

Tips for a Successful Open Enrollment Period

By Art Brooks, BeneTrac

As another open enrollment period approaches, human resource managers have a lot of important decisions to make, including whether to stay with existing plans or consider the myriad of health insurance alternatives, as the cost of plans continues to go up. Next, HR must communicate and manage all of the changes. And, with healthcare reform, even more factors and questions come into play. How can HR managers make sure their next open enrollment is as headache-free as possible? Timing and technology can be key. This article will discuss these and other tips for managing the open enrollment process. First and foremost -- start planning.

Start soon and early

HR managers that are already feeling behind schedule on open enrollment may not want to hear this, but it's almost never too early to start planning when it comes to open enrollment. Many managers find success in reviewing their company's employee benefits early in the current year in preparation for the coming year. Staying with the current benefit package or going with something new should be a continual consideration, based on factors like price, employee feedback, and provider response to requests. Each company will have its own top-ranking criteria.

And the healthcare reform effects are...

Even though the structure and effects of healthcare reform continue to evolve, HR managers need to be on top of changes as they emerge. HR needs to ensure compliance with new requirements and educate employees on any aspects that will affect their benefits packages and expectations. HR should align early with an experienced broker and other good sources of information, such as Healthcare.gov, [The New York Times'](http://www.nytimes.com) [Healthcare Reform pages](#), and [The White House Healthcare Reform web page](#) to help in this area.

Assess the changing face and needs of your company

HR should also consider other pertinent factors. Has the composition of your workforce changed? Have their needs evolved? Is there a need to decrease costs? Should we instead offer a richer benefit package to be competitive in hiring and keeping good employees? Are the needs of our employees changing due to demographic changes? Is our employee population increasingly being made up of older employees or younger employees? Are they single or married? How can we help our employees improve their overall health? In determining many of the key factors, HR should consider polling employees electronically or via paper surveys regarding their needs.

Determine what options are available to meet your needs

After management has pulled together and assessed data on employees and dependents, deciding how soon to go to market to shop benefits is the next step. Many managers find that six months in advance is not too early to begin surveying the market. Ninety days is a good amount of time to allot for gathering quotes from various insurance carriers.

Another 90 days is needed to review and implement any plan changes. That really leaves only about a 90-day period during the year when HR has a respite from being involved in some part of planning for the next open enrollment.

Determine your top contenders

Upon determining the top criteria for benefits options, HR managers can assign a weight to each of the company's key factors for selecting a plan. HR can then rank each plan's ability to address each factor. For instance, first HR can rank the importance of each key factor, such as price or coverage, using a scale system. Then HR can rank each plan's ability to meet every factor using that same or a similar scale. Those plans that score the highest should become top contenders. A highly ranked "key factor" for the company, such as "price", multiplied by a plan's high ranking on delivering on that key factor, results in a high number ranking, illustrating that particular benefits plan is a good contender.

Look for technology to offer shortcuts in time-consuming tasks

Technology is becoming indispensable to decrease costs, save time, and increase accuracy. When technology is in place, it can provide the tools to review benefits for planning and fulfillment. It helps managers keep better track of information on what has been, and needs to be, done. It also lets them develop alerts to make sure nothing falls through the cracks. Technology enables thorough communication, allowing managers to methodically communicate with employees on a more targeted basis. Finally, technology can provide greater insight into employee demographics (including age, family size, elections) and help HR audit benefits plans.

Identify disparate systems that might work better together early

HR should take a look at the complete picture. In assessing payroll, benefits and other management systems, HR can see if information is being duplicated and can be better managed throughout the entire HR management process. Is information already in one system that can be used by another? Can deductions be streamlined and simplified with systems working more tightly together? Countless hours can be saved through tighter integration between technologies. If considering a single solution -- one that represents payroll, HR tools, and benefits, for instance -- HR should weigh each aspect of the technology to ensure that it will truly deliver the results needed in all of the categories.

Don't forget face-to-face

Technology can offer efficiencies to communicate, educate, and collect employee information, and it can provide enormous value. However, as society becomes more connected via email and social networks, HR risks becoming personally disconnected. Direct contact with the employee is invaluable. HR managers should create opportunities to get employees together for activities that introduce the open enrollment process and connect them with each other and the company. Consider open enrollment as a new opportunity to educate, reassure, and reconnect with the employees.

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