and thoughtfully guide employees as they make the best choices for themselves and their dependents.

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4. Open Enrollment Should Be More Personalized and Interactive

Now more than ever, employees want to know that their employers care about them, and open enrollment isn't just a transaction. Everyone has unique personal needs and physical, mental or financial challenges brought on by or amplified by the pandemic. It's also essential for employers or benefits providers to make themselves available to quickly address any individual employee questions and help guide them through the process or their available options. This personalized touch can help increase benefits utilization.

Gamification is also proving to be a popular way to personalize open enrollment. Employees are ready for personalized help from tools or people to help guide them through the process and select the right benefits after a tough year. For example, employees may be interested in a benefits calculator to help decide which plan is best for them.

Conclusion

Although the 2020 open enrollment season presented considerable challenges, it also provided valuable lessons to engage and support employees better. Now's the time for employers to review these general lessons and their workforce's specific needs and wants. Start now to thoughtfully plan and communicate 2021 open enrollment to increase plan participation and combat turnover on the horizon potentially.

Contact us to learn more about additional open enrollment support, including enrollment guides, employee communication resources and more.