

Voluntary Benefits:

A Strategic Advantage for Brokers in a Complex Benefits Landscape

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For most Americans, life is becoming increasingly complex and so are their benefit needs. What was once a singular reliance on Employer sponsored Benefits and the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) has evolved into a broader demand for support during life's most challenging and joyful moments. In 2023 alone, approximately 20 million people used federal FMLA protections¹. But FMLA is only part of the picture.

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– Stephanie Shields

Head of Employee Benefits at Equitable Financial

Today, a growing suite of voluntary benefits is stepping in to fill the gap where traditional benefits, FMLA and state Paid Family & Medical Leave (PFML) programs fall short. For brokers, this evolution creates a unique opportunity to become trusted partners who guide employers through smarter, more holistic benefits strategies, which ultimately can lead to enhanced protection for employees.

The Broker's Opportunity: Leading the Shift

When employees go on leave whether for the birth of a child or a medical emergency it often triggers more than just time off. It can introduce new financial pressures not covered by traditional benefits or PFML such as travel expenses, childcare expenses, and emotional stress.

Voluntary benefits help fill those critical gaps with coverage options such as:



Accident and critical illness insurance



Mental health and counseling services



Hospital indemnity plans



Support for caregiving, transportation, or home modifications

As benefits become more personalized and state regulations vary, employers are relying on brokers to help them make sense of it all. The best broker is no longer just a product vendor, but a strategic partner to employers who understands the regulatory landscape, workforce demographics, and a company's culture.

“The brokers who win are those who act like an extension of the HR team,” says Shields. “They're not just selling products; they're building support systems for their clients.”

1. <https://behappyfamily.com/how-many-people-take-unpaid-leave-for-their-families.html>

Brokers must bridge the gap between benefit offerings and employee understanding, ensuring that what's available is not only visible but also valued.

Despite nearly 90% of U.S. organizations offering at least one voluntary benefit², many employees remain unaware of what's available. This disconnect presents a major opportunity for brokers to add value.

Raising awareness of these benefits is only part of the job, brokers are being asked to help employers create communication strategies that make voluntary benefits accessible and easy to understand. When done right, these benefits don't just support employees, but also build loyalty and engagement, driving better outcomes for employers and brokers alike.

"For brokers to continue to successfully navigate this ever-changing regulatory landscape, they need strong partnerships with carriers who provide tools and insights they need," says Alyssa Arellano, Head of Product & Technology Solutions at Equitable.

Equitable understands the heightened role brokers must play. "We're investing in our broker partnerships like never before," says Arellano. "We ensure brokers are equipped to explain how our products integrate with the entire benefits ecosystem, inclusive of other products and technology, because employers and employees expect transparency and simplicity."

Equitable's investment in broker partnerships is already delivering results. Since launching Equitable's Digital Onboarding solution in 2023, 97% of brokers say it's easy to do business with Equitable³. This tool is one piece of a larger digital connection strategy because ease of doing business is about making benefits accessible to employees. That's why technology is designed not just to perform, but to connect—delivering a more human experience where it matters most.

Brokers should prioritize working with carriers who offer intuitive, tech-enabled experiences. For example, according to research by LIMRA, 4 in 10 employers would change carriers if their current insurance carrier was unable to connect their products to its benefit technology platform⁴.



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Defining Success for Brokers

There's no one-size-fits-all solution, but successful voluntary benefit programs share common traits: clear communication, seamless access, personalized fit, and measurable impact.

For brokers, success translates into:



Stronger, longer-lasting client relationships



Differentiation from competitors through consultative value



Increased revenue opportunities



Better client outcomes and satisfaction with increased employee participation rates



Elevated role as a trusted strategic, value-added partner

"If an employee has a positive experience, others take notice," says Shields. "Word-of-mouth feedback drives awareness and interest in the benefits, which bubbles up to the employer and the broker. It's a full-circle moment."

2. <https://www.ifebp.org/docs/default-source/pdf/resources---news/articles/ee-bene-surv-22.pdf>

3. Equitable Voice of the Customer survey, "Broker & Employer Implementation Experience Survey Results" (1/1/25 peak season results, October 2024 – February 2025).

Traditional benefits and PFML may be the foundation, but it's often not enough to meet the demands of today's workforce. As employees' needs grow more complex and life continues to evolve, voluntary benefits are becoming not just helpful but essential.

Today's employers need benefits that go beyond basic coverage to provide meaningful, real-life solutions that support employees through every stage of work

and life. To deliver on that promise, they need more than just products, they need strong, knowledgeable, and innovative brokers who can guide strategy, drive engagement, and build benefit ecosystems that truly work.

"The future of benefits isn't just about what's offered," says Shields, "It's about how it's delivered, understood, and experienced. And brokers have a pivotal role to play in making that future a reality."

About Equitable

As a U.S. company with roots going back to 1859, Equitable offers the strength and wisdom that comes with generations of experience as an insurance pioneer. To that heritage, we add the innovation and expertise of an employee benefits business that's been purpose-built to meet the evolving needs of the modern workforce. Together, we strive to learn and improve while always keeping sight of what matters most to the brokers, employers, employees and providers we serve.

The 1859-year history reference applies exclusively to Equitable Financial Life Insurance Company.

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GE- 8403341.1(9/25)(Exp.9/29)