Employee Benefit News

ebn

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2023 | VOL. 37 NO. 1 | BENEFITNEWS.COM

THE PRODUCTIVITY ISSUE

WANT TO GET MORE WORK DONE IN LESS TIME? HERE'S HOW.

@EBNbenefitnews

Optavise

Benefits clearly communicated

Don't let your benefits communication turn into a game of telephone. Connect with Optavise to take control of your benefit offerings.

Optavise equips you with full-service, year-round solutions that empower your employees to choose and use their benefits.

INCREASE EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT with **Optavise Now**, our powerful communication and scheduling tool.

BOOST PARTICIPATION with in-person or virtual enrollments.

CREATE BETTER EXPERIENCES for employees with experts who can advocate for their needs.

PROTECT YOUR WORKFORCE with voluntary and group benefits.

Achieve better results from your benefits program » visit: **Optavise.com/EBN**

209716

© 2023 Optavise

STEPHANIE SCHOMER

Doing more, working less

Is it possible to cram more work into the day — without increasing business hours?

The short answer: yes. For EBN's Productivity Issue, our team spoke to experts and employees across industries and disciplines about how they make the most of their days, the tips, tricks and tools that support productivity, and where the employer/employee relationship comes into play.

It's a timely problem to work on solving. We're just weeks into 2023 and mass layoffs are dominating the headlines, economic uncertainty lingers, and inflation continues to squeeze workers' wallets. That's putting pressure on organizations and employees alike to do more work with fewer resources — a dangerous but common workplace expectation that can quickly snowball into burnout and turnover.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Kickstarter, the popular crowdfunding platform, piloted a four-day workweek in 2022, and the test was so successful that the company has permanently shifted to a 32-hour workweek. During the pilot, productivity jumped, attrition fell, and recruiters had an easier (and faster) time attracting top talent, chief strategy officer Jon Leland recently told EBN.

To understand how that translates to the day-to-day, one Kickstarter employee outlined their newly structured workweek (see page 8). Workdays are busier than ever, she admits, but they're also more efficient. The personal space created by a three-day weekend every weekend, she notes, has helped her improve both her health and wellness.

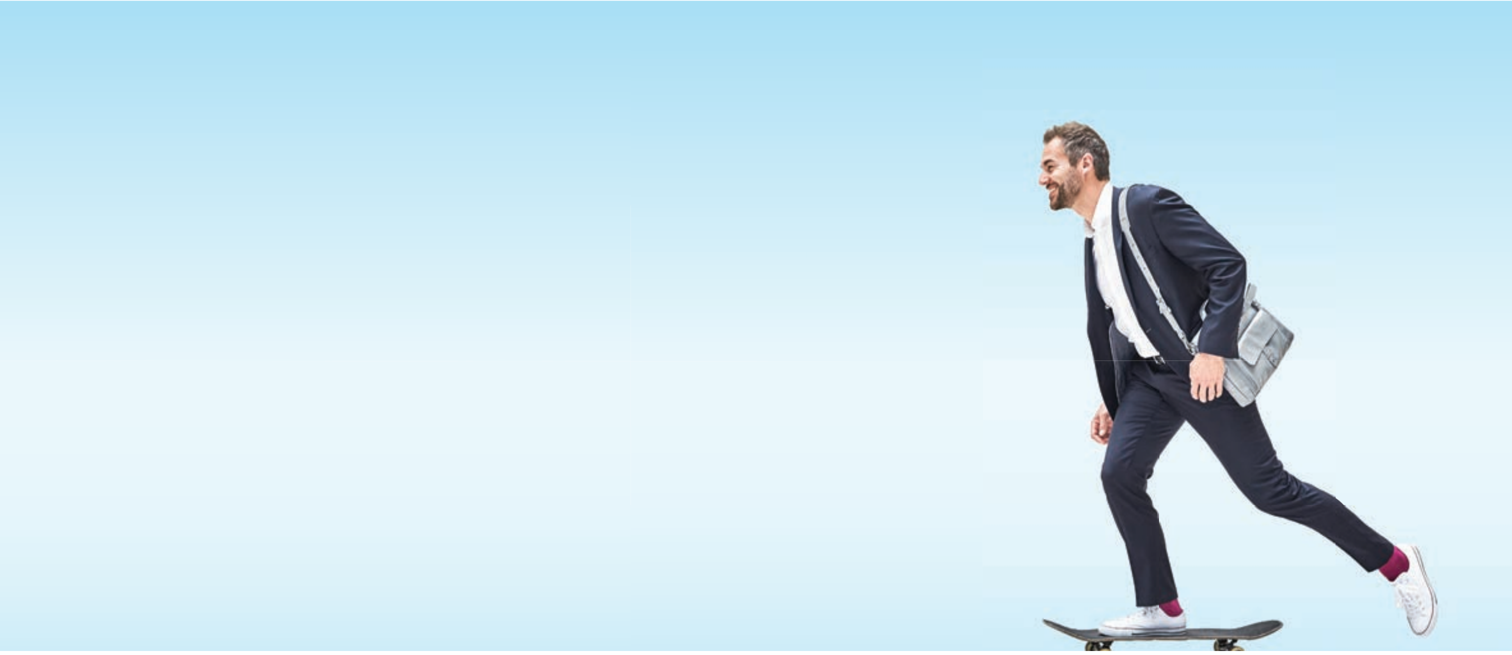
On the following pages, we break down tangible ways to actually boost productivity, examining the roles that everything from sleep to music can play in helping workers focus. Whether you're managing an office of employees or remote and hybrid workers, what tools can you provide to help your team feel more productive, content and supported?

As always, visit benefitnews.com for even more insight on the world of benefits and workplace culture — and how to build your best workforce.

Stephanie Schomer
Editor-in-Chief

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2023

CONTENTS



LICENSING AND REUSE OF CONTENT: Contact our official partner, Wright's Media, about available usages, license and reprint fees, and award seal artwork at arizent@wrightsmedia.com or (877) 652-5295 for more information. Please note that Wright's Media is the only authorized company with which we've partnered for Arizent materials.

CUSTOMER SERVICE: help@arizent.com or (212) 803-8500

Employee Benefit News, Vol. 37 | No. 1 (ISSN#1044-6265) is published 6 times a year; January/February, March/April, May/June, July/August, September/October and November/December by Arizent, One State Street Plaza, 27th Floor, New York, NY 10004, 212/803-8200. Periodical postage paid at New York, NY and additional U.S. mailing offices. Subscription Rates: $149 for one year in U.S.; $229 for one year in other countries. Single copies and back issues $15 domestic, $18 international. Change of Address: Notice should include both old and new address including ZIP code. Postmaster: Please send all address changes to Employee Benefit News, Arizent, One State Street Plaza, 27th floor, New York, NY 10004. For subscriptions, renewals, address changes and delivery service issues contact our Customer Service department at (212) 803-8500 or email help@arizent.com. Printed in U.S.A. Employee Benefit News is intended only for employee benefits professionals. The publisher does not perform due diligence on the companies or products discussed or advertised in Employee Benefit News. ©2023 Arizent and Employee Benefit News. All Rights Reserved.

REPRODUCTION POLICY: No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without the publisher's written permission.

TRANSACTIONAL REPORTING SERVICE: Authorization to photocopy items for internal or personal use, or the internal or personal use of specific clients, is granted by Arizent, provided that the appropriate fee is paid directly to Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923

ebn

Employee Benefit News

1 State Street Plaza, 27th Floor
New York, NY 10004-1505

EDITORIAL

Editor-in-Chief Stephanie Schomer

Executive Editor Alyssa Place

Editor Lee Hafner

Associate Editors Deanna Cuadra, Paola Peralta

Contributing Editor Bruce Shutan

Contributing Writers Ben Conner, Ed Ligonde

Executive Director, Brand Studio Michael Chu

Designer Robin Henriquez

MARKETING SOLUTIONS

Marketing Services and Event Sponsorship
Kris Kadel
(908) 625-1008, kristopher.kadel@arizent.com

Michelle Sutherland
(703) 946-7536, michelle.sutherland@arizent.com

Nicole Mazzara
(908) 433-2576, nicole.mazzara@arizent.com

Alex Remstein
(631) 747-8848, alex.remstein@arizent.com

Marketing
Jamie Billington
(212) 803-6099, jamie.billington@arizent.com

Aaron Boscanin
aaron.boscanin@arizent.com

arizent

Chief Executive Officer Gemma Postlethwaite

Chief Strategy Officer Jeff Mancini

Chief Commercial Officer Josh Rucci

Chief Financial Officer Jeffrey Choong

ONLINE

TOP STORIES

A snapshot of the top trending and most-read news and analysis

TRENDING NEWS ON BENEFITNEWS.COM

Photo: Cottonbro studio

25 best companies to work for in 2023

McKinsey, Google and HubSpot all made Glassdoor's annual ranking of the best places to work.

Photo: Andrea Piacquadio

How to encourage PTO and prevent burnout

Forty percent of employees took no time off in 2022, which can lead to poor mental health.

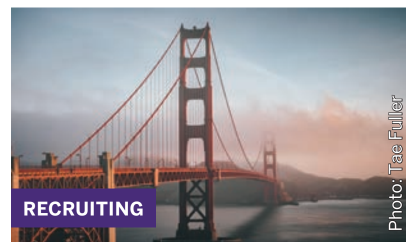


Photo: Tae Fuller

10 best and worst cities to find a job in 2023

Job opportunities, average starting salary and housing affordability make these cities appealing for job seekers.

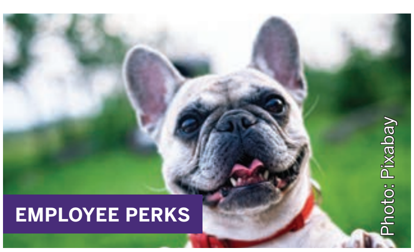


Photo: Pixabay

Add 'pet-friendly' to workplace flexibility strategies

Nineteen percent of job searchers expressed a preference for roles that came with "dog-friendly" office spaces.

Photo: Michelangelo Buonarroti

HubSpot's 'hybrid enablement manager' eases remote pain points

The company helps employees feel connected, no matter their work arrangements.

Photo: Karolina Grabowska

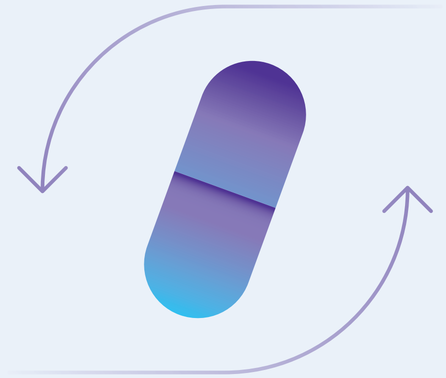
Help employees maintain healthcare coverage after layoffs

Advisers can help workers navigate COBRA and avoid other healthcare gaps after a job loss.

CarelonRx is redefining the right way to deliver pharmacy benefits

A way that combines new perspectives and deep expertise — creating value through cost savings and better health outcomes.

When we put people first,
everyone benefits.



carelonrx.com

Services provided by CarelonRx, Inc.

THE PRODUCTIVITY ISSUE

WANT TO GET MORE WORK DONE IN LESS TIME? HERE'S HOW.

Are you making the most of your day?

It's a question that's tough to answer for many employees. Despite best intentions, life's distractions get in the way — and as the tasks on the to-do list pile up, stress compounds, and productivity further suffers.

Solving the problem of productivity doesn't require a single answer. Instead, boosting output while supporting worker wellness requires a multi-pronged approach that considers everything from workload to workspace, at-home stressors and even sleep.

To kick off the new year, EBN's productivity issue dives into the many ways the workplace (whether in-person or remote) can help its workforce increase output without absorbing more stress and approaching burnout.

FITTING FIVE DAYS OF WORK INTO FOUR

Terry VanDuyn, director of product management at Kickstarter, shares a week in her life after her employer switched to a four-day workweek.

▸ **By Deanna Cuadra**

Finding work-life balance in the face of burnout, mounting work responsibilities and economic stress is no small task. To help their employees out, some companies are making a drastic change to the workplace calendar — and telling their employees to simply work less.

Global fundraising resource Kickstarter is among 200 companies in the U.S., Canada, Australia and New Zealand that have joined 4 Day Week Global, a nonprofit dedicated to helping companies reduce their workweeks down to 32 hours. Kickstarter launched its four-day workweek pilot in April of 2022, and nine months later, it has decided to permanently embrace the abbreviated schedule.

Yes, this means that Kickstarter's employees now enjoy a three-day weekend every weekend — but their entire structure of working has transformed as well, explains Terry VanDuyn, director of product management at Kickstarter.

"I'm working fewer hours than I was before," she says. "The intensity of workdays has increased. Still, having Fridays off is a great trade-off."

As director of product management, VanDuyn's position hinges on her ability to meet and collaborate with several other teams remotely, whether it's engineering, design or product. A reduced workweek meant squeezing necessary meetings and check-ins into four days, while still cutting out time to independently work on feedback and strategize how to test new features her teams develop for Kickstarter's platform.

"I am responsible for the outcomes, from setting the strategy on how to get there to measuring our success," says VanDuyn, "My days look very different, and I appreciate that about my job."

To gain a better understanding of a reduced workweek in practice, VanDuyn shared a week in her life with EBN, chronicling what time management and work-life balance look like when Thursday becomes the new Friday.

> **"The intensity of workdays has increased. Still, having Fridays off is a great trade-off."**

Starting off with a bang

For VanDuyn, Monday and Tuesday are her busiest days. While VanDuyn typically starts her morning at 9:30 and ends at six, she finds that the beginning of the week is the best time for her to work a little further into the evening.

"I would prefer to work into the evenings than push that work to Friday," she says. "Even if no one is preventing us from working on Fridays."

Notably, no one is allowed to schedule meetings on Fridays, since it's officially a part of the weekend. And while Van Duyn could technically use Friday to catch up on independent work when needed, she has restructured her week around that Friday off — even if that means working a few hours longer than she normally would at the start of her week.

Terry VanDuyn, director of product management at Kickstarter, has boosted productivity during a 32-hour workweek.

Meetings galore

VanDuyn's weeks are a mix of recurring meetings and spontaneous check-ins, totaling up to 30 meetings a week. Beyond connecting with her own product management team every Monday, VanDuyn also makes time to meet with teams outside of tech and design, such as the brand marketing team, the customer success team and the legal team.

"Even with the four-day workweek, my work is still fairly similar," she says. "Ideally, my days are split between a couple of hours of focus time, so I can do work that requires working alone and a set of meetings."

Given that VanDuyn, who's based on the East Coast, works three hours ahead of many of her West-Coast colleagues, she can easily find structured time that is for her alone. However, she tries to remain flexible to ensure that colleagues can reach her. To that point, VanDuyn doesn't set a lunchtime for herself, since 12:00 to 3:00 p.m. tends to be primetime for meetings.

"I usually grab food at some point, but I don't set that on my calendar," says VanDuyn. "Certainly there are people who prefer to have a set break for lunch, but I don't."

The new Friday

On Thursdays, VanDuyn prepares herself for the next week, finishing as much as she can and writing a to-do list for the following week. Since Thursdays generally have few meetings, she also gets more alone time to focus on tasks. VanDuyn notes that her Thursdays feel lighter than her Fridays did before the four-day pilot.

"I don't smash all my work into Thursdays like I previously did with Fridays," says VanDuyn. "I reallocate my workload throughout the week so my Thursdays don't feel particularly different."

Taking advantage of the weekend

With her workweek already over, VanDuyn does her best not to take Friday for granted.

"I try not to treat Friday like another day on the weekend," she says. "Here's an extra day a lot of people don't have, so how can I do things I want or need to do?"

For Van Duyn, this may mean running errands at spots that are typically busier on weekends or closed in the evenings, like the grocery store and post office. It may mean practicing her Spanish lessons, spending time with her family or traveling for a few days. Crucially, the three-weekend recently allowed her to complete physical therapy and eliminate the chronic discomfort she was feeling in her body. As for Saturdays, VanDuyn takes the chance to relax without feeling rushed to complete a barrage of errands and chores before the weekend is up.

"I feel like I can spend Sunday preparing for the week without feeling like I'm losing my entire weekend," she says. "I get more sleep, and I come back to work a bit more rested."

VanDuyn underlines the four-day workweek as a wellness benefit and business strategy rolled into one. A reduced workweek not only motivates leaders to eliminate non-essential tasks and meetings but boosts employee morale. In fact, Andrew Barnes, the founder of 4 Day Week Global, saw a 20% increase in employee productivity and a 45% increase in work-life balance at his own company, Perpetual Guardian, when it switched to a 32-hour workweek.

VanDuyn can personally vouch for that trend.

"The impetus for having Friday off keeps me more focused," she says. "Knowing that I can get it done by Thursday is a helpful motivator for sure." **EBN**

7 WORKSPACE UPDATES TO MAXIMIZE PRODUCTIVITY

A well-designed space that invites creativity and focus is possible for any organization with these architect-approved tips.

▸ By Lee Hafner

Ninety percent of employers plan on requiring employees to return to the office for at least part of the week in 2023, according to a recent survey by HR Dive. But as workers have grown accustomed to their home offices — and as a focus on well-being continues to take center state among today's workforce — it's likely those employers will face some resistance.

To ease that friction, employers may want to reconsider exactly what they're asking employees to return to. A hybrid work arrangement will likely be the most common for those heading back to the office this year, but the days of settling for harsh lighting and bad coffee are over. Still, offices may not need to undergo an HGTV-level renovation to create some comfort.

"There may be functional aspects like amenities that you want, but there could be another aspect around how you want people to feel when they come into an office," says Julia Leahy, principal and design director at IA Interior Architects, a design firm that specializes in workspaces. "What's the first impression as you come in, and how do you want to feel when you're leaving? So many of those things are about the culture or the organization."

Leahy outlined seven considerations employers should keep in mind as they're revamping workspaces to suit today's employee. "There is definitely no one-size-fits-all, and understanding the culture and the mission of an organization is at the root," she says. "If you can connect that with what employees are looking for, then you've made a really successful workplace."

1. Occupancy

"One of the most important things for us as we're talking to clients is the strategy around occupancy," she says. "Are you creating guidelines around when people are coming in? There's almost an optimal density you want to create. You don't want people packed in — those days are gone — but the flip side is true; if you're one person in a space that's intended to be occupied by 20, that's not comfortable either."

2. Layout

"Understanding what the strategy is around [occupancy], we can help curate whether it is a one-to-one seating model or hoteling," says Leahy, referring to a system in which employees can use any available desk on any given day they're in the office, rather than be assigned a permanent seat. Private offices, she observes, are largely out of fashion in a post-COVID world. "People are thinking, 'If I am making this commute, I want to be with my teammates.'"

3. Decor

"Everyone is looking for spaces that are a little more reminiscent of home," Leahy says. Simple additions like area rugs and throw pillows can create some coziness, and she urges employers to consider lighting and wall colors as well. "What works well on video often creates a better experience when you're in person. Softer materials, getting away from those bright whites and the harsh lighting — now you've got evidence behind it, because you can see it captured on screen."

4. Individual space

"In more of a hybrid workforce, people are going to be more transient, and there's a lot of opportunity to switch up the type of individual work settings so that people have choice," Leahy says. "There are some nice enclosed nooks and alcoves, community tables, or library settings. Having dual monitors, height adjustable desks — people's needs aren't always the same. Being able to provide that variety shows you're not trying to fit everyone into the same size box."

5. Community space

"Collaboration has been such a hot topic," says Leahy. "Having a more open environment that lets people quickly transition from individual work to learning and impromptu work is really valuable. Coffee points, cafes, little lunch nooks — all of those are the life and energy of the office space. There's a science around these open collaboration spaces, especially for the vast majority of our clients that are embracing hybrid work. Make a decision on whether technology is going to be included within it or not. It all goes back to the people who are connecting with one another, as well as connecting with participants on the other side of the screen."

6. Natural elements

"Plants can go a long way," Leahy says. "Taking a lot of cues from exterior architecture — smaller plant groupings, indoor/outdoor courtyard-type spaces using warm flooring materials, even hanging plant life overhead. Lighting is another big one. When you are outside in nature, there are a lot of different light levels. You experience shadow, you experience brightness, so creating a space that has those highs and lows of lighting is a subtle way to bring in more of what you experience in from the outdoors."

7. Well-being and break space

"Taking a look at a day in the life [of employees] and taking care in even the smallest little areas of a space — creating a wellness room or a mother's room that is not four drywall walls and a door with paint on it — adding surprise and delight into all of the spaces makes people feel very supported and cared for," says Leahy. "If you're a mother or somebody with a migraine and you go into one of these rooms, it really does feel like a respite. Even in the restrooms, it all matters." **EBN**

5 APPS TO BOOST FOCUS AND OUTPUT

Eighty-two percent of people don't use any kind of time management system to manage their work, according to 2021 data from Clockify. But improved task management can be as simple as downloading a new app. Here are a few of the top-rated:

1. Sunsama

This time-blocking app helps users add structure to their day, and allows you to manage multiple projects at once and schedule related tasks.

2. Pomofocus

Pomofocus acts as a timer that helps users aim for 25 minutes of focused productivity, followed by a five-minute break to relax. After four rounds of productivity, users get a 15-minutes break.

3. Loom

This asynchronous video messaging app lets users send quick clips offering feedback, explaining a solution or a narrated screenshare. Unlike Zoom, it doesn't require employees to log onto live meetings.

4. Trello

Trello is a task-management app that helps employees create different dashboards to keep track of their to-do list. Users can get manually updated and move tasks along as they're completed; teams can share group projects for transparency and collaboration.

5. Focusmate

Users can get paired with an accountability partner in booked sessions of 25, 50 or 75 minutes. In the beginning the partners greet each other, set session goals then work side by side to get things done.

—Paola Peralta

SLEEP IS A WORKPLACE ISSUE

Employers are losing out on over $100 billion a year in fatigue-related productivity loss. Jacinta Jiménez, CHRO at BetterUp, explains how employers should adapt.

▶ By Paola Peralta

How much sleep an employee gets at night is directly related to how much work they get done during the day. How can employers help them find the healthiest balance?

Approximately 38% of workers are struggling through sleep-related challenges at work, according to the National Library of Medicine, and the effects of that fatigue are costing employers around $1,967 annually per employee. That's $136.4 billion a year in total loss of productivity.

"Sleep is a huge missing piece of the performance puzzle at work, and can unlock unprecedented levels of performance," says Jacinta Jiménez, CHRO at virtual coaching platform BetterUp. "Sleep is a biological imperative. It is as vital as food and water, and even small deficits can have major impacts."

Sleep loss can cause employees to feel drowsy, and the fight to stay awake results in spent mental energy, making it increasingly difficult to stay focused on long tasks that require concentration. Lack of sleep can also lead to what are referred to as micro-naps, according to the Sleep Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to providing insights on health-related issues concerning sleep. Micro-naps are when a sleep-deprived individual falls asleep momentarily in the middle of a task and generally last up to 15 seconds.

And yet, sleep is far from a mainstream workplace issue, though organizations like BetterUp are working to change that.

Jiménez recently spoke with EBN about why BetterUp has added sleep coaches to its platform's roster of experts, how organizations can support better health for their teams, and what that commitment should look like on the executive level.

Jacinta Jiménez, CHRO at BetterUp

What's the traditional take on sleep in most workspaces, and how is it changing?

In the past, I think there's been this idea of busy-ness as a badge of honor. Traditionally, getting rest made it look like you weren't performing. But that shifted with COVID, and people are more open to talking about well-being now, and they're also realizing that their physical well-being and sleep is so intimately tied to their performance at work. Prior to that it was, "Let's pull all nighters, let's continue to cram," and the research shows that just doesn't work.

Underslept employees are not going to drive the business forward with innovation, for example, because when you're not getting enough sleep, you work less productively. Ironically, employees who are working less productively need to work longer, which means they're working later and getting less sleep. So it used to be this downward spiral. But people are finally understanding that if employers can prioritize rest, their teams are not going to be as susceptible to burnout.

What is the role that HR and employers are going to have to play in making sure that their employees are getting the rest that they need ?

It is a two-way street. An individual can only do so much by fixing their sleep habits, because individuals exist in the system of work. Managers can support them in one of several ways. One thing is investing in a sleep friendly infrastructure. Natural light is really important — human beings are not machines, we're wired to respond to light. Exercise is really important, as well as easy access to nutritious food. For those working remotely or for hybrid workers, this can be helped by encouraging employees to take a walk during the day and get outside when they can.

Overall, we have to put boundaries around work hours. It's so important that we're not answering emails at night or staring at bright screens. Having too much blue light can keep our brains awake to create new worries, anxieties and stress. Flexible schedules are another way to offer support, because not everyone has the same kind of sleep style — some people are night owls naturally and others are morning larks that are able to just wake up and start working. More flexible workplaces allow for people to really lean into their unique sleep style that they're genetically predisposed to and be able to actually take advantage of rest.

Finally, why not incorporate sleep into learning and development? Teach employees about sleep hygiene and send the message that you understand this is an important aspect of productivity and workplace mental health.

Does flexibility include allowing employees to build napping into their schedules?

Yes, especially if they're done well. There's a lot of technical research around napping. For example, 26-minute naps lead to a 34% improvement in task performance, and a more than 50% increase in overall alertness. Allowing flexibility for naps and setting up parameters or guidelines on how to take the right kind of nap could be huge for employees.

BetterUp added sleep coaches to their staff, and clients' employees can access the experts through your platform. How do these coaches help fix sleep schedules?

There's a lot of education that has to come into place around employees' perceptions around sleep. Being able to really talk about all the benefits based on science, and also talk about sleep hygiene and healthy sleep habits help ensure a good night's sleep. Everyone has a unique relationship with sleep, and having a coach can really help personalize it for the individual — taking in all the unique circumstances, environments, cultures and personalities that they all bring with them. Sleep cannot be a one-size-fits-all-approach. **EBN**

3 TIPS FOR A HEALTHY SLEEP SCHEDULE

We asked one of BetterUp's sleep coaches to share her top tips for getting a good night's rest.

What's keeping you up at night? Amy Korn-Reavis, sleep specialist coach at BetterUp, deals with exhausted employees every day — and helps them work through it.

"Sleep is such an important part of how we ultimately behave throughout the day," she says. "In addition to having an impact on our mood, when we are lacking sleep, our productivity and creativity decreases."

Korn-Reavis shared three foolproof tips to improve your rest and your output at work:

Cut the caffeine

Stop drinking caffeine after 3 p.m., no matter how much you crave that extra cup. "While many of us drink caffeinated beverages during the day, caffeine can have a negative impact on sleep schedules."

Boost your "sleep hygiene"

"It is so important to establish routines and have a healthy bedroom environment to have consistent, restful sleep," she says. "Don't exercise too close to bedtime, keep a stable sleep schedule, regulate room temp and avoid bright light exposure at least 60 minutes before bedtime."

Put your phone down

If you're looking to unwind right before bed, embrace reading, meditating, and journaling, Korn-Reavis says. But the number one rule: "Avoid blue light exposure." So long, doomscrolling.

—Paola Peralta

PUMP UP THE JAM

TouchTunes Unlimited drops a jukebox into your break room.

▸ By Alyssa Place

Looking for new ways to bond with your coworkers? Try jamming out together to your favorite songs.

That's the mission of TouchTunes Unlimited, a music service that drops a jukebox into the breakroom, letting employees sideline as the office DJ.

"At TouchTunes, there is always a jukebox on with music playing in the background while we work," says Stephanie Badouix, HR director for the company. "It's our responsibility as managers to create those moments that matter, to motivate people to come back to the office."

TouchTunes had previously provided jukeboxes primarily to music venues, bars and restaurants, but expanded its offering in 2021 to bring their product to the workplace, in an effort to help employees reconnect and embrace the office environment. A survey by staffing firm Accountemps found that 71% of employees say they are more productive when music is playing while they work. Calming music can even change brain function, reducing stress hormones.

For offices outfitted with a TouchTunes jukebox, employees get access to a catalog of music with unlimited plays. While most people enjoy a little background noise, Badouix acknowledges it could be distracting to some — so the Touchtunes jukeboxes can be programmed to play during lunch hours or certain hours of the day, and on a lower volume to accommodate for phone calls or meetings.

Badouix says she personally loves to listen to pop music during the day, to boost her energy. Through TouchTunes, she's been introduced to other genres of music, like new wave, which has started conversations with her colleagues over their music preferences. The jukebox is a good icebreaker, and can help employees feel more comfortable with each other, especially if they've been working remotely previously.

"This is something we don't really do naturally anymore, since being remote, having that social connection or conversation before jumping into your meeting," Badouix says. "Music is such a good facilitator of that — people love to discover music and discuss it."

With many employers anticipating a return to the office this year, they'll need to create a culture that feels worthwhile to employees, Badouix says.

"When we ask people to come back to the office, it really has to add value to them," she says. "The aim is to improve workplace productivity, happiness and company culture by leveraging the power of music. It opens up new possibilities for interactions." **EBN**

TOP TUNES TO WORK TO

Is your favorite song on the list?

TouchTunes' 2022 data revealed that there's no one-size-fits-all when it comes to the tracks that get listeners amped up. Forty percent picked rock as their go-to genre, while 22% listened to country tunes, and 13% queued up rap and hip hop. "Fat Bottomed Girls" by Queen was the most played rock song on TouchTunes in 2022, followed by Van Morrison's "Brown Eyed Girl." For more feel-good jams, Whitney Houston's "I Wanna Dance with Somebody" was the most popular pop song of 2022.

Just 1% of listeners turned to the blues to get them through the day, which may just prove that the right song can get you in the right frame of mind to blast through that to-do list — and feel good while doing it.

Image from Touchtunes.com

ebn Employee Benefit News

PERK UP!

Talent challenges? Time to Perk Up!

In Perk Up!, a podcast from *Employee Benefit News*, we chat with business leaders and employees about the policies and benefits that help them achieve new levels of success at work — and a little joy, too.

Tune in to Perk Up! to hear the insights that can help you attract and retain top talent.

Listen and subscribe at benefitnews.com/podcast/perk-up

FINANCIAL WELLNESS

Benefits that help employees fight inflation

Employers can lean on benefits if boosting salaries isn't an option this year.

▸ **By Alyssa Place**

From groceries to gas prices, Americans are feeling the pinch from inflation and looking for relief. But employees may not have to look too far — employers have the tools to offset this financial strain.

According to a December poll from Gallup, 55% of Americans are experiencing financial hardship due to rising costs; 13% say the impact has been severe. An earlier October survey by Gallup found that 24% planned to reduce their spending and buy only essential items.

While there has been a 7.7% increase in prices over the last year, employers anticipate boosting salaries by just 4.6% in 2023, according to Willis Towers Watson. Bridging that gap will require creative efforts from employers, says Kaleana Quibell, vice president of well-being and platform partners at Sequoia, an HR management platform.

"Employees are paying more for groceries and homes, but also for important services like child care, medical procedures, and behavioral therapy," Quibell says. "We are seeing more employees turn to their employers in hopes they may offer covered or subsidized services."

Employers should be reviewing their benefit offerings to see if they can provide discounted child care and telehealth services, and basic financial planning tools to help employees manage budgets. However, employers themselves might be finding themselves in a pinch, Quibell cautions. But there are low-cost solutions available.

"It's understandable that in times like these not all companies may have a robust budget to accommodate this," she says. "In these cases, it's important that employers help with education on existing benefits, and encourage internal policies to lessen the stress for employees, allowing them time away from work to sort out financial issues or help with caregiving needs that will otherwise entail expenses."

Work arrangements can make an impact, too: research from FlexJobs found that employees could save $12,000 annually while working remotely, saving on commuting and other costs; Global Workplace Analytics estimates that companies can save $11,000 per remote employee, because of reduced rent and lower absenteeism and turnover.

"Staffing changes such as layoffs and hiring freezes have an impact on employee morale and retention in general," Quibell says. "When job stability feels in question given economic times, benefits like career development, skills coaching, and therapy can make employees feel supported in their role." **EBN**

Photo: Karolina Grabowska from Pexels

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Want to help your employees grow? Give them a free MBA

A new innovative benefit offering demonstrates how professional stewardship creates a foundation of inclusion and talent in the workplace.

▶ By Lee Hafner

According to Benjamin Franklin, "The investment in knowledge pays the best interest." And as more employers are learning, helping their workforce attain new knowledge is perhaps an even better investment. Tuition-assistance benefits are trending across industries, but at financial services firm Andersen, they're taking it one step further: A fully-funded MBA.

According to Education.org, the current average debt of someone with a Master's degree is $80,494 — over $60,000 of which is from school alone. Coupled with the financial uncertainty of today's economy and the cost of housing, an investment of this size feels out of reach for many, regardless of the payoff. Andersen's Enterprise MBA program, in collaboration with the University of San Francisco, will help offset those costs and is available to the company's global workforce of 13,000 employees.

"We have a long-standing history with USF through our CEO, and that has provided a unique opportunity to collaborate on these program offerings," says Nancy Power, head of HR at Andersen. "This is an option for individuals who are pursuing advanced degrees in general business administration and want to re-skill in those areas as well."

Andersen's MBA program, which launched in November, has key features that make it especially appealing to its diverse employee base. The courses, which are offered virtually, are designed to provide professional development specific to Andersen employees' needs. Company involvement is evident at all levels, as Andersen CEO Mark Vorsatz helped design the curriculum and senior staff serve as adjunct professors in the program. The cost is completely covered by the company, and all qualified employees, regardless of tenure, are eligible.

"Unlike traditional MBA programs, the students are all Andersen employees," Power says. "Whether they sit here in the U.S. or abroad in other parts of the world, they are positioned in this shared common experience across our firm. This builds cohesion and breaks down barriers because these are individuals who speak the same language essentially, which is very special."

Whether employees participate in educational courses for professional growth, to learn new skills, or to meet compliance, the effect on their overall productivity is undeniable. According to 2022 research from Bright Horizons, 82% of employees surveyed said the skills or degree earned through their employer's tuition reimbursement program helped them be a more effective employee. At Andersen, notes Power, technology and flexibility play a big role in this kind of success.

"We have a completely virtual MBA program designed around busy seasons," she says. "So in slower cycles where people can actually devote time and not be stressed out by trying to juggle all the personal and work demands, they have opportunities to do the coursework during work hours."

The MBA program's inaugural class of 50 U.S.-based employees has already generated valuable feedback for Andersen, which the company will take into consideration as they prepare to expand the program worldwide this year.

"The feedback has been nothing but positive," Power says. "Even individuals who aren't direct participants are excited, whether it's an option for them in the future or they appreciate this type of investment in our people." **EBN**

MENTAL HEALTH

To support working parents, support kids' mental health

Dr. David Grodberg, chief psychiatric officer at Brightline, explains how employers can holistically support their workforce's mental health.

▸ By DEANNA CUADRA

While many employers have stepped up their mental health care game, it seems that benefit leaders may be overlooking a vital part of working parents' wellness: children's mental health.

Brightline, a virtual behavioral care platform for children, found that 85% of caregivers feel that spending time on their child's behavioral health impacts their ability to work. Since the start of the pandemic, 20% of caregivers have noticed that their child needs more medical care, mental health help, or educational services than what they feel is normal for a child their age.

Given how the pandemic transformed workplaces and schools, Dr. David Grodberg, chief psychiatric officer at Brightline, doesn't find these responses too shocking. Three years into the pandemic and families are still faced with

Photo: Gustavo Fring from Pexels

ebn Employee Benefit News

Who cares for caregivers?

Many employers suspect that caregivers need more support from the workplace, but most companies are still hesitant to commit to expanding their offerings.

Explore the key findings at
benefitnews.com/research-report/who-cares-for-caregivers

unclear futures.

"There's so much uncertainty now, and wondering what the new normal is going to be," says Dr. Grodberg. "Children are significantly psychologically stressed."

Mental Health America estimates that 15% of kids ages 12-17, have experienced at least one major depressive episode in the last year.

"When children are anxious, it's well known that it takes quite a toll on parents," says Dr. Grodberg. "As parents, we're wired as humans to make our children feel better when they're distressed and to protect them."

Employees are also juggling uncertainties outside of the home. Employers are still figuring out how much they want employees back in the office, or if they should keep their workforce at home. Additionally, this winter's "tridemic" of COVID, flu and RSV has spread like wildfire in schools and homes. Over 15.2 million children have now tested positive for COVID, according to the CDC, and half a million children are estimated to have long COVID.

Even kids who are back to a normal school schedule may have troubles that seep into their parents' work. A parent may be called by the school because of an incident involving their child, or find themselves responding to 30 different text messages from a child looking for reassurance, explains Dr. Grodberg. Since children have more trouble finding the words to express themselves, their feelings manifest through their behavior, which could seem erratic or out of character.

Knowing that mental health challenges are likely to persist if not addressed in childhood, Dr. Grodberg underlines how important it is for parents to have access to pediatric mental health care.

Dr. Grodberg advises employers to work with third parties that not only offer affordable therapy for children but behavioral coaching, noting that some parents may feel skeptical about sending their children to a therapist. Behavioral coaching focuses more on helping children develop better life skills for the future, while a therapist would ask their patients to explore their past and the reasoning behind their behavior.

Most importantly, Dr. Grodberg asks that employers do not underestimate the difference between pediatric-trained therapists and a therapist for adults.

"There are adult mental health companies using adult interventions that they simply implement with kids and teenagers," he says. "But you want a truly developmental approach that is designed for the awareness of children and accounts for parents as well as other stakeholders that are inevitably involved in kids' lives, like teachers and pediatricians." **EBN**

WELLNESS

Where preventative care and productivity meet

Johannes Bhakdi, founder and CEO of Quantgene, explains why employers need to look beyond their health insurance plans if they want a healthy workforce.

▶ **By DEANNA CUADRA**

Preventative healthcare and workplace productivity may not seem like a natural pairing, but when it comes to tenured employees who are absorbing more responsibilities with each passing year, the relationship is undeniable.

According to the Ripe Health Assessment Study, nearly half of senior executives have one or more chronic health conditions, while only 35% of the general population lives with a chronic illness. Between their workload and older age, senior leaders tend to have the recipe for chronic illness

— and yet, like most Americans, they put off visiting their doctor until something seems vitally wrong.

Johannes Bhakdi, founder and CEO of preventative care platform Quantgene, is on a mission to help workers live longer, healthier lives, starting with senior executive leadership. He encourages employers to start prioritizing preventative care, and recently introduced a new digital tool, Serenity Complete, to empower workforces to easily keep up with preventative care.

"Serenity Complete is a preventative healthcare system for executives that helps them determine their risk of chronic illnesses like cancer, diabetes and heart disease," says Bhakdi, pointing to an annual subscription offering that employers can provide to their workers, which includes two check-ups a year, in addition to other preventative offerings. "Early detection is key to increasing survival rates."

Bhakdi knows this firsthand. After fighting for three and a half years, his mom passed away from stage four colon cancer. Despite being a doctor, even Bhakdi's mom kept putting off her colonoscopy.

"She was in a tough spot in her life, and no one was fully aware outside herself and her doctor that she needed to do the [test]. Her doctor didn't really push her," he says. "She was a textbook example of unnecessary death."

Bhakdi founded Quantgene in 2015 just a few months after his mom's passing. He is intent on building a solution that is not only personalized to each patient's genetic makeup but is convenient to use. Along with Quantgene's preventative care providers, Serenity users have access to liquid biopsy screenings, a non-invasive way for doctors to find out more about a tumor through a blood sample. Additionally, Serenity features whole exome sequencing and pharmacogenomic sequencing, which tells providers whether someone has possible disease-causing mutations or if they will have a bad reaction to a drug.

To create ease of use, Bhakdi's made sure to remove some of the friction points that come with visiting the doctor. Depending on one's work schedule, a nurse can be sent to the office or home to conduct tests and retrieve samples. Bhakdi believes that regular check-ups like this can make the difference between life and death. For example, a patient who catches breast cancer in stage one has a 90% chance of living for five years beyond their diagnosis — at stage four, those chances drop down to 28%.

Ultimately, the U.S. healthcare system does not prioritize preventative healthcare, but instead waits for someone to be sick to the point of treatment, says Bhakdi. He notes that preventative care usually comes with a short-term, upfront expense that saves patients money down the line, but cautions that insurance companies have an eye on their profit margins.

"Insurance companies have a certain preconceived notion of what they believe should be paid for, and then put a lot of constraints on what can be done," he says. "If you stick strictly to what Blue Shield or UnitedHealthcare tells you, then you have no leeway."

Still, Bhakdi believes that employers have an obligation to their employees, especially those who have been taking on more responsibilities and leading their organizations in the last few years. He advises employers to protect the health of their employees rather than wait for workers to begin missing work or showing drops in productivity due to chronic illness.

This means embracing the future of healthcare — and for Bhakdi, that future rests in the embrace of preventative care and technology.

"The future of preventative care is mostly a medical intelligence problem," he says. "You need a cloud system that understands each patient, creates a custom profile for the patient with a custom preventative care strategy that is optimized for outcomes and costs. You don't want a doctor or healthcare system that waits until you're incredibly sick with cancer or diabetes. We want to know the risks and make sure there is a good outcome." **EBN**

Photo: Tima Miroschnichenko from Pexels

Eliminating the ‘Black tax’

Carice Anderson, author and director of people manager strategy at BlackRock, discusses the emotional burdens of being Black in the corporate world.

▶ By ALYSSA PLACE

Employers have pushed the message that employees should bring their “authentic selves” to work. But that doesn’t always apply to all employees equally.

“People believe it when they say it, but I don’t think they actually think about what that really means,” says Carice Anderson, author and director of people manager strategy at BlackRock. “For example, I spent a lot of time trying not to live up to that ‘angry Black woman’ stereotype. I muted my emotions. So what happens is, you get a fake version of me.”

Anderson says she’s struggled with the emotional burden of being a Black woman in the corporate world — starting her career at one of the top accounting firms in the U.S., she was the only Black woman at her level of seniority. In her quest to be successful, she says she struggled with perfectionism that held her back.

“I just remember feeling tremendous pressure, like I had to prove that Black people are worthy of being in this space,” she says. In her new book, Intelligence Isn’t Enough, Anderson coins this experience as “Black tax,” and believes it holds Black people back from career success.

Anderson recently chatted with EBN about the cost of Black tax, how employers can help all employees feel safe and included at work, and how she redefined authenticity on her own terms.

Photo: Mart Production from Pexels

`What does "Black tax" mean to you?

I think there's two definitions of Black tax — I lived in South Africa for 10 years, and there, it means that you're the first person in your family to have a white-collar professional job, and because of that, your family is looking to you to help them financially. Black people are oftentimes making choices about their career based on finances. They don't have that safety net. No one's parents are giving them a down payment or paying for their student loans.

The other definition of Black tax is that oftentimes, Black people will say, "We have to work twice as hard to get half as much." So that entails doing more, taking on more to prove that we deserve to be in these spaces. There's a lot of emotional and physical labor that goes along with constantly being in this mode of having to prove yourself.

Carice Anderson, director of people manager strategy, BlackRock

How does that manifest at work?

My second job out of undergrad, I worked at Arthur Andersen, a big five accounting firm at the time. I was the only Black consultant on the entire floor. There were other Black people working there, but they were in more administrative positions. I felt like I needed to operate at a level of perfection. My comments needed to be profound and insightful. So what that resulted in was me not speaking at all, because nothing I said ever hit that bar. Nobody at Andersen ever said, "Hey, you know, you're Black and you need to carry the weight of all Black people and you can't mess this up and you need to be perfect." But that's the expectation that I came in with because of the messaging we get as Black people.

Do you feel like you're living authentically now?

I am the most authentic I've ever been. For me, People's perceptions are their issue and not mine. People are going to think what they want to think, and all I can do is try to show up in the way that's appropriate for the context that I'm in.

I think authenticity exists on a spectrum. My level 10 most authentic self is who I am with my family, my friends and my husband. I'm going to crack jokes and be sarcastic and probably really loud. I wouldn't necessarily come to work and be exactly that person; I might be a level seven or eight at work. If my colleagues were to come and see me with my family, I still think they would recognize me. I would want my family to be able to come to work and recognize me. So for me, it's less about trying to be two different people. That's not sustainable. I look at the audience, the context of the message and where I operate on that spectrum.

How can employers help their colleagues on that journey and facilitate these conversations?

The fact that we're talking about this is step number one. When I graduated undergrad in 1998, nobody cared about the fact that you were Black, that you were a woman, nobody cared about all your different dimensions of diversity. People didn't even talk about that stuff. It was like, check it at the door, get in here and get work done.

Step number two is for employers to create forums where Black people and all underrepresented groups can talk about their experiences and have people want to understand that experience. To understand the emotional labor and how that worry takes time and cognitive capacity away from the job.

Make it clear that behaviors of exclusion or non-inclusive comments will not be tolerated. I have hope because of Generation Z, to be honest — when I look at what they're expecting from a workplace, diversity and inclusion is top of mind. They're going to be walking the walk and they're not going to work for organizations if they don't feel like people are taking diversity and inclusion seriously.

What's your advice for other Black employees who are struggling to find that authenticity?

Companies are not in the business of hiring people who they don't think can be successful, so the fact that you're here, you need to believe that there's a reason that you're here. People believe that you can be successful, that you have the potential to be successful.

A lot of Black people have been told things like, you need to have a "white voice," you need to code-switch. While that may have been good advice for a certain period of time, it doesn't drive us in the long-term. I think we have to let go of some of the messages that we've been given by our well-meaning Black family and friends. We have to examine some of these messages that we get to see if they actually serve us in our environment. **EBN**

Photo: Courtesy of Carice Anderson

WORKPLACE CULTURE

Jewish ERGs take a stand against antisemitism

New York City-based marketing agency Lippe Taylor Group ties employee resource groups to a culture of inclusion.

By BRUCE SHUTAN

At a time of rising antisemitism, Jeremy Simon realized that his appearance as a white male with an ambiguous religious identity masked his Jewish faith. While proud of his heritage, there were times when the SVP at Lippe Taylor Group didn't feel comfortable being his full self at work.

But solace came in the form of a Jewish employee resource group (ERG) he co-chairs known as Not So Chai Maintenance. A playful pun on the Hebrew word for life, it was formed more than a year ago with 15 members and is part of a culture that encourages inclusion and belonging.

The group — one of eight active ERGs at the New York City-based marketing agency, which employs 207 people — recently shared experiences about casual discrimination. A company-wide panel was well-received by non-Jewish coworkers, some of whom were caught off guard by the antisemitism their colleagues faced.

"It's nice to have empathy in these conversations," says Simon, who's also part of a neurodiversity ERG.

When ERGs emerged more than 50 years ago following the U.S. Civil Rights movement, the aim was to support racial diversity. Since, these affinity groups have targeted those with similar identities or interests; an estimated 90% of Fortune 500 companies have ERGs.

ERGs can play a role in helping understand how antisemitism might be showing up in the workplace and the negative impact on an organization's success, as well as serving as a voice for employee experiences, says Aaron Mitchell, former director of HR for Netflix Animation Studio, and DEI adviser to Shine A Light, an organization that works to call out and fight antisemitism.

"I think people are learning that being Jewish is not simply a religion, but it is an identity. Creating that awareness creates space for dialogue," he says. "A lot of the work DEI programs have done around unconscious bias is parallel to the language workplaces need to learn around antisemitism."

Sometimes, stereotypes rear their ugly head during casual work conversation. Such was the case for Stacie Haller, chief career adviser at ResumeBuilder.com, who recalls how a colleague said to her, "You go make this deal. You're a New York Jew, and you could do this." Her firm recently conducted an unscientific poll of 1,131 recruiters that uncovered antisemitism in the workplace.

Simon remembers one incident at a previous employer when, after providing information about celebrating upcoming Jewish holidays, client meetings were planned during that time with no support for rescheduling them.

His Lippe Taylor ERG has another event in the works on the shared connection members feel through their faith, summer camp memories and the role food plays in their lives. "One of the things we want to get across in the next panel," he adds, "is just how small the number of Jewish people are and that there's a reason for inter-connectivity."

ERG members from marginalized groups may find strength in numbers. Faith-based ERGs can serve as a source of solidarity for people who face workplace bias, says Farzana Nayani, a DEI specialist who works with ERG members and leaders around the world. "They're an empowering place for employees to share and live out their identities in a fuller way," she says. **EBN**

HIRING

Why UPS, Gap, Home Depot are axing interviews

Could getting rid of a formal question-and answer session boost recruiting?

▶ By Paola Peralta

Photo: Cottonbro Studio from Pexels

With low unemployment rates holding steady, employers are still scrambling to find workers — and they're willing to sacrifice once-vital parts of the hiring process to achieve faster results.

Companies in the retail and service sectors including UPS, Home Depot and Gap are some of the first to drop their applicant interview requirements for entry-level positions in an effort to speed along the recruiting process. Instead, they're turning to alternative methods such as solely relying on resumes, or skills-based applications. But could this introduce more risk than reward?

According to a 2018 study by the Harvard Business Review, 19% of new hires that received a job offer without interviews were considered fully successful, but by the time they'd reached 18 months of tenure, 46% were deemed failures. Despite those statistics, Paul Lewis, chief customer officer at job-search site Adzuna, thinks the elimination of interviews can drive business in certain scenarios.

"Everything in business is a risk, and it could be [detrimental] if it's a highly-skilled job like a programmer who claims to know Java but cannot solve a simple algorithmic task," says Lewis. "But the bottom line is that the consequences of a bad hire are very minimal."

An interview-less hiring process could look like simply creating a straight-to-the-point job ad that clearly lays out the scope of daily duties, as well as salary ranges to accelerate the hiring process. That will be followed by a form applicants can fill out, including multiple choice questions on availability and skill.

"Generally, jobs that are crossing out interviews are usually entry-level, or in blue-collar fields," Lewis says. "Most don't need prior knowledge or a degree. On-the-job training is more crucial, hence why employers are most likely to benefit from this cost-saving and time-saving trend."

Lewis says hiring would then shift to a potentially first-come, first-served basis, allowing employers to accept all appropriate applicants until vacancies are filled. Rather than background or reference checks, organizations may implement probationary periods to help mitigate the risk of investing in an employee who is the wrong fit.

According to a recent survey by Adzuna, job seekers' second biggest gripe is the lengthy interview process, and it prevents 50% of workers from exploring new opportunities.

"If you as an employer wiped out this painful process for your employee, this means you have improved candidate experience and also indirectly enhanced their employee experience," Lewis says. "Which is the key to retention." **EBN**

401(K)

Hardship withdrawals threaten retirement security

As more workers find themselves in a desperate financial mindset, employers should take the time to educate them on all the ways there are to save.

▸ By LEE HAFNER

The fiscal challenges faced by many American workers due to COVID and inflation have been plentiful, and in some cases, brutal. For those hit the hardest, the drastic step of taking a 401(k) hardship withdrawal can feel like the only option, but employers should stand ready to remind employees that there are better ways to establish savings for a rainy day.

According to Vanguard, 401(k) hardship withdrawals — which are subject to income tax as well as applicable early withdrawal fees — are at an all time high. This lump sum removal from the account, which must be approved by the plan provider, can have devastating effects on people's ability to accumulate savings for retirement. But employers can play a key role in directing their employees to better alternatives.

"The first thing is for plan sponsors to reach out to their existing vendors, record keepers and others to find out what they have," says Timothy Flacke, co-founder and executive director of Commonwealth, a financial solutions nonprofit. "Vendors often have resources designed to be shared with workers, and if they don't, there's nothing more powerful than hearing from their customers, saying this is a need."

A November report from LendingClub showed that 63% of Americans were living paycheck to paycheck. Communication on how to set up and contribute to emergency savings accounts and other available options can be extremely beneficial in helping people make wise decisions with their income. This is something that can go beyond HR, Flacke points out, and should be done at the time of onboarding, as well as intermittently afterwards.

"There are a lot of employers who don't have HR departments, but everybody pays their workers," Flacke says. "Most vendors provide the ability to send that net pay to multiple destinations, so drag your workers' attention to that at the moment of onboarding. 'Hey, you can have $10 of every paycheck go into a savings account, and we can do that for you.'"

Emergency savings accounts and other options for immediate financial needs can help workers feel reassured that if things come up short one month, they have the autonomy to pull from their reserves, then replenish when they're able.

"You set up a long-term savings plan that's designed for financial security a decade or two or three or four down the line," says Flacke. "You don't want to be using it to resolve today's issues. It comes back to the idea of, what you can offer your workers as a much more suited tool to manage the short-term. We call that flywheel savings — they're constantly building up balances and drawing down instead of some kind of high-cost borrowing."

A great way to compound financial information is for employers to stay abreast of current legislation and remind employees of their options when extra funds are made available. Flacke points to the Child Tax Credit and aspects of the Secure Act 2.0 as ways to direct workers to publicly available resources that can provide additional income and set them up to take advantage of employer benefits.

"It's straightforward intuition that folks who are experiencing more financial pain or anxiety recognize that it would be nice to have a little bit of cushion," Flacke says. "Savings is the optimal tool to manage volatility — it's most cost effective, it's fastest, it's most flexible, it's more dignified, because you're not having to rely on anybody else." **EBN**

WORKFORCE MANAGEMENT

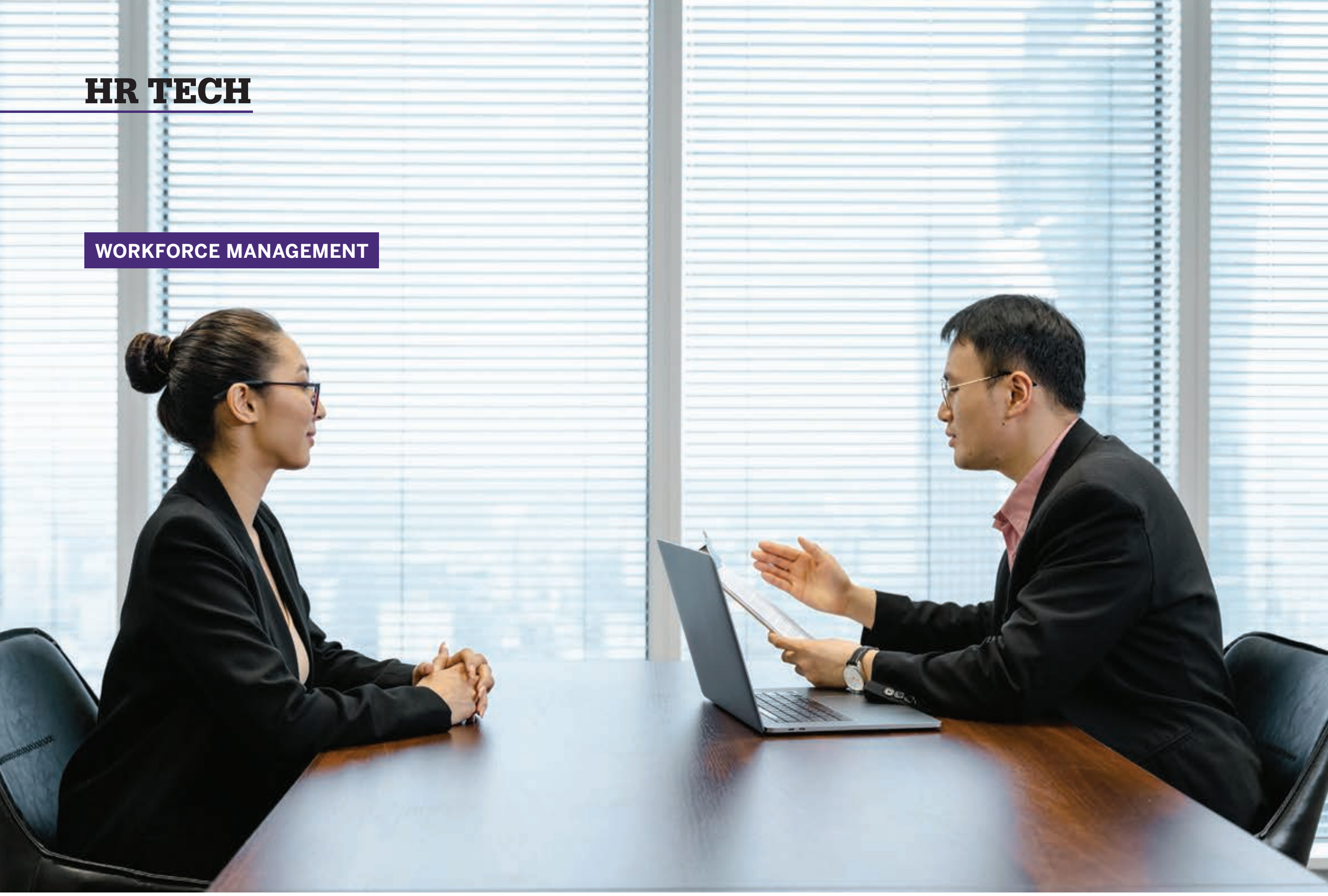


Photo: Mart Production from Pexels

Use tech to trim bias from performance reviews

Josh Merrill, co-founder and CEO of Confirm, shares how the platform's "auto-calibration" technology will revolutionize how companies treat performance reviews.

▸ By DEANNA CUADRA

There is pressure on HR teams and managers to revise how they approach promotions and lay-offs to reduce bias. Transforming performance reviews is an essential part of that process.

Traditionally, performance reviews are often at the whim of managers, and it can take HR months to assess whether leaders in relevant departments find each other's ratings consistent. Otherwise known as calibration, HR teams will put functionally-related managers in a room and run through every employee, asking if they seem to have been rated fairly.

HR tech company Confirm has launched new software to help employees overhaul this approach — managers and employees will be expected to submit reviews on their colleagues into Confirm's "auto-calibration" program, and the software will then pinpoint discrepancies in ratings and flag which employees need to be further reviewed.

"We need more than just the manager's perspective to be able to give somebody a really accurate assessment of their performance," says Josh Merrill, co-founder and CEO of Confirm. "That's why we rely on a network, which is all those people that you may work with, who may not even be on the same team, or even in the same department as you, but have something useful to say about your performance."

In a workforce of 1,000 employees and 200 managers, the traditional process is not only tedious, but makes it easy for bias to slip through the cracks, Merrill says. Research on performance reviews has found that one's rating is mostly based on the idiosyncrasies or personal judgments of the rater. In other words, a managerial-centered performance review process is bound to have its failings.

"Calibration is the process of adjusting ratings so that we get a consistent scale," says Merrill. "An HR team can spend six to eight weeks paralyzed by the calibration process, going line by line to talk about every single person."

"We need more than just the manager's perspective to be able to give somebody an accurate assessment of their performance. If a company doesn't have a really good picture of their talent, they don't have good ways of understanding the difference people are making at work."

Confirm's auto-calibration does not assess reviews based on a traditional corporate structure. Instead, it uses organizational network analysis, a tool that measures how people communicate and collaborate across teams and departments, noting which workers are vital to the flow of information and connection — rather than just what one manager may think of them.

Auto-calibration accounts for how colleagues who constantly cross paths feel about each other's performance, regardless of their title or team. If the software finds that an employee's manager and co-workers share a similar point of view, then there's no need for that employee to be under further scrutiny. Their rating is calibrated. But if there is a notable difference in their rating, then HR knows just by a glance that this employee needs to be further reviewed, explains Merrill.

"All this data is brought to the same dashboard, where it's visible to managers and HR," he says. "There's a wall of data, and on the left you can see all the people in the company, their function and their department. The software finds somebody who needs attention, and we flag them. This is the stuff HR does by hand today."

Merrill points out that on average, only 10 to 15% of ratings actually need to be changed, yet the process just adds to HR leaders' task lists before the matter is resolved. Using Confirm, if an employee received negative feedback from their manager but positive feedback from their co-workers, auto-calibration can reveal those discrepancies without weeks worth of meetings.

Merrill also underlines what this technology could mean for promotions and layoffs. For example, if a manager believes that a certain employee is great, but peers find that employee to be difficult to work with, that employee may not be promoted without trackable improvement. Additionally, Merrill believes auto-calibration can easily highlight a company's top performers, ensuring that if worse comes to worst and employers have to make cuts, they don't lose vital talent due to inconsistent, biased ratings.

"We see more and more companies doing [layoffs] these days, and the first thing that goes through my head is, 'Did they really pick the right people?'" says Merrill. "Or is it a biased and broken process that is causing them to let go of a lot of people who don't deserve to be?"

Merrill hopes this new software will make it easier for companies to make more equitable, inclusive decisions without an administrative nightmare for overworked HR teams. But whether employers add auto-calibration to their people toolbox, Merrill advises them to thoroughly know their workforce.

"If a company doesn't have a really good picture of their talent, they don't really have good ways of understanding the difference people are making at work," he says. "This is going to lead to some suboptimal decisions." **EBN**

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Aflac's CHRO models work-life balance to his teams

"If you send me an email at 9 p.m. tonight, there's a 100% chance I'm not going to respond to it," says Matthew Owenby, Aflac's CHRO.

▶ By ALYSSA PLACE

Photo: August de Richelieu from Pexels

For remote and hybrid workers, the line between work and home time has become so blurred, it can seem like one in the same. That's having a persistent negative impact on mental health and well-being nearly three years since the start of COVID.

"If you're surrounded by work all the time, at least from my perspective, it can be very troubling," says Matthew Owenby, chief human resource officer at Aflac. "A lot of the mental health issues are because there's no natural breaks for people to separate their work and their life."

Aflac's nearly 15,000 employees work a remote or hybrid schedule, and ensuring that employees have the time to unwind and the benefits to support them has been top priority for Owenby and his team. The company offers both remote and on-site mental health counselors, which Owenby says has reduced the stigma around discussing mental health, while providing immediate access to care.

Beyond benefits, Owenby says he prioritizes his work-life balance every day, by limiting after-hours emails and taking his PTO. He shares what works for him, and what other employers and leaders can do to address workplace burnout.

What are some of the persistent pain points employees are dealing with that are impacting their mental health?

Aflac employs thousands of people globally, so I get to talk to employees about how they're feeling. The mental health issues that either came out of the pandemic or have been sustained throughout the past couple of years are not surprising to me. You have people that are still struggling with the balance of work that has invaded their homes. Leaders really have to be adept, thoughtful and communicative so that distance doesn't mean isolation.

"Allow people that separation between work and life. In fact, insist upon it. Take time off, take your PTO, take your mental wellness day."

How is Aflac addressing that, and encouraging a healthier work-life balance?

At Aflac, we have counselors both on-site and remote for people to reach out to and establish a relationship with and start having those dialogues. We make it safe to talk about anxiety and depression and the issues that we see. But if you're thinking that a couple of links on a webpage is going to make a difference, it probably isn't. We have to be willing as employers to be customized, like with physical health.

Over the past year and a half, we've started having town halls and focus groups about things that we're going to be doing to support mental wellness and mental health. We brought in outside people to speak about it and to start making it just as common as any other wellness support, whether I'm talking about fitness or diet, or financial wellness. We've seen that it took away some of the stigma that may be attached to these issues, and just made it part of our normal offerings of benefits for our employees. Since we started the town halls, we've seen about a 45% uptick in the use of our programs regarding mental health.

How are you planning to address and expand your mental health and wellness support as we move through 2023?

What we don't want to do is have this be a sort of an annual enrollment type experience — we want this to be as integrated into a person's life as their diet preferences, their fitness routine, and their general healthcare protocol. It should not be a once-a-year activity, it just should be incorporated into how people manage their health. So our big goal around these types of benefits is to ensure that people understand what's available for them, and then as they're accessing it, that they're getting what they need.

In 2023, we're really going to focus on the next stage of what we believe is a part of employee mental health, which is financial security. So offering budgeting and financial planning and retirement and how it all plays together. We know that if people don't feel financially secure, they experience a lot of anxiety on the job, which leads to all sorts of negative mental health outcomes.

What's your one piece of advice for employers?

This is going to sound super basic, but allow people that separation between work and life. In fact, insist upon it. Take time off, take your PTO, take your mental wellness day, take that break, and when you take that break, leave Aflac behind. There is nothing that's going to happen here, in the next two days or even week, that's going to be super important to Aflac. We can sustain the organization without you for a period of time. Aflac has nearly 15,000 employees globally, so a portion of them being out, while it may be inconvenient, it's not catastrophic.

For me, some of the things I don't do: I don't send crazy emails after a certain hour in the day. I don't send to-do lists for people over the weekends. I don't check my own email after certain hours. I don't constantly create fire drills for people. I try to plan my day around preventing the need for rushed work.

But I also set up my own boundaries — if you send me an email at 9 p.m. tonight, there's a 100% chance I'm not going to respond to it. When somebody, for example, takes PTO, I will never email them or call them, so I expect the same out of myself. If I'm on PTO, I'm going to be on PTO and try as you may, you will not get me. **EBN**

HEALTHCARE

Keeping healthcare simple

Mindful that too many choices can diminish value, advisers need to make healthcare and benefit programs easier for clients to understand.

▸ By BEN CONNER

Today's employers are overwhelmed with information, making everyday decisions a challenge. The healthcare system is no exception. Organizations may default to a check-the-box approach to deliver a program for their people. As advisers, we have the opportunity to alleviate stress caused by information overload so employers can begin to make clear decisions about their benefit needs.

Some advisers believe that keeping communications complicated creates job security for our community. In fact, the opposite is true. When we're thoughtful about how we construct healthcare plans for our clients they can begin to understand the reasons behind the strategy. Simplicity, leading the way to understanding, can help eliminate guessing by employers and provides employees with improved benefits.

A 2022 report by Joblist found that 80% of those looking for jobs believe employers need to re-evaluate the benefits they offer. The report also noted that almost 40% of full-time employees report being "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" with their available benefits. If our clients need to re-evaluate their benefits plans to better represent their people, they may not know exactly what their people need.

Employers get very excited when we use the word "simplify." Instead of overloading them with plan data and technical terms, simplify. Create strategies that align with the company's long-term needs and deliver those strategies in a way that clients can understand. When we overcomplicate healthcare benefits, our clients may default to a less-than-optimal choice that not only affects their bottom line, but their entire workforce.

While getting technical is important for us as advisers, going technical with clients isn't helpful without first establishing an understanding of the strategy. Specialists and partners are great resources when a program requires options that are outside of your knowledge or expertise. This is especially true when considering rules and regulations. Compliance is extremely important.

Ben Conner, CEO, Conner Insurance

Photo: Conner Insurance

Once a complete understanding of the proposed policy has been reached, any pros, cons and outcomes to each option can be highlighted. If we take the time to review possible scenarios carefully and answer any questions that may arise, employers can begin to make confident choices. From there, HR teams and leaders should be involved, educated and armed with resources to help support employees. However, our job is not done there. We have the ability to assist with and promote benefit programs throughout the year, making access and understanding easier for employees.

As experts in our field, we need to make sure the information our clients receive is digestible. We need to provide the right insights and take a consultative approach to ensure everyone is making wise choices.

In a nutshell: simplify choices.

When we provide companies with a better understanding of their healthcare programs, we improve perceived value — something that ultimately generates new business for advisers. **EBN**

WELLNESS

5 ways to manage 'whole employee' wellness

In helping clients adapt to increasingly demanding employee populations, we need to be more mindful of purpose, flexibility, culture, career development and wellness.

▶ By ED LIGONDE

As we kick off a new year, there's a marked shift in the employee benefit space that advisers are having to keep tabs on: the rise of the "whole" employee.

In MetLife's recent employee benefit trend study, a decline in the number of employees willing to stick with their employer has been spotted over the past few years. A major reason? Employee well-being. Employees are looking to their employers to help support ongoing health and wellness needs from a personal perspective, as well as provide tools to combat mental health declines. Insurance plans are not always the best solutions for these difficulties.

There are five key areas that the survey suggested employers should focus on. Let's determine how advisers can help their clients tackle each of these:

Ed Ligonde, EVP, Nielsen Benefits

1. Purposeful work

Depending on the client's industry, this is a matter of helping employers understand that their culture matters. As advisers, challenge employer clients to consider all positions and help derive ways to educate members on the ecosystem and why each role at the organization is so relevant to the company's success. And, if any of these positions are deemed not important, then candidly, you've at least helped them identify a way to streamline.

2. Flexibility and work-life balance

While advising employers on how to handle remote and hybrid office environments, we also can help them understand a significant shift in the diverse workforce and how talent now can be found all over the country or globe.

3. Social and supportive cultures

This one is probably the most obvious yet underrated area. Employees thrive in a culture that is supportive and engaging to the point where they feel as safe as possible.

4. Career development

Providing employees with a path to growth or further learning helps individuals feel more wedded to an organization. As advisers, there are fantastic tools to further education that are available as "employee benefits" that also would fall under the "lifestyle" benefit category.

5. Wellness programs and benefits

Wellness is such a vague term, but we can help our employers understand what is important to their employee population. Whether incentives that steer employees toward low-cost and high-quality care, or supportive and diverse mental health resources, we need to help employers understand that these are much longer conversations that deserve more than a Band-Aid solution.

The benefit landscape is changing, and so are our roles and the way we are viewed as partners to our clients, rather than just a broker. This is no longer just an "insurance game" anywhere. It's the "employee game," and we have a front row seat. **EBN**

Photo: Nielsen Benefits

Insights for organizations leading the future of work

As the workplace changes and employees' priorities evolve, no one has their finger on the pulse of transformation like *Employee Benefit News*. This is your destination for recruiting and retention insights, DEI strategies, benefits analysis and so much more.

Employee Benefit News
ebn

Sign up today at
benefitnews.com

Creating value for her and her employer

When members are empowered to make better care decisions, it results in real value — for them and their employers. **GenerationYou™** offers 24/7 access to guidance, every step of the way. Members get the support they need throughout their health care journey while maximizing benefits and reducing costs.

Get more value from your plan:
go.umr.com/experience-genyou

GenerationYou™
powered by UMR