

Prepare for Open Enrollment Challenges During a Difficult Year

Take steps to increase employees' engagement with their benefits

By Joanne Sammer

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The COVID-19 pandemic has led to millions of people working from home. With open enrollment for employee benefits coming up in the fall at most U.S. organizations, employers have an opportunity to reintroduce their benefit programs in ways that demonstrate how they can support workers in this unprecedented time.

"This year's annual enrollment may find employees paying more attention than in past years," said Betsy Woods Brooks, a principal with benefits consultants Buck in Stamford, Conn. She urged employers to make the most of this attention and educate employees about specific benefits programs, how they work and why the employer offers them, as well as how employees can leverage those programs to enhance their sense of security and overall well-being.

Employers can take several steps to maximize employee appreciation and engagement with their benefits. Although many employers will have to rely on virtual open-enrollment activities, they can still create compelling and educational events for employees and their families.

SHRM MEMBER-EXCLUSIVE RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Coronavirus and COVID-19 (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/communicable-diseases.aspx)

Consider Active Enrollment

Simply allowing employees to leave their benefit selections unchanged from the previous year may be easier from an administrative perspective, but it may not be the best approach in the current environment. "Rather than default to the prior year's selections, active enrollment requires employees to review each benefit (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/benefits/Pages/active-vs-passive-enrollment.aspx) and make unique selections for 2021," said Dani McCauley, a senior vice president with consultancy Aon Hewitt in Denver. "This can lead to higher benefit awareness."

Employers can enhance active enrollment by offering decision-support tools that help guide employees through their choices (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/benefits/Pages/does-AI-have-a-place-in-open-enrollment.aspx) based on their expected health care use, family status, income and other factors. "This can get employees to really consider their benefits, perhaps for the first time," McCauley said. Individual sessions between an employee and a benefits counselor, which have lost favor in an increasingly digital, self-service enrollment environment, could make a comeback if employers offer these one-on-one opportunities (video chat is an option) and make sure employees know about them.

[SHRM members-only toolkit: *Leveraging the Value of Employee Self-Service Portals* (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/leveraging-value-of-employee-self-service-portals.aspx)]

Encourage Questions

Answering questions from employees and their families during open enrollment can be an opportunity to improve satisfaction with the benefits program. "Questions help us understand how effective our enrollment communication has been and what we have not covered" in enough detail, said LoriAnn Penman, SHRM-SCP, director of human resources for TTC Inc., a technology firm with 130 employees based in Hampton, Va.

Employers should be prepared to address questions related to specific situations employees may be facing. For example, if employers are continuing benefits for furloughed employees, open enrollment is likely to bring pointed questions about the future of those benefits—not just from currently furloughed employees, but from employees concerned that they might face furlough in the future.

Similarly, "an employee with a partner or spouse who is not working is likely to have questions about their situation, and employers need a plan for how to answer those questions," said David Slavney, a partner with consultancy Mercer in St. Louis.

Employers can create curated content to address the issues employees might be facing, such as parents with school-age children needing help with child care referral services if schools do not fully reopen and dependent care flexible spending accounts.

Get Managers Involved

With many employees still working from home, front-line and middle managers may be contacting their departments and teams more now than when everyone was in the office. "Managers can be a reinforcing mechanism to encourage employees to use the open enrollment resources available to them," said Slavney.

As the chief HR officer at Epsilon Inc. in Asheville, N.C., Christine Taylor, SHRM-SCP, makes a point to reach out to the technology company's 92 employees ahead of open enrollment to see how they are feeling, what they like about their current benefits and what they would like to see done differently. "It's an opportunity to hear what people think, and they are not shy about giving feedback," she said. Be prepared to "talk about all aspects of benefits, and don't take anything for granted."

Taylor views these conversations as particularly important for 2021 plan-year enrollment because they provide employees with an opportunity to talk about the pandemic and how it has or might affect their families.

Plan Ahead

A virtual open enrollment must be tailored to the needs of the employer and its employees—and that requires planning. Penman is managing open enrollment for a health plan year that begins Dec. 1, but she won't know exactly how much health benefits will cost until late October or early November, when the company's broker provides that information.

Given the tight time frame for plan enrollment, Penman plans to hold a contest to encourage employees to complete enrollment materials by the deadline or earlier.

"We have prizes like gift cards or free lunches for the employee who gets their open enrollment completed first, as well as for the first team or department to complete it," she said. "This keeps people engaged, especially when they are working from different locations" or from home.

Penman must also prepare customized communication for a diverse workforce. For example, her company, TTC, employs a number of people from other countries who are in the U.S. on H-1B visas and may be unfamiliar with the U.S. health care and insurance systems. These employees will need basic information on what health insurance does and does not cover and possible out-of-pocket costs.

Don't Forget Print

No matter how much virtual support employers can provide, they should not forget the value of mailing printed materials to employees' homes. "Many employees like to review printed communication with family members and may not have a home printer," Bucks principal Brooks said.

Joanne Sammer is a New Jersey-based business and financial writer.

Related SHRM Resources:

SHRM's Open Enrollment Guide & Resources (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/benefits/Pages/Open-Enrollment-Benefits-Guide.aspx)

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