

Enrollment strategy

High expectations for enrollment firms means having a trusted partner in the space is critical

BY GILLIAN ROBERTS

The good ol' days are over for many in this business, including for some enrollment firms.

For brokerage HNI Risk headquartered in New Berlin, Wis., this has meant departing from the firm's previous tactic of exporting clients to different vendors for HR automation. Anthony Fioretti, chief benefits officer, chose instead to hire a technology contractor to serve as an internal technology consulting firm of sorts for his clients. It has made a huge difference.

"It was just such a huge array of providers that were ever-changing and evolving," Fioretti says about automation vendors. "So we chose a different path and chose to look at Michael [Weiskirch], who's a contract hire at HNI, and now have a specialist who can work with existing processes that clients have and also work with those who don't

have enrollment technology to help them start it."

He emphasizes that the dexterity that comes with having an in-house person to work with a client and tailor to their needs is really important to the diversity of his clients' circumstances.

"We've become a technology consulting firm that crosses a lot of bridges — it touches enrollment and also payroll. We have sponsored technologies that we've purchased en masse, but we didn't have the resources and so we chose to hire this specialist," Fioretti says.

Weiskirch is HR technology adviser at HNI. While he understands that not all advisory companies may have the resources to hire someone like him (HNI has about 105 employees and four offices throughout the Midwest), smaller brokerages can take something away from their philosophy.

"The discussions with clients [now] are bigger than benefits," Weiskirch says. "The clients are HR professionals or people who are operators and they're pretty lean, so they're looking to the benefit adviser as the best person to help them with ... not just health costs but managing everything around their health plans."

With the Affordable Care Act requiring greater accountability through increased reporting requirements, Weiskirch says employers are going to have to up their game as it relates to HR technology if they want to keep up.

"Now the benefit broker is being put into a situation where they have to have a broader understanding of the marketplace. It doesn't always involve straight-up enrollment," he says.

He adds that if a firm can't afford someone like him full time, there are ways the broker himself can become more a consultative adviser.

Selecting a partner

But HNI's tactic isn't necessarily the norm for the entire industry. Bob Harnett, vice president of Washington-based Silberstein Insurance Group, says enrollment firms are very much still in demand, especially with the continuing rise in popularity of voluntary benefits for brokerages.

He says, however, you don't want to work with just any firm. His tips for proper selection include:

- Look at how enrollment professionals are evaluated: "Whenever I work with enrollment firms I always ask how the benefits counselors are judged," Harnett says. "The good ones typically say some variation of whether or not the employee understands



the message that's being delivered."

He adds, "You don't want to work with a company where the benefits counselors are judged on how much they sell."

He also explains that the evaluation of employee understanding is measured at the conclusion of enrollment through employee feedback responses.

- Look at how enrollment professionals are trained: "Are they trained not just on products but on the culture of the client?" Harnett says.

Ask if a firm trains their team based on the uniqueness of the client they're working on. If they just say, for example, "Well, it's a hospital and we specialize in hospitals," Harnett says to shy away from them.

The best answer to that question is, "We make sure the HR team and senior executives at the client have the opportunity to speak with the benefits enrollment counselors as part of the training process."

Simply having a specialty doesn't make the firm good, but specializing in tailor-made programs does.

- Trust: "One of my main criteria is can I trust the main person and the people he's hiring to be put in front of my client?" Harnett says.

Brokers should evaluate the firm based on if the company delivers what they verbally say they are going to do. If it's anything less, they can't and shouldn't be trusted. Harnett learned that lesson from a bad experience that almost cost him one of his clients.

"The enrollment date came and they'd done a great job up until then, but when it came down to it, they didn't have enough physical staff to complete the onsite enrollment," he says.

As a result, Harnett's client's employees were waiting in long lines, not being seen at appointment times and being generally delayed. Harnett's staff had to step in and start doing enrollments because it would have been even worse if they hadn't.

"Things fall down when the senior person at the enrollment organization makes a promise and they can't deliver and they can't make an adjustment on the fly in a changing situation," he says.

From that time on he's really stuck to his three criteria and hasn't taken risks when it comes to enrollment firms.

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Narrow the search

HNI's Weiskirch also has some tips for questions to ask the client before going out on a vendor search of your own:

- Find out how the client communicates with their employees.
- What are the client's needs from a data standpoint?
- What are their needs around their benefit plans and eligibility rules? This is an especially important question because that requirement may be challenging and means not every system is a proper fit.
- What is their end goal with automation and how are they measuring success?

He adds that one particular vendor shouldn't be the end-all-be-all for your clients. Not every client should be matched with the same vendor.

A team mentality

Brokers are looking at enrollment firms to truly be trusted partners and act as extensions of their own team. For Dan LaBroad that's meant including the enrollment professionals from Colonial as team members when his brokerage, Ovation Health & Life Services in Dallas, walks in to enroll clients.

Colonial was a natural choice for him because ancillary benefits are a large part of their compensation model. When Aflac, the company they'd previously worked with, wasn't able to take a new account, LaBroad turned to Colonial and hasn't looked back.

"All other firms cost money," he says. "They've become a very strategic partner for us and we always put Colonial in because they do the enrollment for us."

It's been apparent in the numbers as well. In the first year since adding Colonial products, Ovation revenue increased 40% and it's consistently increased by 20% the two years after that," LaBroad reports.

"It pulled a lot off my plate and allowed me to focus on sales, which is what we tell our own clients when we're selling

them products."

One example of the team spirit Colonial has displayed is with a particular Ovation client that has 200 employees — nearly 75% of whom are blind. Since the employees needed to create a signature on the computer during the enrollment, Colonial's staff was in a bind.

"They went out and bought microphones and voice-recorded all the signatures into the computers right there," LaBroad says. "The personal touch makes all the difference."

LaBroad says the in-person take is important for all enrollment firms. He's noticed from past experiences that the 80% participation that comes with in-person enrollment is light years away from phone enrollments that usually garnered 8%-10% participation historically.

The camaraderie between benefit advisers and brokers and enrollment firms is certainly a by-product of the brave new world the whole industry is entering.

"Some enrollment firms are still strictly about open enrollment, but we're moving to an ongoing, year-long, in-person service model. We have 15,000 employees that we do insurance on across all clients," LaBroad says. "Every single one of them has my cell phone number."

Silberstein's Harnett agrees. "Communication is key for enrollment firms," he says. "They all have tech, platform, good relationships with carriers and can deliver products, but communicating with the employees effectively, letting them know what's going on, is really the key to success for an enrollment company."

In other words, the more the employees feel like a part of the team too, the better. "There are several studies that show that simply communicating benefits, even without changing a single thing about them, increases employee satisfaction 70%," Harnett concludes. **EBA**