

Top Considerations for HR & Benefit Leaders in the Time of COVID-19

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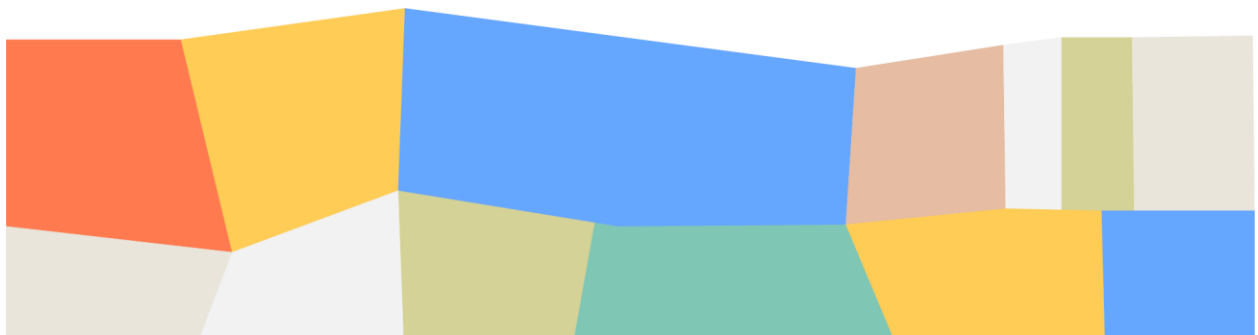


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Our Role as HR & Benefit Leaders

Employees can be our greatest asset. So as we all live through the time of COVID-19, it's critical that employees know that their health and the total well-being of their families are top priorities for our organizations. As such, we have to help them navigate through uncertainty by providing specific information and guidance about their benefits and wellness programs.

At the same time, this is truly new territory for all of us. In our roles as HR & benefit leaders, we work closely with all of the different players in the benefits ecosystem, including our health plans, our consultants and brokers, and other benefit suppliers. While we each have unique perspectives based on our role and business, there is one common overlap – everyone across the ecosystem is working together to make sure that everyone is well informed and taking all of the necessary steps to keep everyone as safe and healthy as possible.

Even under normal circumstances, work environments can be hectic. Now with the pandemic touching all facets of life, our employees (and, in many cases, we as individuals) are juggling things like school closings, working from home, restricted travel, social distancing and self-quarantining. We are all on a steep learning curve and our role as HR & benefit leaders will continue to expand as we embrace becoming strategic partners in our organizations.

This resource can provide you with guidance and considerations as you take on new, expanded roles and challenges.

Research and Answer the Call to Action

We're experiencing a tidal wave of news, regulations and recommendations. It can easily feel overwhelming as an employer, an employee, a parent or even as a child. Our role within human resources and benefits is to work diligently to provide our employees with the most up-to-date and reliable information. When researching what should be communicated to employees, it's important to use trusted sources, such as:

- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#)
- [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#)
- [Society for Human Resource Management \(SHRM\)](#)
- [Department of Labor \(DOL\)](#)
- [Occupational Safety and Health Administration \(OSHA\)](#).

During a SHRM webcast held on March 11, 2020, the CDC's deputy director for infectious diseases Dr. Jay C. Butler gave a call to action for employers to do all they can to help slow the spread of the virus. He urged employers to evaluate their sick-leave policies and work-from-home capabilities, along with communicating the importance of hand washing, social distancing and staying home when you're sick. We must use our ability to connect and influence employee behavior to answer this call to action.

Communicate and Educate

In early March, a public relations firm, Edelman, conducted an [online survey](#) from each of the 10 countries that had been hit the hardest at that time, including the U.S., U.K., Italy and Japan. Their survey confirmed that employees feel that the most credible source for information about COVID-19 is from their employers. The [2020 Edelman Trust Barometer](#) showed that employers were more trusted than government and other media outlets. The survey also shared that over half of the respondents (75 percent of U.S. employees) felt that their employer had a responsibility to protect them and make sure that they do not spread the coronavirus in their communities.

When creating your communication strategy during a crisis, it's important to remember these best practices:

- **Develop a regular cadence and format for your messages.** Everyone is being bombarded with so much information on the news, through social media and the constant influx of emails, so sending on a certain day of the week in a consistent format to communicate with your employees can foster trust and manage their expectations.
- **Think holistically about the whole person.** Consumer-centric communications should address all the different pillars of total well-being: physical health, mental and emotional health, financial health, and their social/purpose well-being. Your messages could be organized into these well-being categories with each week focusing on one of these areas, or touching on each area with highlights and benefits that support their total well-being.
- **Use a variety of channels.** Communicating through many different avenues is a gold standard in any marketing campaign or educational objective. At Benefitfocus, we utilize our Smart Moments capabilities to connect employees to their benefits through personalized messages sent via email, text messaging, and push notifications to our mobile app. However, we also share information through our company Yammer groups, videos, webinars and in our benefits platform, [Benefitfocus Benefitplace](#)™.

Exploring Your Benefits Package

As the constant state of uncertainty presents us with a variety of challenges, it's just as important to be well informed during this time as it is to be prepared. HR & benefit leaders should explore and study their current benefits package to make sure they know what is covered, along with what options are being presented by health plans in response to COVID-19.

A competitive and innovative benefits package should have the different areas of health, wealth and lifestyle incorporated into an overall consumer-centric design. Use these areas to explore your benefit options and identify any potential gaps.

Health

Your health plan and provisions serve as the best starting point in addressing the COVID-19 crisis. The first critical step is to understand what amendments are being made by your health plan as many insurance providers are waiving prior authorizations, copays and other cost-sharing agreements. It's recommended that benefit administrators reach out to their health plan team to confirm any new announcements and changes to plan coverage. These changes could have some big financial implications down the road and transparency is paramount.

When exploring your health plan, here are some key areas to clarify and communicate:

- **Virtual access to care.** Many providers are waiving costs to telehealth services until further notice, and this form of care should be highly encouraged to reduce unnecessary exposure and/or avoidance of care.
- **Pharmacy amendments** in regards to early refills, mail-order deliveries and expansion of 90-day supply scripts. Again, encouraging these practices can help limit unnecessary exposure while also making sure employees are adhering to prescribed treatments.
- **COVID-19 testing and the option of covering all treatment costs.** Most health plans are covering the costs of testing without charging back to self-funded employers; however, if the health plan decides to cover all costs for treatment of the coronavirus for their fully-insured groups, the self-funded employers have the option to opt-out. This is an important item to discuss with your consultants and/or health plans because approving an amendment for COVID-19 treatment to be covered differently than other illnesses in your plan provisions could place the contract with your stop-loss carrier at risk and the potential for those claims to be denied if they exceed the threshold. Employers should always seek guidance from their compliance team and consultants when making any changes to their current plan designs or provisions.

Wealth

One of the foundational pillars of total well-being is financial wellness. Yet, due to the immense turmoil the pandemic has caused in the global economy, many people in our country are experiencing a financial impact that hits closer to home.

During this period of instability in our economy, HR & benefits leaders are being challenged to provide financial support and resources for employees. When evaluating your options around financial wellness, here are some major areas to review:

- **401(k) retirement savings plan and the recently enacted CARES Act.** Employers and plan administrators should be reaching out to their retirement vendors to confirm if any action is required to comply with the new legislation. The CARES Act provisions address relief for those paying back loans, waiving required minimum distributions for 2020, allowing coronavirus-related withdrawals without penalty and doubling the current plan's loan limits. Employees may be tempted to take advantage of accessing their retirement savings; however, this can put their long-term financial future at risk due to a short-term financial uncertainty.
- **A short-term loan benefit.** These can serve as a financial safety net when employees are hit with unexpected expenses. From medical to self-quarantine expenses and paying for childcare now that schools are closed, the opportunity to get a low cost loan can help employees avoid borrowing against their 401(k) or taking out a high interest loan on a credit card.
- **A financial wellness solution.** Employees need guidance and advice from the experts to navigate all of the financial questions. As HR & benefit leaders, we should be leaning on our partners in this area rather than trying to become personal financial counselors. A financial wellness solution that offers coaching and education with spending, saving, borrowing and planning can help provide that guidance to employees.
- **A student loan refinancing solution.** This can offer the opportunity to consolidate outstanding student loans into one loan with a competitively lower interest rate. There is a large segment of our population struggling with student loan debt and employers can offer alternative options that may improve their employees' current financial standing.

Lifestyle

COVID-19 has disrupted every aspect of our everyday lives and the uncertainty of when things will get better continues to fuel anxiety and stress. Our objective is to give employees the knowledge and tools they need to protect their mental well-being, manage their finances and prevent any damaging ripple effects of negative coping skills.

When assessing your lifestyle offerings, here are some important areas to explore:

- **Mental health support solutions** like an employee assistance program and behavioral health services. For more information, see our Benefitfocus resource: [COVID-19 & Mental Health: Measures to Protect Employees' Well-Being](#).

- **Caregiver support benefits** to provide assistance to employees that are trying to navigate caregiving during a global pandemic. For more information, see our Benefitfocus resource: [COVID-19: How Caregiving Benefits Can Make a Difference](#).
- **Identity theft protection benefits** to help safeguard your employees from those who look to prey upon the fears and vulnerabilities of others during a crisis.
- **Wellness programs** can provide a great avenue to support your employees' lifestyle with healthy habits and resources. Many of these providers offer self-guided workshops, online fitness programs, mindfulness activities, and much more. For more information, see our Benefitfocus resource: [Keeping Employee Motivated in the Confines of Quarantine](#).
- **Concierge benefits** like a membership for grocery delivery services during a time of stay-at-home orders and self-quarantines.

Proactive Conversations with Your Consultants and Brokers

Your partners at broker and consultant firms are constantly monitoring the impacts of COVID-19 to provide the best resources to support and guide you. Many firms have even created COVID-19 specific resource pages, advisory teams and newsletters to keep their communications up-to-date and relevant for their clients.

Here are some proactive conversation starters for the upcoming meetings with your consultants and brokers:

- How is COVID-19 impacting my financial projections for the rest of 2020?
- What plan amendments and changes are being implemented by my health plan carrier?
- Do you recommend any plan design changes or off-cycle enrollments this plan year?
- Do you feel that COVID-19 will initiate more carve-out services or consolidated services with carriers going into next year?
- How does the current situation influence upcoming open enrollment planning?
- Are we staying in compliance with all of the new regulations and legislation (i.e. Families First Response Act, the CARES Act, etc)?

Additional Employer Support Resources

During this time of uncertainty, Benefitfocus is committed to helping the benefits community by providing unique insight, best practices and resources for human resource strategy, employee well-being and internal communications.

Here are additional ways Benefitfocus is supporting the benefits community:

[Business Resilience Webcast Series](#)

A webcast series where subject matter experts and guest speakers discuss business continuity strategies and share best practices to inform and support the benefits community in response to the pandemic. All of the webcasts can be accessed on-demand [here](#).

Community Resource Center

Resources, templates and a peer forum to help Benefitfocus clients navigate the impact of difficult business decisions during unprecedented times.

[Benefitplace.com](#)

A consumer platform featuring a comprehensive catalog of products, including individual health plans and discounted voluntary benefits that separated employees can access to protect themselves and their families for life.

About Benefitfocus

Benefitfocus (NASDAQ: BNFT) unifies the entire U.S. benefits industry on a single technology platform to protect consumers for life. Our powerful cloud-based software, data-driven insights and thoughtfully-designed services enable employers, insurance brokers, health plans and suppliers to simplify the complexity of benefits administration and deliver health, wealth, property and lifestyle products through a world-class benefits experience. Learn more at www.benefitfocus.com, [LinkedIn](#) and [Twitter](#).