



BY Elizabeth Millard PHOTO BY Tate Carlsson

Benefits Buffet

Employers are putting lots of ingredients into their benefits packages to find a recipe that can help trim some of the fat off rising healthcare costs.

In the realm of employee benefits, healthcare is looming large, particularly as the whisper of recession becomes a shout. This leaves many employers trying to meet costs and still cover employees, a feat that's taking an increasing amount of creativity.

The strategy also requires more flexibility than in the past, as well as the willingness to make frequent changes. For some, the biggest trend is to involve employees more fully in the decision-making process, both by extending the opportunity to participate in a Health Savings Account (HSA) and by boosting the amount of options they can choose.

Like a buffet line, presenting an array of choices—yet only one plate—can help employees take what they want, such as vision care or different co-pay amounts, believes Sally Mainquist, president and CEO of Certes Financial Pros, a firm that provides CPAs, CMAs, and MBAs on call. The company offers its contractors an array of benefits, she says, and every year, a new component is added to the mix.

In 2007, an HSA was included, and participation was a notable 24 percent just after its introduction, compared to a national average of 10 percent for HSA participation. Certes offers a “dual choice environment,” in which employees can either opt for a standard-type of health insurance plan that's been in place for the last five years, or they can put together their own package.

That smorgasbord approach has been very successful in recent years, Mainquist notes, because it gives the contractors more control over their healthcare coverage, and also lets them shop around for the best deal, particularly in comparison to a spouse's coverage at another company.

“Health coverage has become expensive, so we're seeing people take more time to really look at what's being offered,” says Mainquist. “They may be deciding on what type of risks they'll take versus the potential to save money in the long run.”

The company uses a benefits broker, the David Martin Agency, to track trends and keep on top of benefits changes. For example, one option that may be forthcoming is offering health insurance with other types of insurance like auto and homeowner policies, says Deb Rodgers, an account executive at David Martin. “In some ways, that kind of offering would be a convenience measure, but it also leverages the power of a group buy,” she says.

“Health coverage has become expensive, so we're seeing people take more time to really look at what's being offered.”

—SALLY MAINQUIST, PRESIDENT AND CEO,
CERTES FINANCIAL PROS

GETTING INFORMED

Keeping employees informed about their choices isn't often a challenge, Mainquist notes, because Certes' contractors are CPAs, MBAs or CMAs and they tend to be more aware of healthcare insurance changes and have become savvy about shopping around for the best deals.

But some companies are making sure that employees are even better informed, and using company resources to get that education. SPS Commerce, a provider of hosted electronic data interchange services, recently implemented a website that gathers healthcare information and individualized benefits data. An online "health and wellness center" connects to other sites, offering employees a starting point for answering many health questions or researching different topics.

"As a company that's growing rapidly, SPS knows that to attract good people, you need a comprehensive benefit program," says Deb Ratelle, VP of HR at the company. "But you also have to understand changes in benefits, so we do an annual review of what's offered, and consult with an employee benefits firm to get their recommendations."

The Web site was created so that frequent changes can be communicated to SPS employees easily, and gives them personalized data that can help them track what the changes might mean for them.

HEALTH, NOT HOSPITALS

Beyond amping up more choices and

NATIONAL TRENDS

According to a recent American Express survey of business owners, there have been changes in healthcare trends within just six months between September and March:

- Thirty-four percent don't offer healthcare coverage to employees, up from 29 percent last September.
- Six percent have eliminated coverage altogether in the last six months, and six percent have reduced coverage.
- Nine percent have required employees to pay a larger share of healthcare costs.
- Twenty percent have been shopping

keeping employees informed about their options, perhaps the largest trend in healthcare isn't about who will pay when someone gets sick—it's more about preventing illness altogether. Wellness programs have become a large part of the benefits blend for many Minnesota companies, even if it's just offering discounts at the local gym, or switching conference food choices from fat-filled doughnuts to healthy salads and snacks. Others are being more aggressive in their measures, though.

SPS Commerce, for example, just added a program for expectant mothers, so they can connect with an OB nurse throughout their pregnancies. Over the last few years, there has been an increasing focus on preventative



"There's no cookie cutter solution for any one company."

—BILL JEATRAN, CEO, RJF AGENCIES

care, Ratelle notes, which was kicked off with discounts at fitness centers, and has led to the larger Web effort.

There are some difficulties with putting too much effort into wellness programs, notes Bill Jeatran, CEO of employee benefits outsourcing company RJF Agencies. For industries that have high turnover, such as retail, the long-term focus on wellness doesn't mesh well with short-term employment. "You'd be attempting to help an asset of your organization that won't be there in the next 12 to 24 months," he says. "So, it's a big challenge, with a lot of moving parts."

Still, he admits, the "holy grail of health-care" does include these programs as part of the mix. Making employees into better buyers, and providing corporate resources for education and health about preventing illness, can go a long way toward utilizing healthcare dollars more effectively, not to mention increasing productivity levels through fewer sick days.

"There's no cookie cutter solution for any one company," says Jeatran. "But right now, we are seeing more awareness among employees about health issues, and an understanding about making good decisions." MB



952.345.4140

www.certespros.com

www.permplacementnetwork.com

A REASON FOR CELEBRATION

Certes Financial Pros is proud to be recognized as a 2008 “Outstanding Employer” and winner of an “Innovative Work-Life Initiative” award by the Center for Ethical Business Cultures in conjunction with RFC Resources. Kudos to the other award-winners. We are in great company! From CFO to Senior Accountant, Certes is your trusted partner for interim, project, and permanent financial staffing needs.



“Certes strives to implement programs and practices that create a flexible and supportive workplace, one that allows our employees to express their true needs while providing the highest level of service to our clients.”

— SALLY MAINQUIST, PRESIDENT AND CEO

CONTRACT • CONTRACT TO PERM

www.certespros.com

PERM PLACEMENT

www.permplacementnetwork.com

952-345-4140



CERTES FINANCIAL PROSSM
CPAs, CMAs, MBAs on call &
Perm Placement Network