



TIMES ARE CHANGING

Experts share practical advice on how to improve the enrollment process despite an uncertain future.

By Alan Goforth | Illustration by Sjoerd van Leeuwen

Brokers often prepare for open enrollment as if it were a 100-meter dash, only to find they would have been better off training for a marathon. “One thing I always remind employers and brokers alike is that because benefits are so complicated, we can’t focus on them just once a year,” says Kim Buckey, vice president of client services for DirectPath. “It’s a year-round process. We need to put tools, mechanisms and systems in place where there is a good mix of push and pull communications throughout the year. If you have those systems in place and make use of them during the year, open enrollment is going to be much less painful.”

Despite careful preparation, open enrollment brings a number of pain points, even in the best of times. The ongoing pandemic has only added more of them.

“One of the biggest challenges is that we are trying to serve a large, diverse audience with something that is very complex,” Buckey says. “Add to that constantly changing regulations about what we can and cannot provide and how these various plans can be communicated, and it’s a challenge.”

Brian Uhlig, senior partner, employee benefits, for Alera Group agrees.

“First and foremost, the carriers don’t make it easy—especially for smaller clients—by not releasing renewal information far enough in advance to allow sufficient time to work closely with the client

on any changes or the communications that would be required for those changes,” he says. “Additionally, there is the aspect of today’s multigenerational workforce and all of the differences employees have when it comes to communication preferences.

“Older generations might still prefer to have an actual brochure to read and review, while younger generations do not want to read anything. They prefer videos or possibly even an artificial intelligence app that helps walk them through the benefits and allows questions to be asked through a chat-box feature. The challenges lie in the timing of renewals and the multiple generations that inhabit today’s workforce.”

The pandemic triggered a number of changes in 2020 that will continue to be felt this year.

“COVID forced an almost unilateral shift to online open enrollment,” says Bart Sheeler, CEO and cofounder of Benezon. “Much of this is likely to remain online, so the challenge will be in advanced messaging and preparation prior to open enrollment to leverage opportunities, streamline the process for employers, and maximize engagement participation with employees.”

Although many of these changes may prove to be positive in the long run, they add to the short-term complexity for brokers.

“In light of the pandemic, what we are starting to see across our book of business is higher-than-normal increases in the renewals from prior years,” Uhlig says. “And we believe that much of that is due to some of the catchup on claims that were avoided during the lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, as well as the lack of employees seeking preventive care, whether that be through normal annual checkups, cancer screenings or other regular visits with their physicians.”

These impacts are beginning to show up in higher emergency department utilization and inpatient admissions.

“The other component driving these trends is an almost universal increase in specialty drug utilization that is starting to get close to 50% of overall pharmacy spend for many of our clients,” Uhlig says. “What we are finding with employers is that due to the challenging environment of both hiring and retaining employees, most are absorbing these increases and not passing them on to employees.”

Providing relief

Every pain point may present an opportunity, but easing that pain is easier said than done. Industry leaders shared their recommendations to not only make open enrollment smoother this fall, but also to set the stage for a successful 2022.

Ease clients' pain. Remember that open enrollment can be as stressful for clients as it is for brokers. Understanding client needs must come before delivering solutions.

“Technology is rapidly changing how we interact within the health care and insurance industries,” says John Kelly, founder and CEO of NexBen. “Most consumers have a smartphone, and they are used to checking it regularly to gather information and communicate frequently with family, friends and even businesses. Consumers

VOLUNTARY ON THE RISE

Employers offering voluntary benefits increased **27%** last year

ID theft saw a **44%** increase in participation over the previous year

Enrollment in accident coverage increased **50%**

Source: Aon

don't think twice about purchasing anything online, from cars to running shoes. Why can't buying health insurance online be like buying a car online?

“The face of the health insurance consumer is changing, and they are demanding a more streamlined and efficient way to use technology to purchase goods and consume services. These consumer needs are a driving force for change to occur in health insurance, too. Brokers must understand this and adapt to these changes so they can continue to provide value to their clients.”

Lean in to technology. Technology that has become essential during the pandemic will continue to boost efficiency and convenience in the future.

“We learned during the pandemic that, when forced to use technology, we can step up to the plate,” says Bobbi Kloss, director of human capital management services for Benefit Advisors Network. “Advisors need to use the same technologies and processes that they are suggesting for their clients: Be present on Zoom or other meeting platforms, and use whiteboards and other creative tools.”

Keep the personal touch. An emphasis on technology should never come at the expense of the personal touch, though.

“There is still tremendous value in having benefit counselors participate in the enrollment process,” Uhlig says. “If they are easily accessible to employees, they can help them enroll in plans that are best suited for their individual needs. Personal touch is all about providing options for all different types of needs. One person's personal touch is not another's. The key is multichannel communications to meet the needs of all different individuals.”

Address the fear. Some employees would rather go to the dentist than think about benefits.

“Understand that benefits are scary for many people,” Buckey says. “Anything we can do to simplify the process, make benefits more appealing and

ON HEALTH CARE COVERAGE...

55% of employees say their health care is too costly

54% have skipped or postponed getting health care during the pandemic

65% would sacrifice other benefits and perks for better health care

Source: OneMedical

BROKER BUSINESS

90%
of brokerage firms say their clients will want **more insurance options**

57%
say **technology** will play a very important role for their groups this year

88%
expect to conduct at least 25% of open enrollment activities **online**

Source: Ease

help employees understand how the decisions they make are going to affect not just their wallets, but their overall well-being, is critically important. Brokers have a key role in helping the employer put together a package that meets both employer and employee needs, and then changing hats and helping employees understand what's available and why they should care about it."

Plan ahead. Some benefits remain the same year in and year out, so there is no reason to put off planning ahead for them.

"Start working on the communication pieces for those aspects that you know will not change in order to get them done and 'cleaned up' before the renewal process even starts," Uhlig says. "When it comes to being able to communicate with all of the different generations, you should be working with marketing specialists or benefit communications specialists to help create clear and concise open enrollment and new-hire guides.

There are dozens of benefit communication apps that are available to help with this process, as well."

Emphasize voluntary benefits. Working from home around their spouses, children and pets has many employees rethinking their benefits mix.

"Because of COVID, they may be questioning whether their coverage is still adequate and wondering what their disability coverage looks like," Buckey says. "They are asking, 'What else is available to protect my family if I am in the hospital for three weeks?'"

"I have had a number of clients this year tell me they are adding hospital indemnity and critical illness in particular, and they are also expanding their mental health programs. The nice thing about voluntary benefits is that because they are voluntary and paid after taxes, the enrollment period doesn't necessarily have to coincide with open enrollment. If someone is late to the game and would like to add them, they can do so later."

Challenge clients' thinking. "More and more employers need to push their brokers and consultants for different ideas if they are continuing to remain in a traditional, fully bundled health insurance plan," Uhlig says. "Employers who are working with forward-thinking brokers and consultants are seeing improved plan designs, improved employee satisfaction and lower annual increases."

Educate and engage. "Education and engagement are key to driving successful outcomes," Sheeler says. "Technology permits communication and engagement to happen in one centralized place, both during open enrollment and then throughout the year as the benefits are needed or as questions arise at the member level. Put all the information in one place and make it convenient, and adoption rates will increase."

Play to strengths. Never underestimate the value that a good broker can bring to an organization.

"Brokers' expertise is really put on display during open enrollment," Kelly says. "Brokers have a unique opportunity to enhance their relationships with their clients by tuning into the pain points these HR teams are facing. HR professionals need more hours in the day, better benefit offerings for their employee base and ways to control costs.

"Brokers can lessen the load for their HR partners by incorporating technology solutions into their portfolio of options. They need to weed through the various technology options available and then determine what will provide the most value and be the least disruptive to all of their HR partners."

In short, perhaps the best way for brokers to ease their own pain during open enrollment is to first look for ways to do the same for the partners they work with and the clients they serve.

"Times are changing," Kelly says. "Now's the time to embrace new solutions that can make the jobs of both the brokers and their clients easier." ↺