

5 Tips for Improving Employee Communications Around Open Enrollment

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For many organizations, open enrollment can be a bit of a hectic time. As an employer, you may feel overwhelmed as you balance your workload while responding to questions, issues, and demands about benefit plans. Employees may experience stress as they seek to understand their options and choose a comprehensive and affordable plan.

In fact, if you've recently completed your open enrollment period, you may be tempted to skip through this article simply to avoid hearing that term! However, it's never too early to start preparing for how to make your next open enrollment period more successful.

In addition, with technology and communication preferences changing seemingly faster than ever before, it's critical that organizations stay up-to-speed on all of their available options.

To get through any Open Enrollment period successfully, communication is a critical component. Here are five suggestions that may help your organization achieve its goals:

- **Understand workforce benefit needs:**

This step really requires preparing for open enrollment many months in advance. You may want to conduct employee surveys that seek to gauge their satisfaction with current options (including plan designs, carriers, etc.). At times, we may put too much value in our assumptions as to what benefits employees truly care about. However, changing demographics in the workforce may be significantly altering what the majority of your employees find valuable. Through simple employee surveys, you may be able to develop a more clear vision of which benefits are most important to your workforce.

Depending on your company's size, you may also have access to plan utilization data. By combining that type of information with the results of your employee surveys, you may be able to identify benefits that employees are unaware of desired benefits that are currently available to them. That, in turn, could help shape your future benefit communication strategies.

- **Create customize benefits information resources:**

Instead of taking a one-size-fits-all approach, you may want to customize your benefits resources to the life stages of your employees.

Technology is actually making this easier than ever to do so. For example, you may choose to create “bundles” of your employee benefit plans. This approach enables you to group together plan designs and supporting materials that will appeal to different groups of employees.

In addition, you may want to develop personas as you plan your communication strategy. Here is a brief overview of how to go through this process:

- Develop a variety of personas that describe typical employee sub-populations. As an example, you may identify that you have older employees who are preparing for retirement. On the other hand, you may have employees that are recent additions to the workforce.
 - Jot down what are the typical needs, pain points, issues, and questions that each of those groups may have regarding benefits
 - Develop tailored communications that help each separate group best understand and take advantage of specific benefit offerings.
- **Start talking about enrollment early:**

While this is not always possible, you want to aim to provide plan details several weeks (even months) before the enrollment deadline. If possible, share this information in multiple channels. Yes, it may be easier and faster to send all enrollment promotions via email. However, to capture the attention of your employees, you may want to incorporate printed materials as well. This could be a small, simple postcard... or perhaps a poster that is displayed in the office kitchen and/or break-room.

Also, take the time to develop and deliver clear and simple benefits communication materials that make it easy for employees to understand their options. If your company is offering alternative solutions (such as Health Savings Accounts), you may consider sharing employee stories and case studies about the impact different types of benefits have had on their lives. These types of materials may help employees to be more open-minded when their actual open enrollment period comes around.

- **Don't be afraid to repeat information:**

While it's important to not overwhelm employees with HR communications, open enrollment is a time that may require a multi-touch, multi-channel communication effort. Plan to conduct lunch and learns, meetings, and seminars at different days and times. Also, utilize online technology to provide calculators, benefits education information, and online enrollment tools. Of course, depending on your company's size, one-on-one meetings may still be needed for employees that require personal guidance.



- **Utilize technology to share benefits and insurance information:**

Today, more and more employees are comfortable going online — whether through a PC, laptop, smartphone, or tablet — to access information. Take advantage of this by posting your benefits forms, summaries, and additional resources online in an employee portal. Not only does this give your organization more control over the content that is shared, but it may make it easier for employees to research their options outside of normal work hours.

In addition, you may want to prominently post links to carrier websites, “find a provider” web pages, and more within your employee intranet. By creating a centralized, online portal for open enrollment-related materials, you may save a tremendous amount of time throughout this period.

I hope that you find these tips helpful as your company seeks to utilize technology and communication strategies to achieve its goals during its next open enrollment period!

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For more tips on how your company may use technology and multi-channel communication strategies to achieve your HR and Benefits goals, please visit <http://CBGBenefits.com>.