

Smaller Employers Add a Personal Touch to Well-Being Benefits

Big employers can offer more perks, but small businesses can personalize offerings

By Lin Gensing-Pophal

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Job seekers may be paying attention to how large and small employers are addressing workers' well-being needs during the coronavirus pandemic.

Small employers, such as those with 100 or fewer workers, may be able to offer benefits with greater personalization, such as targeted worksite wellness programs that reflect the fitness activities employees say they'd prefer. Larger employers, however, may be able to offer more services and resources that support employees' physical and emotional well-being. Having more employees may also allow big organizations more opportunities to provide flexible scheduling.

Employees are likely to consider the value of benefits they receive, whether from a small or large employer, as they mull returning to the workplace and future employment prospects.

Renewed Interest in Wellness

A survey by consultancy Willis Towers Watson, fielded April 20-24, asked 816 large employers representing 12 million U.S. employees how COVID-19 was affecting health benefits. Almost half (47 percent) of respondents said they were enhancing health care benefits (<https://www.willistowerswatson.com/en-US/Insights/2020/05/2020-covid-19-benefits-survey>), with 45 percent broadening well-being programs, and 33 percent planning changes in paid time off (PTO) or vacation benefits.

Large employers "are making it easier for employees to get help across all aspects of the well-being spectrum," said Regina Ihrke, senior director and well-being leader, North America, at Willis Towers Watson.

Big companies aren't considering or making these changes without good reason. The survey found that 64 percent of respondents believe COVID-19 will have a moderate to large effect on employees' sense of well-being—and more than 77 percent are offering or expanding access to virtual mental health services.

Among large employers, Johnson & Johnson, for instance, is taking steps to address the health and safety of its 132,000 employees in the wake of COVID-19. Here are some of the steps the company is taking:

- Allowing those who need to take care of a child or family member and are unable to work to take up to 10 business days off with full base pay.
- Assisting employees working from home with digital tools to support mindfulness; resilience; physical and mental health (e.g., suggestions for setting up an ergonomic home office); nutrition tips; virtual health experiences (e.g., meditation, home workouts); and workshops and training focused on mental health, resilience in times of crisis and managing emotions.

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Bigger Isn't Necessarily Better

But while larger employers may have more resources at their disposal, they may not have the same opportunity to connect with employees and understand their needs and to offer the personalized benefits and experiences that workers may value.

The pandemic "will increase the allure of small companies for employees who previously were drawn to larger corporations," said Dan Edmonson, founder and CEO of Dronegenuity, a Hudson, Mass.-based company that arranges aerial drone services for businesses. The company employs 11 full-time workers.

Traditionally, one of the perceived benefits of working for a large organization was stability, Edmonson said. COVID-19, though, "has shown that both small and large companies have been negatively affected by layoffs, furloughs or, at the very least, a reduction in hours. The safety of many jobs has been proven to be unreliable regardless of company size."

Smaller companies have an edge, he believes, in communicating with staff, understanding employee needs and having more flexibility in offering benefits. They can also better target programs and plans based on their employees and locations, Edmonson said.

For example, the COVID-19 pandemic is more severe in some locations than in others, so "different risk plans are needed for different locations, and this is far easier for smaller companies." As a result, he said, it's likely that "the typical benefits of startup culture will increase the demand for smaller companies."

But according to Kathy Harrington-Sullivan, a partner at the 24-employee law firm Barrett & Farahany in Atlanta, "it really depends on the employer rather than the size."

She explained, "Thanks to our managing partner and her interest in making this the best place to work that it can be, our benefits are amazing. Additionally, we have and have had for years the capacity and the technology to work entirely remotely, so it has been business as usual for us throughout the duration of the pandemic."

Right now, she noted, "the most important question on people's minds might be, 'Does this employer care about my health and continued well-being at work, and does the workspace and the employer's best practices reflect that?' "

Mindfulness Matters

When attracting and retaining employees during times of crisis, mindfulness matters, said Melodie Bond-Hillman, senior manager of human resources and administration at Simi Valley, Calif.-based XYPRO Technology Corp., a cybersecurity solutions company with 87 employees.

"Regardless of company size, the real key in attracting and retaining employees in this new environment is the ability on the part of the employer to demonstrate flexibility and stability," Bond-Hillman said. "The degree of flexibility can mean a lot of different things, including flexible hours, work from home arrangements, flexibility with benefits, PTO and sick policies."

It's important for employers to stay attuned to and aware of what matters most to employees, which could be easier for small companies to do, she explained.

As for helping employees feel safe in the workplace, "smaller companies, in some cases, will have a perceived advantage due to numbers and the ability to control office density more easily, minimizing risk to exposure," Bond-Hillman said.

While she acknowledges that a larger company may have the ability to put practices in place at an institutional level to reduce exposure to the virus, "a smaller company can listen to the voice of the employees more readily and address individual concerns more quickly, which could increase employee comfort levels," she noted.

"Rather than focusing on one aspect of employee benefit as a decision point," she explained, "employees will be considering their total package and experience when seeking employment because they will need to choose the best fit for their new normal."

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