



The Importance of Providing Voluntary Dental Benefits in an Uncertain Economy

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The current economic climate means tough times for benefit brokers, advisors and employers alike. However, despite gloomy forecasting, the voluntary benefits market continues to be an arena that is growing. Faced with an uncertain economy, employers that once prided themselves on offering generous employee benefit plans are forced to consider cutting back on retiree healthcare, 401k contribution matches and contributions to medical plans. As a result, employers are looking to voluntary benefits to add value to their employees' lives at minimal cost to their organization as a way to buffer some of the cutbacks.

Voluntary dental benefits offer significant value and remain one of the most requested benefits. As employers face continued increases in their medical costs, voluntary benefits provide a mechanism to maintain high levels of employee satisfaction while also serving as a mitigating factor to the rise of medical cost shifting.

According to the 2008 Workplace Forecast by the Society for Human Resource Management, nearly 60% of employees chose benefits as "very important" in a list of the most important factors in employee satisfaction. With that in mind, attitudes from employers toward benefits have moved from "my employees may be interested" to "my employees need them." Employers forced to cut health benefits can now offer their employees the dental benefits they need on a voluntary basis without breaking their budgets.

Offering the right plans can save employers money while allowing their employees to stretch their dollars and take care of their families at the same time. When offering voluntary benefits, the key to conveying the value to employers and employees is emphasizing the return on investment. Brokers and advisors are spending more time educating employers and human resource executives on the value of voluntary products.

For example, many dental plans now offer high-risk employees, such as those who are pregnant or diabetic, extra preventive dental care at no added cost, in addition to regular check-ups. Women in their second or third trimester of pregnancy who have periodontal disease may be seven times more likely to have a baby that is born too early and too small, according to the American Academy of Periodontology. In addition, employees

with diabetes have an increased risk for mouth infections, especially periodontal disease, which can then make it hard to control blood glucose.

Some plans may also offer annual pre-diagnostic testing to employees 40 years old and older who demonstrate risk factors for oral cancer. Oral cancer strikes an estimated 35,310 Americans each year and claims the lives of more than 21 percent of those diagnosed with the disease, according to the American Cancer Society. Early diagnosis of such diseases can have a significant effect on five-year survival rates. By offering dental benefits, employers have a long-term impact on the quality of life for their employees as well as potentially reduce employee medical costs.

Uncertain economic times should not deter employers from offering strong employee benefit packages. Companies should stay focused on retaining their employees and cannot afford to skimp on wellness. Limitless plan options are available to fit the budget and benefit needs of every company. Voluntary benefits serve an important role in maintaining overall satisfaction and can help employers ride out the current economic climate, all without impacting the bottom line.

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