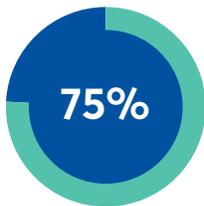


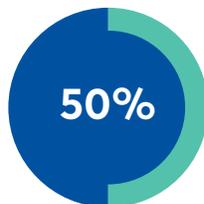
BECOME A GREAT PLACE TO WORK WITH BENEFITS YOUR EMPLOYEES LOVE

Two HR Leaders Share Strategies for Gaining a Competitive Advantage with Compelling Benefits

Retain and recruit top talent with comprehensive benefits:



are more likely to stay because of a company's benefits



would leave for a job with better benefits

At a time when unemployment is low and competition to attract and retain top talent is intense, the need for impressive employee benefits has never been higher.

Research shows that a company's benefits package can convince new recruits to move over, while motivating current employees to stay. About 75 percent of employees are more likely to stay in a job because of its benefits program (Willis Towers Watson, 2017), and 50 percent of adults would leave their current job for better benefits (You, 2018).

Gina Goodrich, Senior Manager of Benefits at Aptio, and Elizabeth Napolitano, Executive Vice President for People and Culture at Accolade, recently shared their insights on the topic during a web seminar hosted by Employee Benefit News and sponsored by Accolade.

As they presented their learnings from several years in the human resources industry, Goodrich and Napolitano revealed four pillars that make up a successful benefits strategy: intentionality, breadth, communication, and assessment.

The Best Strategies Start with the Best Intentions

Creating a suite of benefits with specific goals in mind is what sound business strategy is all about. All too often, though, employers unconsciously lapse into a "throw everything against the wall and see what sticks" approach. From a strategic perspective, everybody on the HR and People team needs to be thoughtful, well-rounded and intentional about how to build a comprehensive benefits program.

For Napolitano, being intentional starts with "thinking about your current employees, and then also about what you hear in the market and from candidates." That's no small challenge when considering the needs and desires of a demographically and geographically dispersed workforce and labor market.

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Gina Goodrich,
Senior Manager of
Benefits at Apptio



In her experience, the key to intentionally designing benefits is personalization. HR leaders must consider the value that employees place on a given benefit, as well as how easy it is for them to use.

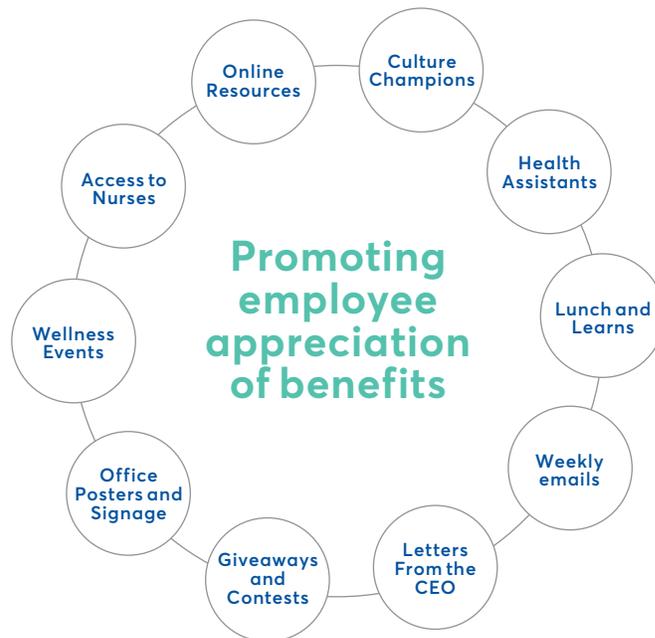
To illustrate how to link a company's HR strategy to personalization of benefits, Napolitano pointed to Accolade's goal of recruiting and retaining female information technology engineers in the Seattle area. Accolade evaluated benefits programs and options that this particular group may value and decided to enhance its parental benefits — a move she characterized as "one of the most popular things I've done for a subset of our population."

Benefits to Meet Diverse Employee Needs

When making program changes and adding new benefits, it's important to be sensitive to potential perceived fairness issues. If you introduce a new benefit that positively impacts one employee demographic, be ready to hear from other groups asking "What about us?" For example, Napolitano received feedback from older employees after Accolade improved its parental leave policies — even though the company offered a generous paid family leave policy in addition to its maternity and paternity benefits.

To remain mindful of all employees' needs, "We look at data all the time; we're looking at demographics and usage of existing benefits," Napolitano said. That consideration requires looking beyond the scope of core healthcare benefits to consider contextual issues in all dimensions of an employee's life.

Apptio offers benefits that promote social well-being like team outings, volunteerism, and pet care affordability. These offerings, collectively, have been a huge attraction for employees. Accolade also promotes whole-person well-being by giving employees an annual paid volunteer day, scheduling group-based community service activities, and providing access to financial coaching. Both companies prioritize flexibility options so employees can accommodate childcare needs, among other pressing demands on their personal time.



Connect through Clear Communication

The greater the depth and breadth of one's benefits strategy, the more critical it is to communicate with employees about the offerings that can address their needs. During a webinar poll, attendees identified their greatest benefits challenge. The top response: communicating to employees about all available benefits.

"If employees don't know about or understand their benefits, it doesn't matter if you have the greatest program," Goodrich said. "So, we try to keep employees engaged through ongoing communication."

Communication channels include traditional approaches like newsletters, at-home mailers, the company's intranet and lunch-and-learns. Recently, Apptio launched Accolade Total Benefits, a personalized health and benefits solution that integrates all benefits in one convenient platform. It connects employees and covered family members to all available programs and on-demand support from Accolade's highly trained Health Assistants and Nurses.

The resource has helped Apptio "bridge the communication gap that wasn't being met through internal company channels," Goodrich said. Through Accolade Total Benefits, employees and their family members can now "view all our programs, and have a Health Assistant available at their fingertips to help them understand or navigate the complex healthcare system."

That guidance can range from steering people away from unnecessary ER visits to pointing out relevant benefits they might not have previously known about. For example, when an employee off-handedly mentioned their teenager was heading to college, the Accolade Health Assistant let them know about Apptio's computer discount benefit, which helped the employee send their child to school with a new laptop.

Accolade Total Benefits also helps solve certain HR challenges by providing trusted guidance and expertise. Employees may feel less reluctant to connect and confer with independent advisers about personally sensitive health issues, rather than discussing with their employer's personnel. Benefits staff members may feel equally relieved because Health Assistants can respond to routine employee questions about their benefit options.

Make an Honest Assessment

Connecting employees to their benefits does not guarantee they will take full advantage of them. This is where the final pillar of an effective benefit strategy comes into play: assessment.

"One of our company goals at Aptio is to continuously improve, and we've incorporated that objective into our benefits strategy, right from the beginning," Goodrich said. "The more data you have in advance, the better chance you have in successfully rolling out new benefits."

When assessing employee benefit preferences, actions generally speaks louder than words — are employees actually using and appreciating the available resources? Other valuable data sources include employee surveys, industry benchmark data from benefits brokers and consultants, and insights shared in your professional network.

At Aptio, input from such sources led to the introduction of a suite of voluntary benefits, including pet insurance, group legal, merchandise discount programs and identity theft protection. Such benefits don't require a deep pocketbook on the part of the employer, and are "perceived as really valuable by employees," Goodrich said.

So how does one judge the success or failure of a benefits initiative in light of the broader HR strategy? Some assessment criteria are easier to measure than others. Financial criteria, such as cost savings, are generally straightforward, but establishing realistic financial goals can involve subjective judgments. Other success metrics, like employee turnover rates and productivity improvement, can be tricky because multiple factors beyond the realm of benefits influence them.

Another important source of feedback is recruiters. If job prospects balk at seeking employment with you because of your benefits package, a recruiter will generally know it, Goodrich suggests.

Sometimes employee feedback garnered in the assessment process can reveal opportunities for improvement that were never on the HR team's radar screen. And inevitably, some benefits assessments lead to disappointing results. But when it's time to pivot to a new approach, you need to be transparent about it with employees and hope for a better outcome with a revised strategy.

"The biggest 'a ha moment' I had a few years ago," Napolitano said, "is that benefits enrollment doesn't always have to be tied to the calendar year." She acknowledged that an annual employee survey corresponding to a healthcare benefits enrollment cycle can lock you into a calendar-year-based strategy for all benefits. The rigidity of such a one-size-fits-all approach can prevent timely deployment of new benefits that keep your employees happy and make your company a great place to work.

"As an HR leader, you can never reach a point of being in maintenance mode," Napolitano added. "It amazes me how much constantly evolves in this space."

To learn more about what it takes to design a benefits strategy that gives your organization a competitive edge, [CLICK HERE](#) to listen to the webinar in its entirety.