

Administrator

Important news and updates from your benefits professionals

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Trends In Today's World

Alzheimer's Drug Approved

While early trials showed clinical benefits far from a cure, the FDA gave early conditional approval to a new drug that may help slow the cognitive decline caused by the disease. The drug, slated for availability in January under the brand name Leqembi, will sell for \$26,500 per year.

Powering Productivity

A unique new stationary bike desk, introduced at this year's consumer electronics show, uses the energy you generate by pedaling and converts it to charge your laptop or iPhone. An hour of cycling generates 75 watts of power accessible via USB ports. The charging bike is expected to sell for \$999 and will be available in June.

Apple and Diabetes

With one in ten Americans having Type 2 diabetes and many more considered prediabetic, it's no wonder Apple has already dedicated more than a decade of research to perfecting noninvasive and continuous blood glucose monitoring. At least two pharmaceutical firms offer patches that are inserted into the skin, but they must be replaced every

Winning Through Better Benefit Communication



One topic that keeps coming up at employee benefit conferences year after year is improving employee engagement – what employers can do to help employees better understand health benefits and use their plan to improve their overall well-being. With family coverage costing more than \$22,000 annually and surveys showing that more than a third of employees don't understand the benefits they've selected, it's a topic worthy of further consideration.

Begin with a checklist

Open enrollment is when employees get most of their benefit information, so why not consider adding a tool that will get members more involved in the selections they make. Adding a simple checklist will enable employees to check boxes as they go through the benefit selection process. Chances are they may be encouraged to question something they may otherwise have just brushed aside. Confirming that their providers are in-network, finding a new provider if needed, signing up for mail-order maintenance prescriptions and taking

steps to access a digital app if available are just a few items that many employees need to be educated on.

Take time to ask questions

As the plan year moves forward, why not create a brief survey designed to give you a better indication of what employees understand and what aspects of their health plan are most important to them.

- Did they read the information provided to them prior to open enrollment and was the information helpful?
- You might ask people to let you know how they prefer to receive benefits information, such as email, text, at an online portal or in-person sessions.
- What topics or available benefits would they like to know more about in order to be better prepared in the future?

Keep it simple and consistent

Keep your survey simple and remember that while HR specialists understand health plan terminology, a majority of plan members don't – especially those that are young. Whether you follow up monthly or more often, adopt a schedule you can execute. Identifying your topics in advance and focusing on one per broadcast should help boost engagement. You may want to vary your media based on member preferences. Asking for feedback from time to time will help you monitor progress and make improvements going forward.



States Drive Compliance Trends

A number of noted employment attorneys seem to agree that while federal compliance issues impacting employers seem to have slowed recently, there is no shortage of legislative trends coming from states. California, New York and Illinois seem to be leading the way on issues including pay transparency, paid leave, union organizing and more.

New **pay transparency laws** have come to the forefront in California, Washington, Rhode Island and New York, as an example. These laws, requiring employers to include salary range information in job postings, are intended to put an end to pay gaps and inequities going forward.

A new **Paid Leave for All Workers Act**, passed by Illinois on January 10th, will take effect in 2024. The law will require that employers annually provide covered employees with up to 40 hours of paid leave which can be used for any purpose.

Non-compete agreements between employers and employees are one issue being watched closely in Washington. If the FTC is able to enforce a proposed ban, these agreements could become a thing of the past. Finally, there is little doubt that the Biden Administration is doing all it can to encourage union membership, especially in the technology and food and beverage sectors.

Has Wellness Changed Forever?

From hybrid environments to mental health benefits, Covid-19 has changed the way everyone defines employee well-being. While some employers have adopted policies that yield greater flexibility and autonomy, others foster a culture of wellness in different ways. Regardless of which camp you're in, the following practices should make everyone happier and more productive.

Focus on what's important – As workforces become increasingly diverse, so do worker's needs. While help with child or elder care may be critical for some, it may be of no interest to others. Do the hard work needed to identify what benefits can have the biggest impact on the health of your covered group and focus your resources accordingly.

Don't overlook fitness – With obesity linked to hypertension, diabetes and other chronic illnesses, helping people get fit can save lives. While a free, on-site fitness center or access to a personal trainer may benefit a number of workers, no or low-cost access to mental health counseling or an on-site nurse practitioner may have even greater appeal.

Walk the walk – Just as a 4-day work week will not, on its own, transform an organization's culture, free gym memberships won't automatically lower everyone's blood sugar. Regardless of the programs you deem most appropriate, members will be happier and healthier when they are valued by their employer and inspired by managers who practice what they preach.

No Limit to Specialty Drug Prices



Even though pharmaceutical companies are being pressured to limit price increases on existing specialty drugs, new brand-name drugs continue to come on the market with higher-than-ever price tags. Previous price thresholds are being ignored time and again as newly launched drugs for cancer and other rare diseases are coming on the market at prices greater than \$20,000 per month.

According to an analysis conducted for the Wall Street Journal by an Ohio-based non-profit, the median starting price for a newly approved specialty drug nearly tripled between 2011 and 2022, rising from just over \$2,600 per patient per month to more than \$7,000.

Trends continued

two weeks. It will likely take several more years to add this capability to the Apple Watch, but testing has been ongoing for some time.

Recapturing Time

Data gathered by Microsoft shows that while most offices were empty during the pandemic, many employers doubled and even tripled their number of meetings in an effort to keep people engaged. Three years later, after learning that many group meetings were being held for no real reason, employers are reducing their number of meetings. In the process,

productivity and worker satisfaction are increasing.

Maternal Mortality Up

The National Center for Health Statistics reports that maternal death rates are higher in the U.S. than in any other high-income country, rising 78% from 2000 to 2020. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, cardiovascular conditions including pulmonary embolisms, uncontrolled bleeding and problems linked to hypertension are leading causes of higher pregnancy-related deaths.

Unlimited PTO

Even though research by the Society for Human Resource Management shows that only 6% of responding employers offer unlimited paid time off, Microsoft made what it calls "discretionary time off" effective earlier this year. Critics point to the significant percentage of employees who fail to take time off even when policies encourage it. Instead, many HR officers favor policies that stipulate a required minimum amount of time off even when unlimited PTO is available.

Tobacco and Your Bottom Line

Not only is cigarette smoking the leading cause of preventable death in the U.S., according to the CDC, but the costs incurred by businesses reach into the hundreds of billions of dollars each year. While increased absenteeism and lost productivity due to smoking-related illnesses come to mind quickly, higher property insurance premiums, higher cleaning costs and the liability risks associated with second-hand smoke also have a dramatic impact on costs.

Then there's the average \$8.00 expense incurred by individuals who smoke a pack per day. Over a lifetime, this translates to about \$250,000 not including future inflation or the medical expenses that often result from using tobacco. We all know quitting isn't easy but investing in a solution that can help employees quit certainly seems like a win-win.

How Smart Can Your Phone Get?

After a little more than 10 years, smartphones are being used to measure heart rate, screen for sleep apnea, assess people for concussions and more. When you realize that smartphone penetration by adults 65 and over has grown to more than 60% in the past decade, it's easy to understand why more than 350,000 digital health products are currently available in app stores.

From technology startups to giants such as Google, companies are working to find more health-related applications for the microphones, speakers and camera lenses built into leading smartphones. While some apps send data to the cloud, requiring patient consent, others avoid this step by processing data directly on the phone. Many applications will require years of fine tuning, but even today's smart phones have made people in every corner of the world far more comfortable with virtual care.



Discovering New Benefits

As employers continue their struggles to bring people back into the office, many are looking beyond traditional employee benefits to address a growing list of employee needs. One idea that could certainly help workers over the age of 40 is finding some way of helping those who have been serving as caregivers for a parent. This challenge is supported by a recent AARP study showing that more than half of employees between 40 and 49 years of age and more than a third who are 40 and older are caregivers for an adult.

In-House Counseling

Employers are also looking for ways to help employees address their mental health struggles. While some are offering subscriptions to online therapy sessions, others are going further and considering in-person, on-site counseling with therapists or life coaches. Privacy can be a concern depending on the workspace but as we know all too well, there are far more empty offices available than there once were. Not only are employers seeing helping workers with personal problems as well as work-related issues as increasingly important but some human resource officers believe bringing this service on-site could help overcome the stigma that has long been associated with therapy.

Workplace strategists predict that tomorrow's workforce will consist of many different age groups. If this is correct, adult daycare and mental health counseling may grow in importance along with other benefits designed to appeal to different stages of life.



HSAs Gain Momentum

A 2022 Voya Financial survey showed that Health Savings Accounts were used by nearly 34 million Americans, up from 32.5 million in 2021. Consultants attribute the increased interest to a growing awareness of the many benefits of these accounts and an added focus on personal finances created by the Covid-19 pandemic.

If legislation moving through Congress gains widespread support in 2024, the requirement of enrollment in a high deductible health plan and a preclusion that has long kept Medicare enrollees from funding an HSA could be eliminated. These changes could enable millions more to use this tax advantaged option to cover unforeseen medical expenses not only during their working years but in retirement as well.

Did You Know? New Ideas for Healthy Consumers

Salt, Sugar and Sandwiches

Nutritionists describe sandwiches, which nearly half of Americans often eat for lunch, as the leading source of salt and saturated fats in our diets. Researchers at major universities point out that sandwiches haven't always been this unhealthy. In fact, the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute says a typical turkey sandwich that contained about 320 calories in 1980 grew to include more than 800 calories in 2000.



How can you enjoy a good sandwich without subjecting yourself to the health risks associated with sodium and sugar? Consider the following...

- The white bread used for most submarine buns consists of carbohydrates from highly processed white flour. This quickly turns into sugar while the fiber contained in whole grain bread helps the system process carbs, avoiding spikes in blood sugar.
- Processed meats found at deli counters and grocery stores are loaded with sodium and preservatives while fresh chicken breast or fresh turkey is much healthier. Red meat fans will be much better off with sliced fresh steak or a burger rather than processed roast beef or salami.
- Believe it or not, even condiments such as ketchup and mustard are high in sugar content. Being higher in mono and polyunsaturated fats, mayonnaise carries a lower risk of heart disease. Add lettuce and tomato and your heart will benefit from the fiber and healthy nutrients.

Girls Who Walk



A growing number of working women, missing the face to face contact they enjoyed prior to the pandemic, are turning to walking as a way to combine low-tech exercise with no-cost social

interaction. The trend is growing as "Girls Who Walk" groups are forming in major cities throughout the country.

While fitness centers, gyms and offices were shuttered, a great number of individuals took up walking on their own. While the exercise and an opportunity to be outside in the fresh air provided a much needed break from computer screens and home-schooling, it did nothing for women anxious to socialize with friends or connect with co-workers.

Some groups have blossomed into communities by offering happy hours or social get-togethers at one another's homes. While everyone benefits from the exercise, the element driving the movement's success is the opportunity to connect and make new friends.

Note: This newsletter is not intended as a substitute for personal medical or employee benefits advice. Please consult your physician before making decisions that may impact your personal health. Talk to your benefits administrator before implementing strategies that may impact your organization's employee benefit objectives.



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