Colonial Life℠

Making benefits count.

Benefiting the Bottom Line

How a Strong Benefits Communication and Education Strategy Helps Drive Business

Benefits at Work Series

A Colonial Life White Paper

Spring 2009

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Executive Summary

Many companies are not in positions, either financially or competitively, to make a major transformation to their benefits plans. And not every company needs to. But there are some relatively easy and practical things employers can do to strengthen the value of their benefits plans and grow their human capital investments.

The roles benefits communication and education play are often overlooked when talking about strengthening benefits plans. Effectively communicating the value of the total benefits package to employees is critical for organizations to maximize their programs as a competitive advantage in terms of attracting new workers and retaining the best talent. In a research study conducted by Watson Wyatt Worldwide, employees gave higher marks to employers who provided fewer benefits but explained them well, than to those employers who provided a richer array of benefits employees did not understand.[1]

According to the Society for Human Resource Management's Job Satisfaction Survey, benefits are the second-most important job satisfaction factor for employees, after job security.[2] Another survey of SHRM members reports more than 90 percent of employers feel it is important to their business that employees understand and appreciate the value of their benefits, yet only 21 percent say their employees have a good understanding of their benefits, and nearly 5 percent think their employees know nothing at all about their benefits.[3]

This white paper discusses how companies can use a strong benefits communication and education strategy to help employees better understand and appreciate their benefits package, ultimately leading to improved morale among their workforce, increased productivity in the workplace and a reduction of overall staff turnover. In particular, the paper examines the evolving delivery of benefits communication and education, how companies can easily and cost-effectively implement programs to provide the necessary information and education for employees, as well as the results companies can expect to achieve from successful initiatives.

More Communication Helps Employees Understand, Better Appreciate Benefits

More Communication Helps Employees Understand, Better Appreciate Benefits

Regardless of the economic environment, organizations are constantly challenged to help employees understand and appreciate the benefits they receive. According to recent research by Charlton Consulting Group, only 5 percent of human resources and benefits executives believe employees have a full level of understanding and appreciation for the value of their total benefits package.[4] To meet this challenge head-on, employers need to develop a more proactive benefits communication and education strategy. This, in turn, can produce residual corporate payoffs in the form of a more motivated, engaged and productive workforce — ultimately helping drive bottom-line business results.

Benefits communication helps employees understand what they need and better appreciate what they have. Employers need an ongoing strategy that delivers the right information — in an easy-to-understand format — when and how employees want to receive it. The days of the one-shot, "big-envelope" approach to benefits communication and education have ended.

With the trend toward consumer-driven benefits plans, employees have a more vested interest in the choices they make. At the same time, they want communication to be simple and easy to understand. When employees understand their benefits, it enables them to make more informed decisions about their personal and family needs and helps drive satisfaction in the workplace.

According to recent research by Colonial Life & Accident Insurance Company, employers say it is particularly important for employees to understand how best to use their benefits. Employers also feel the following areas are key to helping workers develop a full understanding of their benefits plans:

- Recognizing their unique insurance needs.
- Learning insurance terms, concepts and what is covered and not covered.
- Maintaining good health and productivity in the workplace.[5]

Employers need an ongoing strategy that delivers the right information — in an easy-to-understand format — when and how employees want to receive it. The days of the one-shot, "big-envelope" approach to benefits communication and education have ended.

Other Benefits Communication Drivers Exist Beyond a Tough Economy

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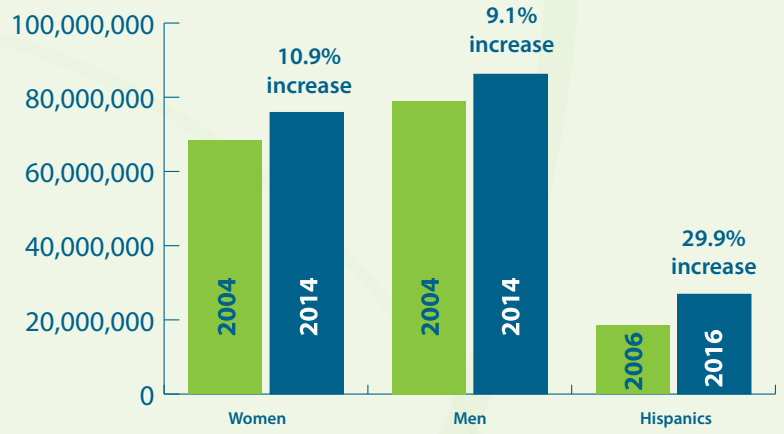
A bad economy with all its baggage is an obvious driver that compels companies to improve their benefits communication and education, but it is not the only catalyst. HR executives have started to face a number of other challenging trends in the workplace that demand a departure from the traditional methods of communicating benefits. Other significant drivers include a dramatic change in workforce demographics, the consumer-driven movement, a proliferation of technology and the largest contingent of workers in history starting to prepare for retirement.

Changing Workforce Demographics

Projected labor growth will be dramatically affected by the aging of the baby-boom generation (people born between 1946 and 1964). However, Generation Y is growing up and entering the workforce at a time when the marketplace is starting to experience this major demographic shift. Born between 1981 and 1999 and numbering nearly 81 million strong, Generation Y makes up the largest generation in U.S. history — outnumbering even the proverbial Baby Boomers. Generation Y is one of the most education-oriented generations in history, and one that has been raised in a point-and-click technology world.

Changing Workforce Demographics



(Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, "BLS Releases 2004-14 Employment Projections," Press Release, USDL 05-2276, December 7, 2005)

In addition, the number of working women is expected to be nearly 11 percent greater in 2014 than it was in 2004, more than the approximate 9 percent growth projected for men.[6] Driven by higher birth rates and increased immigration, the number of Hispanics in the work force is also expected to rise, reaching 26.9 million in the next seven years.[7] To respond to the unique needs and expectations of each of these emerging workforce segments, companies will not only need to adapt their benefits packages, but they will also need to adjust the way in which they communicate them.

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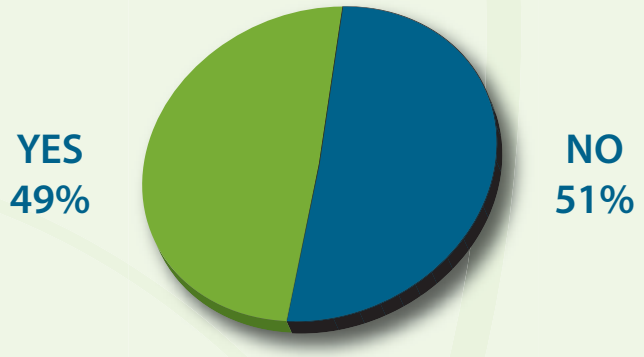
Consumer-Driven Insurance

Companies have come a long way in making benefits more flexible. In turn, they have asked employees to make their own decisions about what benefits they need. But to make an informed decision about benefits, employees first need to understand them. Because employees are asked to fund more benefits through "consumer-driven" programs, HR executives should treat them like *consumers*. That means providing them with the proper information sources and better access to those resources. Employers especially expect employees to take a more active role in their health care decisions, but that misfires if employees do not get the message. Take, for example, the fact that half of working Americans with health insurance (51 percent) recently surveyed in a joint Harris Interactive and Colonial Life poll say they do not have a clear understanding of what their health insurance covers for medical expenses related to cancer treatment.[8]

Half of Employees Don't Know What Their Health Insurance Covers

Do you have a clear understanding of what your health insurance covers for cancer treatment?



(Source: "Harris Interactive and Colonial Life & Accident Insurance Company survey, July 31-Aug. 4, 2008)

Technology

Using today's technology has become a little too convenient. The proliferation of the Internet and its related connectivity technology, such as PDAs and smart phones, has changed everything, creating greater efficiencies and a new approach to administering and communicating benefits at the worksite. Many employers have embraced web-based, self-service programs as their main tools for communicating. While these programs do an excellent job of speeding the enrollment process and recording real-time decision-making for employees, they do little to help them make *informed* decisions. Technology should not be a substitute for face-to-face and ongoing communications. Employees still want the opportunity to interact with benefits professionals for more personal, in-depth consultation.[9]

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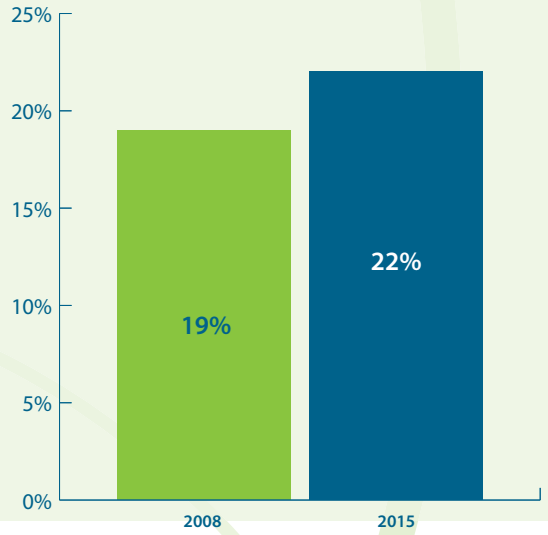
Retirement Preparedness

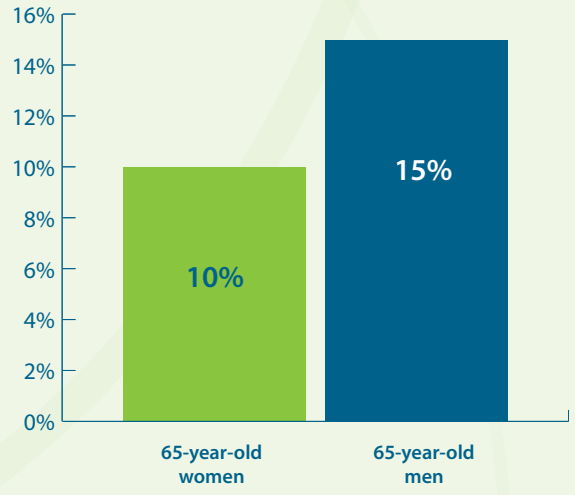
In the next seven years, the percentage of individuals over age 62 will rise from 19 percent of the workforce to more than 22 percent as the baby-boom generation reaches retirement age, according to Census Bureau projections.[10] Nationwide, the percentage of men and women actively working drops sharply after age 62, leveling off to 15 percent of men and 10 percent of women by age 65, meaning a sizable percentage of today's workforce will be "aging out" of the labor market by 2015, according to the Department of Labor.[11] Boomers, numbering around 78 million[12], began working when companies relied on employer-funded, one-size-fits-all benefits packages. They, like others in the workforce today, have had to become more active in making their own benefits decisions. It is important to keep in mind that their benefits focus has also changed and, at this time in their lives, they are most likely more interested in benefits associated with retirement planning, work-life balance, life insurance, critical illness, etc.

62-Year-Olds as Percent of Workforce



(Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, "The aging of the workforce," testimony of Vice Chairman Donald L. Kohn, U.S. Senate, February 28, 2007)

Aging Out of Workforce By 2015



(Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, "The aging of the workforce," testimony of Vice Chairman Donald L. Kohn, U.S. Senate, February 28, 2007)

Corporate Reality Creates Barriers to Benefits Communication

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Developing and implementing the best and most effective benefits communication and education methods to reach today's diverse employee population is a challenge for employers, regardless of size and industry. The challenge becomes especially difficult when employees are not actively engaged in the process from the onset.

Regardless of how the business landscape changes, companies need to stay grounded in the basic principles of communication — relevance and convenience — in order to be successful. As simple as this concept sounds, the reality of corporate business today can create barriers that threaten effective benefits communication and education. The following are the most prevalent threats:

Regardless of how the business landscape changes, companies need to stay grounded in the basic principles of communication — relevance and convenience — in order to be successful.

- **Cost.** Taking at look at the number of potential employee touchpoints during the year, one of the biggest problems with making benefits communication more effective is cost. During open enrollment, a typical enrollment session could last from 15 to 30 minutes or more for each employee. Throughout the year, new-hire orientations and life-event changes could potentially happen every day. Having people available year-round to talk to employees is an expense most employers think they cannot afford.
- **Internal resources needed for administration.** It is no secret that HR staffs work with limited resources. Most are looking for hassle-free product offerings, enrollment and claims management. They want benefits programs that do not add to the current administrative burden they are already experiencing. Companies often see activities related to benefits communication and education as soft and unnecessary, taking HR staff — and employees — away from productive work time.
- **Complexity of the benefits landscape.** Companies are moving to integrate benefits packages, offering traditional employer-sponsored benefits layered with new offerings through voluntary products. This approach gives employers much more robust benefits plans and, at the same time, delivers the choice employees now crave. Nearly 650,000 companies in the United States already sponsor at least one voluntary benefit, allowing 82 million American workers to access these benefits through the workplace.[13] However, if not administered properly, many times the integration of products, vendors, billing, claims, etc., creates a complex benefits environment that overwhelms HR staffs with limited resources.
- **Geographically dispersed employee groups.** Having employees in dispersed locations, as well as those who do not work in an office, is of great concern for employers, especially as the size of the company increases. Companies may view having dispersed locations as too impractical to facilitate more personal benefits communication and education. From a global company's perspective, it is difficult to make time for insurance carriers to meet with these employees. There may also be some additional trepidation regarding a carrier's ability to handle multiple languages associated with a company's global workforce.
- **Employer apathy.** One of the worst mistakes an employer can make is inadequately gauging employees' attitudes and satisfaction. The last thing an employer wants to convey is apathy. Unfortunately, there are companies that consider benefits a "necessary evil" — more of a means to an end to drive business results. Simply put, these types of employers have created a take-it-or-leave-it corporate culture with no frills attached.

Today, industry leaders in benefits communication and education have removed these barriers. They have adopted a number of successful, yet cost-effective, strategies and tactics that are offered to the employer and are easy to implement with little effort on the part of HR departments.

Industry-Leading Benefits Providers Hold Keys to Successful Communication

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A good benefits partner can relieve companies of the communication responsibility, helping them avoid additional costs incurred through either the HR department or by subcontracting enrollment help, while providing a service that employees greatly appreciate. Some benefits communication partners or third-party enrollment companies charge fees (either lump-sum or per employee) for this service, and some do not charge fees but are compensated through commissions on the products sold, for example.

Before the first employee is ever enrolled, a successful benefits communication partner should recommend the best ways to convey benefits information and enroll employees by taking advantage of the following industry-leading techniques:

Today's benefits communication and education involves more than just developing a message and delivering it. It is about creating participation — an integral part of any highly successful communication program.

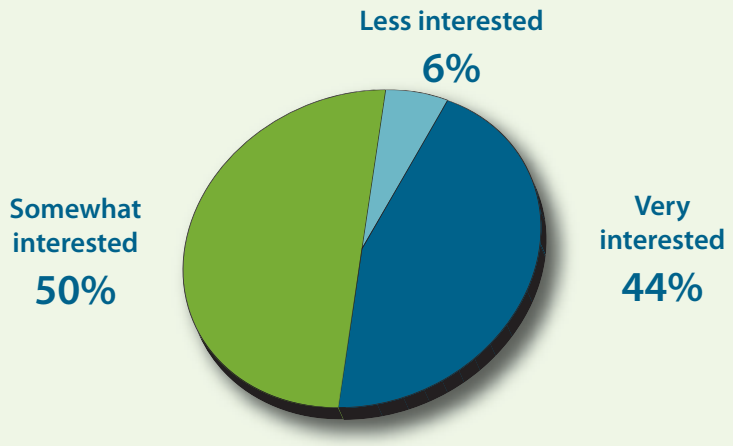
Interactivity

As benefits decision-making continues to shift more toward employees, workers have become increasingly eager for more information and tools to maximize their benefits investments. They want more advice and counsel — more best-practice ideas on which to base their decisions.

Today's benefits communication and education involves more than just developing a message and delivering it. It is about creating participation — an integral part of any highly successful communication program. It is imperative to get employees involved by challenging them to think and engage. The use of tools such as workbooks and on-screen needs analysis helps breed true engagement and participation. And, employers support these tools.

Proof in point: According to Colonial Life research conducted among its current customer base, 94 percent of employers were somewhat interested (50 percent) to very interested (44 percent) in gaining access to resources to help educate employees about benefits. Online resources and printed materials (benefits booklets, enrollment guides, etc.) garnered the most interest.[14]

Employer Interest in Resources to Educate Employees



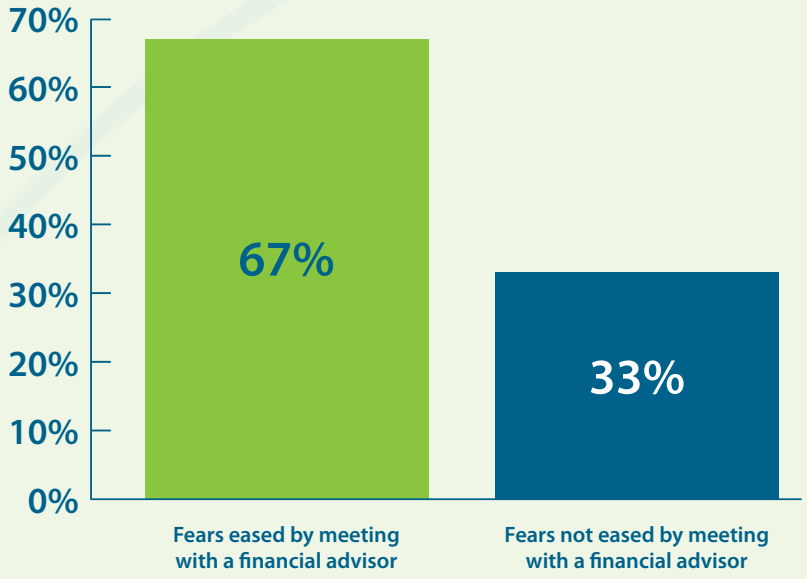
(Source: "Target Model and Larger Case Research: Breakout for Benefits Communication and Education," Colonial Life, July 2008)

One-to-One Support

A one-size-fits-all approach to benefits communication and education does not work any longer. It is unproductive to think that something as complex as insurance can be effectively communicated relying totally on technology and "self-education."

According to analysis from LIMRA's "Consumer Views on the Fall of 2008" study, perhaps most compelling is how far a little one-to-one guidance goes. In the wake of today's economic crisis, for the few people who had contact with a financial advisor (15 percent), two-thirds of them had their concerns eased.[15] Having access to a trained benefits specialist who can talk about insurance options, answer questions, clarify product features and help uncover a family's most important needs proves invaluable for employees making personal benefits decisions. Sometimes they just need to hear a "voice of reason" to calm feelings of confusion and frustration.

A Little One-to-One Guidance Goes a Long Way



(Source: "Consumer Views on the Fall of 2008," LIMRA, 2008)

One-to-one interactions where tools are used that personalize the benefits decision-making experience are most effective. For example, conducting an individual needs analysis or using statistics about the incidence of death and disability based on age and gender enhances decision-making. This type of one-to-one communication involves addressing the soft needs — helping employees understand all the terminology and choices while giving them confidence that they are making good decisions for their families. Real satisfaction is created here.

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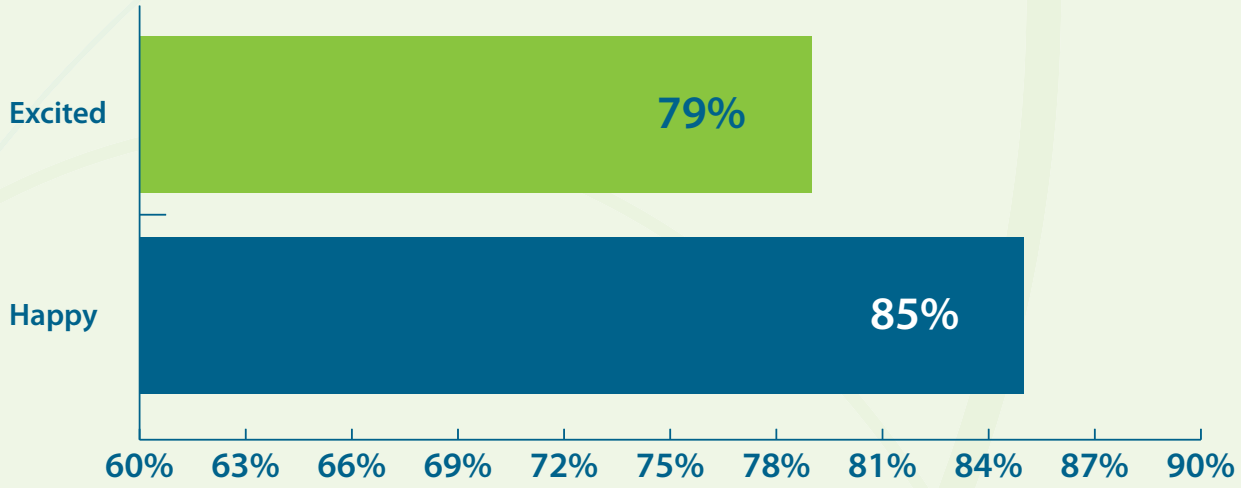
Convenience

Benefits communicators' greatest success comes when they keep communication simple and keep industry jargon to a minimum. Employees must be able to understand the communication and relate to it in terms of their cultural background, including language, family, social values, traditions, attitudes and beliefs. For example, companies with Hispanic workers must make information more convenient to those employees by offering Spanish translations and Spanish-speaking benefits communicators.

Providing additional resources that make benefits information more accessible and convenient is well worth it for employers. When employees feel their employer gives them all the resources needed to make informed decisions, 85 percent and 79 percent feel happy and excited respectively, according to a recent study on employee benefits enrollment.[16]

Employee Feelings About Benefits Education
When employer provides adequate resources for informed decisions



(Source: 2008 Employee Benefits Enrollment Study, MetLife, 2008)

Employers are also realizing the value of providing more easily accessible tools to help employees evaluate and estimate their needs — not just at annual enrollment but throughout the year. The use of corporate portals has become increasingly popular, giving workers easy, 24/7 access to a wide range of web-based benefits information they can use year-round at their convenience.

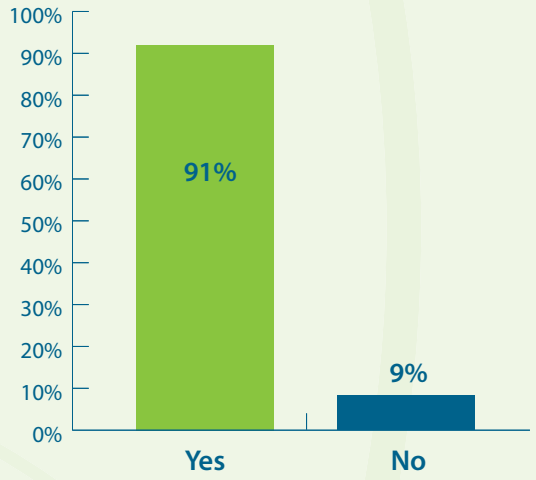
Multiple Employee Touch Points

A variety of opportunities exist to reach employees — both in the workplace and at home — when it comes to benefits communication and education, from pre-enrollment promotions to one-on-one advisory sessions, group meetings, online self-service portals and call centers.

Recent research by Colonial Life indicates that employers can start a good foundation in benefits communication and education using the following methods:

- **One-to-one meetings**
  91 percent of employers said having one-to-one meetings significantly improves employees' understanding of their benefits — but only 58 percent are using them.
- **Group meetings**
  80 percent use employee group meetings to explain their benefits.
- **Internet or self-enroll**
  40-44 percent have employees enroll for benefits on their own or using Internet methods.[17]

Do One-to-One Meetings Significantly Improve Benefits Understanding?



(Source: Colonial Life, Society for Human Resource Management National Conference Survey, June 2008)

However, as stated previously, employers are showing a strong interest in supplementing their main efforts with other online resources, printed benefits booklets, printed enrollment guides and other communication methods that help get their messages across to employees.

It is important to get the message out to the family decision makers who are, many times, people other than the employee, such as spouses. For example, companies may use a direct mail piece to communicate open enrollment deadlines that triggers a family discussion on changes to current benefits choices. Employers must repeat their messages — to all their audiences — and do it often.

As younger generations begin to enter the workplace, employers must keep in mind this group's preferences for how it wants to get information. The message does not need to change, for the most part, but the delivery mechanism does. Employers can make simple concepts stand out by using video, audio and social media, and repurposing materials with new headlines, themes and updated colors. They also can incorporate more consumer-oriented content that uses multimedia interactive tools.

Social media can come in the form of blogs, forums and podcasts. The proliferation of social media has successfully crossed generational boundaries, so this tool should not be limited to just younger workers. Employees do not have to be tech-savvy to use these tools and, more importantly, they can be implemented without a lot of resources from IT.

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Engage Throughout the Employment Life Cycle

Employees can be like moving targets. Throughout the year, companies deal with new hires, executive promotions and retirements. Employers must keep in mind that even though they deliver the benefits message once, people's lives change, and employees will hear a message differently based on their needs at any given moment.

Therefore, benefits communication and education is a year-round project. For example, health and welfare benefits have become increasingly driven by life events. Employees need to have a two-way line of communication open with their employers regarding their benefits plans as they get married, have children, prepare for retirement and, finally, begin their retirement.

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How to Bridge the Benefits Communication Gap

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Employees are an organization's most important asset. The ability for HR and benefits executives to provide clear, simple and focused benefits communications will bridge the knowledge gap and help educate employees about the value that comes from their benefits plans. However, with companies looking to streamline their business through reduced staffs and cost-cutting measures, this is sometimes easier said than done.

Many providers offer benefits communication and education at no additional cost to employers as part of their package of voluntary insurance programs. The real advantage comes from those providers that offer a benefits counselor who will meet individually with each employee and review *all* benefits — not just the ones offered by that particular vendor. In this respect, the benefits counselor can explain to the employee the features of major medical and dental insurance, retirement plans, vacation and all other benefits programs that may be offered by the employer, including any benefits offered through the voluntary provider.

This approach is not about telling employees what to do.
It is about showing employees how their benefits work together and guiding them to make decisions that are best for them and their families.

A strong benefits communication and education program not only provides financial savings to employers, but also saves time for their HR departments. When looking for a benefits communication partner, companies should evaluate providers based on the following criteria:

1. **Strong partnership.** The most successful benefits providers work with companies using a consultative approach to develop a business case around their benefits plans. Employers need to see vendors as part of their HR team, as opposed to another provider of a commoditized product. The ability for the enrollment group and the company's HR directors to work as a team is crucial.

2. **Customized communications.** Effective programs work when benefits communication is employee-friendly. This approach is not about telling employees what to do. It is about showing employees how their benefits work together and guiding them to make decisions that are best for them and their families. Communication materials should be top-notch, very attractive and easy to understand. Well-produced materials help employees feel comfortable that they are working with a professional, high-quality company.

3. **Nationwide enrollment capabilities**. Vendors with a nationwide network of professional benefits counselors who take full advantage of automation and the use of technology are in the best position to coordinate enrollment across employers' multiple locations. Specifically, enrollment technology should provide the flexibility that employees need and the control that HR managers require. Leading-edge enrollment technology allows employees to make benefits elections during one-to-one sessions with a benefits representative, co-browse over the Internet and telephone with a benefits representative or self-enroll on their own. This approach ensures all employees have the same information and are well-trained on the company's benefits program. It also provides the consistency in communication employers expect. Through an online reporting dashboard, the latest enrollment technology can monitor an employer's enrollment process, providing daily enrollment updates on who is enrolling, who is not and details on elections made each day. It can also offer flexible options for custom data feeds for the benefits carriers. These capabilities provide optimum ease of administration and give the employer access to the information and forms they need.

Enrollment technology should provide the flexibility that employees need and the control that HR managers require.

4. **Industry expertise and best practices**. Employers should look for partners that provide a versatile product portfolio, industry-leading benefits communication, financial strength, a proven history and a foundation of best practices across a number of industries. This type of benefits partner brings a wide and deep base of knowledge learned through the course of millions of customer engagements. It is best positioned to understand industry nuances and then tailor communication and education programs to specifically address individual company needs.

With the right partner and enrollment strategy, employers can expect to realize the following key business and competitive advantages when they implement a strong benefits communication and education program:

- Decreased turnover
- Enhanced recruiting
- Increased enrollments
- More engaged, loyal employees
- Improved productivity
- Reduced benefits administration

Identify and Implement Long-Term Benefits Strategies Now

Identify and Implement Long-Term Benefits Strategies Now

Employers and benefits communicators will need to work together more than ever to try to "connect the dots" for their employees. The lasting effects of the Wall Street debacle and the current down economy, thrown together with the continuation of rising health care costs and a new administration, will shape the workplace and employee benefits.

In a sluggish economy, companies tend to hold on to knee-jerk, belt-tightening measures longer than necessary, waiting for business to return to normal. Now is the time to identify and implement long-term benefits strategies that address the changing dynamics of the workplace. HR executives, in turn, should work closely with their corporate management teams to determine where their companies are going and what type of activities, from a benefits perspective, they should be undertaking to accomplish those objectives. Organizations should understand that adaptability will be key moving forward. Once they understand the needs of their diverse — yet adaptable — workforces, they can focus on what it will take to be successful tomorrow.

A variety of research has shown that HR and benefits executives firmly believe there are a lack of understanding and a low level of appreciation among employees when it comes to their benefits packages. This presents a tremendous opportunity for companies to develop a strong benefits communication channel that delivers personalized information, education and guidance through multiple employee touchpoints.

Simply put: The effectiveness of benefits communication and education determines value, more so than the depth and breadth of the benefits package itself.

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Benefits
Communication Success

Case Study A

Company

A regional hotel chain with eight locations grew to 32 locations through acquisitions. Different benefits programs from the acquired hotels had to be consolidated into one common plan for all locations.

Number of Employees

3,000

Goal

Increase participation in the core benefits program so employees have adequate coverage despite significant increases in health insurance premiums.

Challenge

Enroll seven different core benefits products in 32 locations across 15 states. Many of the core benefits had participation limits that had to be met.

Solution

The voluntary benefits carrier provided a team of professional benefits counselors who conducted group meetings and individual one-to-one sessions with every employee. They educated employees on all of the hotel's core benefits, explained why health insurance premiums had increased, and demonstrated how voluntary benefits could help offset any increases in their out-of-pocket medical expenses.

Result

In a post-enrollment survey, plan administrators rated the enrollment the best ever. Participation in core benefit products increased between 15 and 35 percent over prior years. During the enrollment, as participation numbers in the voluntary life and disability products were improving, the company's insurance broker was able to renegotiate extended rate guarantees on these products because of higher participation levels.

Case Study B

Company

National medical design engineering firm

Number of Employees

2,500 in 19 locations

Goal

Increase employee satisfaction and understanding about benefits and benefits choices.

Situation

The human resources director was frustrated by low employee satisfaction ratings from an internal survey of the company's benefits program. He knew his company offered a relatively rich package compared to the competition, but it wasn't valued by the employees. There was also a sense of growing frustration with the company's employee benefits broker.

Solution

- Conducted an off-cycle enrollment in June that offered new voluntary benefits and a vision plan. The enrollment consisted of one-to-one meetings between employees and benefits counselors to fully review the entire benefits package.
- Conducted the usual open enrollment in October with another round of one-to-one meetings with benefits counselors. The meetings enrolled employees in their core and voluntary benefits selections and provided printed benefits statements to each employee. All enrollment data was returned electronically to the employer.

Result

All but 20 employees met face-to-face with a benefits counselor. **The post-enrollment survey showed a 21 percent increase in employee satisfaction and in understanding of benefits.** The company highlighted written employee comments from the survey that expressed how much they appreciated the benefits counselors. Relationships between the company's human resources department and the employee benefits broker improved.

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[1] Watson Wyatt Worldwide, WorkUSA Survey, 2005.

[2] 2008 Job Satisfaction Survey, Society of Human Resource Management, 2008

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[8] Harris Interactive and Colonial Life & Accident Insurance Company survey, July 31-Aug. 4, 2008

[9] "Issues in Worksite Marketing," Richard Hekeler, Ph.D., LIMRA International, Inc., Feb. 2003

[10] Bureau of Labor Statistics, cited in Vice Chairman Donald L. Kohn's testimony on *The aging workforce* before the Special Committee on Aging, U.S. Senate, Feb. 28, 2007. As noted: This projection combines the latest estimates of population from the Bureau of the Census for 2006 (http://www.census.gov/popest/estimates.php) with the Census Bureau's projections of population growth by age through 2015 (http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/usinterimproj).

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About Colonial Life

Colonial Life & Accident Insurance Company is a market leader in providing insurance benefits for employees and their families through their workplace, along with individual benefits education, advanced yet simple-to-use enrollment technology and quality personal service.

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