



Striking a Healthy Balance

What Employees Really Want Out Of
Workplace Benefits Communication



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Digital technology has transformed most aspects of employees' day-to-day lives. And while it's easy to think technology has displaced live communication, the reality is, technology acts as a complement to human interaction.

Web and video conferencing are joining audio calls and in-person meetings as workplace fixtures; team projects are hashed out over email, instant messaging and collaboration applications. Unsurprisingly, internal business operations are moving in a similar direction. Innovations in mobile and cloud solutions are forcing employers to reimagine performance management, new employee onboarding and professional development – and workplace benefits programs are no exception.

Technology, however, is only one variable instigating rapid change in employees' benefits communication preferences. As workforce demographics shift – with three to four distinct generations of workers coexisting in some organizations – there is no one-size-fits-all model that will match every employee's needs. In order to be successful, HR and benefits managers today must have a keen understanding of what their employees expect when it comes to benefits, health and wellness program communication.

West's Health Advocate Solutions, the nation's leading healthcare advocacy and assistance company, spoke with full-time U.S. employees and human resources (HR) leaders to get a sense of the current state of workplace benefits communication and which channels employees prefer using for different benefits scenarios.

Key findings from the research include:

- **41%** of employees' noted their top complaint about their employers' benefits programs is that communication is too infrequent
- While employees like having the option of using digital communication channels in certain benefits scenarios, **the majority prefer live-person conversations**

Internal and External Benefits Communication Matters

Many organizations offer a diverse range of benefits that employees must navigate. The majority of full-time workers have access to at least medical, dental, vision, retirement and life insurance benefits, among others. From an administrative perspective, 42 percent of HR leaders partner with a minimum of four to six benefits vendors to maintain these programs.

Faced with such a wide range of distinct benefits and policy options, organizations need a communication plan that mitigates the complexity of healthcare rather than adds to it – while meeting the needs and preferences of their workforce.

High-Touch vs. High-Tech

Employees' health and wellness communication preferences are by no means static. Workers' interaction channels of choice differ depending on the issue at hand, as well as demographic details such as age or gender.

But in this era of smartphones, tablets, wearable devices, and apps for every service, it's important to recognize that people still value the human, expert touch.

Employees' Preferred Communication Channels, Ranked

	Healthcare cost and administrative info	Physical wellness benefits	Personal/emotional wellness issues	Managing chronic conditions
1	Directly with a person by phone - 73%	Website/online portal - 71%	Directly with a person by phone - 71%	Directly with a person by phone - 66%
2	Website/online portal - 69%	Directly with a person by phone - 62%	In-person conversation - 65%	Website/online portal - 63%
3	In-person conversation - 56%	In-person conversation - 56%	Website/online portal - 60%	In-person conversation - 61%

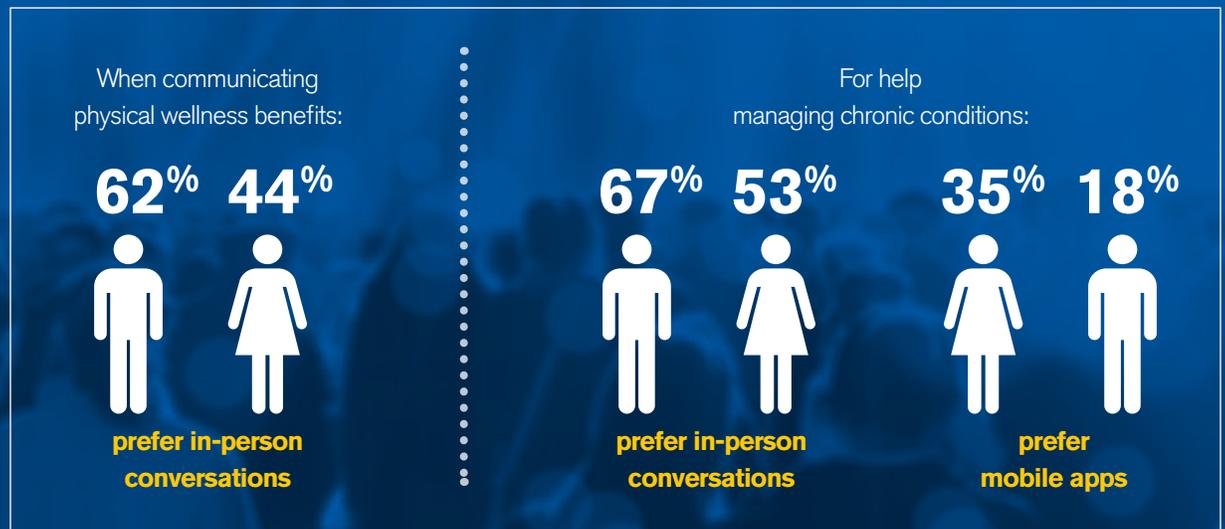
Whether they're inquiring about healthcare claims or looking for support managing chronic conditions, employees consistently prefer talking with a live benefits professional by phone rather than using self-service websites. In many instances, live phone and in-person conversations trump other sophisticated digital tools including mobile apps, email and instant messaging.

Note, however, that in each communication scenario, employees' preferences for web-based interaction doesn't trail too far behind their bias for speaking directly with a person, whether by phone or in-person. What employees crave most of all is not one particular medium, but multiple options – and the autonomy to choose the right platform to fit their needs. This perception of choice also lets employees feel that they can customize their experience, rather than be pigeonholed into a generic customer category.

How Age and Gender Affect Benefits Communication Habits

Employee communication preferences are nothing if not nuanced. How we choose to share information about our health benefits and wellness needs varies not only by scenario, but also across personal details.

Men and women, for example, fall on separate sides of the “high-tech vs. high-touch” debate:



Age also factors into employees’ communication biases. Contrary to what headlines and pop culture lead us to believe, Millennials (18-35 years old) prefer in-person interactions more than their Gen X (36-51 years old) and Baby Boomer (52-70 years old) colleagues – another reminder that tech can be a supplement, not a stand-in, for live support:

Generation	When communicating physical wellness benefits:	When communicating about emotional wellness benefits:	For help managing chronic conditions:
Millennials	61%	68%	66%
Generation X	40%	59%	49%
Baby Boomers	48%	52%	52%

41%

of employees report that their top complaint about their employers' benefits programs is that communication is too infrequent.

Heeding the Call for More Constant, Customized Interaction

Currently, there's a gap between how frequently HR managers say their staff receives benefits information and how often employees perceive these details are communicated to them. In fact, 41 percent of employees report that their top complaint about their employers' benefits programs is that communication is too infrequent.

Almost half of employees feel their employers communicate benefits and wellness information sporadically at best, either annually (likely during open enrollment), biannually or once when they were onboarded. HR and benefits managers, on the other hand, are almost twice as likely to say that they communicate benefits or wellness program details monthly, and seven times more likely to say this happens on a weekly basis.

Health and Benefits Communication Frequency According to...

	Employees	HR Managers
Annually, biannually or once during onboarding	47%	13%
Quarterly	27%	26%
Monthly	17%	31%
Weekly	4%	28%



More critically, the channels HR uses to convey benefits information don't always match with employees' personal preferences. Though employees lean toward live phone conversations and website portals for benefits communication, few organizations offer these options (9% and 26%, respectively). Instead, benefits program managers favor email, meetings and printed materials.



Part of employees' frustration with the frequency of their benefits communication may also stem from the channels HR and benefits departments rely on most. At any point in time, there are at least a handful of employees who miss out on companywide in-person benefits program meetings, or fail to catch emails that come through (especially if they're mass messages blasted across an organization).

The medium HR and benefits leaders use to share benefits information can also affect the quality of the message. For instance, flyers, brochures and group meetings are much more conducive to conveying general information rather than tailored details.

Forty percent of employees cite the lack of "communication personalized to my specific health needs" as another core flaw in their organizations' wellness initiatives. Interestingly, almost two-thirds (65%) of HR managers claim that their employees do receive personalized wellness information, suggesting that what business leaders consider "personalization" is not up to their staff's expectations. Accustomed to the increasingly individualized experience brands in retail, travel and hospitality are laser-focused on offering, employees expect more from their corporate benefits programs.

Measuring the Advantage of Third-Party Support

Third-party benefits support services – when employers offer them and staff know they exist – make benefits communication easier for HR departments and the employees they support.

Engaging an external benefits partner can go a long way toward augmenting HR teams' bandwidth, ensuring that the day-to-day of managing a benefits program doesn't come at the expense of consistent internal communication. Employees who have access to these services through their employers are more than twice as likely as those without to say they receive well-being or benefits communications on a monthly basis. Having a benefits partner also correlates with an organization's ability to offer more personalized benefits messaging and digital communication channel options. Seventy percent of HR managers with third-party benefits partners say their employees receive tailored wellness communication, compared to 56 percent of those without.

92%

of employees with third-party benefits support say their employer values their health and well-being, compared to 66 percent of those without.

With a benefits partner at their disposal, employees are also less likely to contact their insurers with benefits questions (28% vs. 50% of employees without similar resources). These workers benefit from the one-stop simplicity of connecting with a single partner for a range of resources, from estimating care costs to setting up test reminders and tracking personal health goals. When organizations invest in services that take the pain out of historically tedious health and insurance processes, they're really investing in their people: 92 percent of employees with third-party benefits support say their employer values their health and well-being, compared to 66 percent of those without.

Health and Benefits Communication Frequency According to...

	HR Managers with Outside Benefits Support	HR Managers without Outside Benefits Support
Employees receive benefits communications on a monthly basis	26%	11%
Employees receive tailored wellness communications	70%	56%

Conclusion

Despite employees' growing dependence on technology in their work and personal lives, most still value the human touch. When it comes to navigating the tricky, often sensitive nature of health and wellness benefits, the importance of interacting with another person – rather than a screen – cannot be understated.

In the realm of benefits communication, employees want their employers and service providers to meet them where they are. HR and other business leaders tasked with vetting new benefits vendors may be inclined to invest in digital-first options, but the people they support want something more personal.

HR and benefits teams aren't expected to tackle benefits and well-being program management alone. Third-party services are a welcome supplement to existing benefits initiatives, ensuring that employees' demands for frequent, customized communication (and a comprehensive set of communication options) are satisfied. Simply adopting these services, however, isn't enough to guarantee their efficacy. HR leaders should do more to educate their organizations about all that partners can offer in order to promote staff awareness and participation.

Though health and benefits technology, processes and vendors will inevitably continue to change, one important principle will stay constant: benefits program success starts with satisfied people. By more closely aligning well-being resources with employees' needs and preferences, HR leaders will find that the entire organization wins.



About West's Health Advocate Solutions

West's Health Advocate Solutions makes healthcare easier for over 11,500 organizations and their employees and members nationwide.

Our business solutions leverage a unique combination of personal, compassionate support from healthcare experts using powerful predictive medical data analytics and a proprietary technology platform including mobile solutions to engage people in their health and well-being.

Our members enjoy a best-in-class, personalized concierge service that addresses almost any clinical, administrative, wellness or behavioral health need. Our clients benefit from high levels of engagement, improved employee productivity and health, reduced medical costs and simultaneously simplifying and upgrading their health benefits offerings.

Methodology

Health Advocate's *Striking a Healthy Balance: What Employees Really Want Out Of Workplace Wellness Communication* study surveyed more than 500 full-time U.S. employees and 150 U.S. HR leaders about the state of their corporate benefits programs, how well-being and benefits information is communicated within their organizations, and how they prefer sharing and receiving benefits and wellness information. The survey was fielded online between August and September 2016.



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