Benefits Insights

4 Lessons Learned From Open Enrollment During the Pandemic

There's no denying that the 2020 open enrollment season was unprecedented. It's challenging enough most years to engage and educate employees to actively make decisions about their health care and other employer-sponsored benefits, and the prevalence of remote and hybrid workplaces added another level of complexity to the enrollment season.

The pandemic encouraged employers to reimagine their open enrollment processes and try different tactics. This article discusses key findings and lessons from last year's open enrollment and how employers can best prepare for the 2021 season.

1. Employees Want—and Need—Holistic Benefits

As the name suggests, employee benefits should be designed to provide holistic support for employees. But, as was revealed as the pandemic evolved, the perks many employees want may not typically be available. These may include benefits or arrangements that began out of necessity due to the pandemic, such as telecommuting. Now, many employees expect at least some of these benefits to become permanent.

Employees may especially be expecting new benefits if very little changed 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, what do employees want? The following are some of the top benefits employees are looking for right now:

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

If unsure, employers should 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. The overall goal is to establish meaningful offerings and resources for current and prospective employees.

2. More Time Is Needed to Thoughtfully Plan and Promote Open Enrollment

The most successful open enrollment campaigns start engaging 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. Benefits mattered even more to employees, and that provides an opportunity for employers this year to start showcasing all the available perks for employees as soon as possible to thoughtfully engage and retain employees.

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Another reason employers have such a great opportunity is because of the massive wave of turnover expected by the end of 2021. Employers should prepare to 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. 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.

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 if Employees Are On-site or Remote

The pandemic undeniably shifted open enrollment efforts to go digital. 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 generally accepted virtual enrollment.

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 now for feedback on virtual enrollment components. Survey results can drive not just 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 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, it's important to allow extra time to properly implement new technology or platforms in advance of open enrollment. Focusing on 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 them and their dependents.

4. Open Enrollment Needs to 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 their own physical, mental or financial challenges brought on by or amplified by the pandemic. It's also important for employers or benefits providers to make themselves available to quickly address any individual employee questions and help guide them through the process or available options. This personalized touch can help increase benefits utilization.

Gamification is also proving popular as a way to personalize open enrollment. For example, employees may be interested in a benefits calculator to help decide which plan is best for them. 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.

Conclusion

Although the 2020 open enrollment season presented considerable challenges, it also provided valuable lessons on better engaging and supporting employees. Now's the time for employers to review these general trends and lessons along with the specific needs and wants of their current and prospective workforce. Start now to thoughtfully plan and communicate 2021 open enrollment to increase plan participation and help combat potential turnover on the horizon.

Reach out to Schiebel & Associates, LLC for additional open enrollment support, including enrollment guides, employee communication resources and more.