



At-A-Glance Guide from
Empyrean Benefit Solutions

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2020 ANNUAL ENROLLMENT PREP GUIDE: ACHIEVE BENEFITS SUCCESS



 **EMPYREAN**

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has transformed nearly everything about today's work environment, including the biggest event in employee benefits: Annual Enrollment (AE).

More employees are working remotely than ever before, parents are juggling conference calls while their kids attend virtual classes, and companies are navigating the pandemic as the situation evolves every day. Meanwhile, benefit teams are tasked with getting through all of the noise and distractions to keep their employees engaged, satisfied, and productive.

Annual Enrollment is the central moment that defines the success of your benefits strategy. This year the stakes are higher than ever: The coronavirus crisis has underscored the importance of selecting the right coverage choices in protecting participants' health, financial wellbeing, and overall peace of mind. In addition to their benefits package, employees also need proper support to choose *and utilize* the right plans for their needs.

This guide will help you orient your AE planning, so you can execute an enrollment season that will reach, resonate, and deliver positive results for your employees and business throughout these uncertain times *and beyond*.



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Understanding How COVID-19 Has Impacted Annual Enrollment

The way we work has been fundamentally and forever altered by the coronavirus pandemic. Moving forward, it is largely expected that many employees will continue to work remotely – even after the threat of the virus has passed. **As you plan for this year’s virtual enrollment, consider improvements and new approaches to implement that will serve you in tomorrow’s remote-work environment.**

Take time to consider the many ways COVID-19 has impacted your workforce, so you can adjust your enrollment strategy as necessary. **Think of this year as an opportunity to optimize your approach to enrollment and test new avenues to engage employees.**

Here are a few steps to consider:



Plan and prep early

Everyone is working under new conditions – including you and your team. Give yourself extra time to prepare for this year’s AE and adjust to the challenges of fully virtual collaboration and communication. Create clearly defined roles and set a calendar of milestones for your team that includes post-AE follow up. Dedicate an extra week (*or more*, if possible) to ensure you have everything in order for a smooth enrollment season.



Keep employees focused

Like you, your workforce is adjusting to major shifts brought on by the pandemic. Employees across all populations are facing more distractions to enrollment than ever before. Consider reaching out to employees earlier – and more often – than in previous years. Begin reaching out to employees *at least* 60 days before your enrollment window opens. Regardless of whether you’re holding an active or passive enrollment, all employees should be encouraged to review their benefits to make sure they have the right coverage – especially as the situation around COVID-19 remains unpredictable. Early *and continuous* communication will help keep your enrollment metrics on track.



Review your AE goals

The emergence of the coronavirus has forced many businesses to rethink their priorities and goals this year. How has the pandemic impacted the structure of your company or workforce? How might you need to adjust your benefits strategy or enrollment expectations to accommodate these recent changes? Spend time thinking through recent changes and potential adjustments with your team to develop a clear understanding of where your strategy stands today.

Planning for Success

This year's enrollment may look vastly different from previous years, but there are still key questions and processes to review as you plan. There are also a host of new factors to consider depending on how your business, industry, and workforce have evolved over the last few months.

Begin by analyzing your year-over-year metrics to establish your AE starting point. **Identify trends and opportunities for optimization, while also factoring in your company's COVID-19 response where appropriate, and adjust your goals accordingly.**

Think through the following questions with your team:

Have any of your benefit plans, carriers, or vendors changed since your last enrollment?

- ◆ How have your expectations evolved for your internal team and external vendors going into AE?

Has your organization gone through any major *planned* structural or strategic shifts?

- ◆ Has your organization made any unplanned structural, strategic, or workforce changes as a result of COVID-19 or another sudden change?

Where are your employees currently working? Are most employees working remotely, or are many still on location or working from a traditional office?

- ◆ Has your organization experienced furloughs or workforce reductions? Have certain employee populations been more heavily impacted by these changes than others?
- ◆ What additional changes do you expect to impact your workforce over the course of the next year? How might these changes alter your benefits strategy moving forward?

How knowledgeable are your employees when it comes to enrolling in their benefits?

- ◆ Are your employees well aware of the tools and options available to support them during enrollment *and* year round?
- ◆ Are there any new resources or decision support tools your employees need to know about?

What lessons and feedback did you gather from last year's enrollment experience? How should these takeaways shape your plans for this upcoming enrollment?

- ◆ What feedback or common questions have you received from employees since the COVID-19 pandemic began?

As you plan, remember to also review the following topics:



Eligibility rules and gatekeeping processes

How have your employee populations and eligibility rules changed since last year? To avoid data issues from ineligible elections, you'll want to make sure your employees and dependent eligibility rules are precisely aligned with your organization's needs and requirements. Take care especially when managing multiple complex populations with unique attributes (such as union employees, furloughed employees, grandfathered populations, and retirees).



Regulatory compliance requirements

Address any compliance concerns early on in your AE planning, to allow your team and vendors time to review and resolve any issues as needed. Also ensure your solution is properly aligned with the latest updates from the IRS, including those related to COVID-19 relief efforts. Your benefits administration partner should offer dedicated in-house expertise to help keep your business in consistent compliance and protected from potential penalties.





Service Center trends

If utilizing a Service Center as part of your AE strategy, review inquiries from previous enrollment seasons to gain a full picture of the common topics that employees have struggled to understand in the past. Connect with your benefits administration partner to discuss solutions and best practices to help support participants' benefits comprehension – such as adding FAQs to your employee benefits portal. Also review call volume trends to understand when employees are most likely to need assistance, and determine if your communication strategy can be bolstered to provide additional support to employees during these periods.



Additional benefits and resources

Annual Enrollment is the time of year when your employees are most focused on their benefits. In addition to ensuring they select the right coverage, AE is also a crucial time to remind employees about *all* of the benefits, tools, and resources available to them. Telehealth services, wellness programs, financial wellness resources, and your employee assistance program (EAP) can be especially helpful options for employees during this stressful time. Take advantage of the spotlight AE brings to your benefits to drive greater value and encourage employees to leverage their *entire* benefits package.

After reviewing these key topics with your team, regroup with your benefits enrollment and administration partner to discuss your objectives for AE. Your benefits administration service team should be able to provide you with year-over-year insights into your company's goals, best practices to support your benefits strategy, and ideas to address any specific concerns you have related to COVID-19 or your overall plans.



Making Enrollment Easy for Your Employees

The coronavirus pandemic has resulted in a workforce that is more scattered than ever before. **This dynamic shift in the workplace has made leveraging the right technology a must for almost everything** – from conference calls to online benefits enrollment.

As a benefits leader, **it's up to you to ensure that your employees have the tools and guidance they need to make smart decisions about their health, wealth, and benefits coverage**, no matter where or how your employees may be working today.

The following tips will help you build a benefits communication strategy that resonates with your employees:



Acknowledge the situation around COVID-19

Between managing work responsibilities and family life, employees' time and focus are at an all-time premium. Under normal circumstances, 56% of employees spend less than half an hour shopping for their benefits, and 14% do no research at all.¹ Now, your employees may be tempted to spend even less time comparing plans – or worse, may simply select the same plans as last year. Be sure to acknowledge the difficulties presented by the pandemic in your AE communications, and encourage employees to leverage this year's enrollment to re-evaluate their needs, familiarize themselves with their all of their benefit options, and bring greater peace of mind to them and their families as the situation around COVID-19 continues to develop.



Transform in-office events into virtual experiences

With so many employees working from home, HR teams have to re-think the usual AE office mainstays, such as posters and benefit fairs. Regular reminders, educational materials, and events are all key to driving employee engagement – but now these options must be re-tooled to fit today's remote workforce. Brainstorm ways to bring similar experiences directly to your employees through channels such as email, intranet and other online reminders, interactive webinars, and videos. Even if being held virtually, these events can still drive greater comprehension and value to your benefits package.



Maintain a two-way dialogue with employees

When working remotely, it's easy to rely on "one-way" modes of communication (such as email). After all, employees can no longer simply pop into your office or stop you in the hallway to ask a quick question. However, relying on just one form of communication can lead to a backlog of questions in your inbox and leave participants feeling isolated and overlooked when they don't receive a timely enough response. Instead, encourage employees to start a *dialogue* via phone calls or online chat conversations (such as Skype). This will help keep lines of communication open, allow employees to get their questions answered faster, and re-emphasize the *human* element of HR – even at a distance. Better yet, leverage a client-dedicated Service Center to provide live, one-on-one assistance to employees without adding additional burden to your workload.



Help your employees help themselves

Selecting the wrong benefits coverage can lead to increased financial risks, more stress, and greater dissatisfaction for employees. The stakes of your benefits strategy may be higher than ever – but making the enrollment process as quick, easy, *and effective* as possible will lead to happier employees and more positive outcomes for your overall business. Emphasize employees' self-service solutions from the very start of your AE communications. Your benefits administration provider should offer convenient mobile solutions for benefits selection, enrollment, and utilization that provide employees with the exact tools they need, right when they need them. With the right support at their fingertips, employees can make smarter decisions and save time and money in the process.



CONCLUSION

With the right planning and proactive solutions, you can help your employees experience peace of mind – even during these uncertain times. And while this upcoming Annual Enrollment may be unique, your benefits administration service should be more reliable than ever. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed much about the way we work, but it does not have to derail the success of your strategy or compromise the service quality of your benefits partner.

Is your vendor reliable, knowledgeable, and equipped with solutions to best execute your strategy? Or do you find yourself struggling to keep up with administrative tasks, employee complaints, or frequent data errors due to inefficient processes or sub-par service?

As you collaborate with your vendors, take time to evaluate the solutions, service, and support they provide to your team and your participants. Optimizing your Annual Enrollment approach today will help prepare you and your employees for tomorrow's virtual world.



References

1. Aflac Workforces Report: 2019-2020 Workplace Benefits Trends." Aflac, Inc. Columbus, GA. November 2019. https://www.aflac.com/docs/awr/pdf/2020-overview/aflac-2020-awr-executive_summary_overview.pdf

ABOUT EMPYREAN

Empyrean Benefit Solutions looks to enrich employees' lives by making benefits matter every day.

Empyrean provides employee benefit solutions without compromise through the development and delivery of software and services.

Founded in 2006, Empyrean serves more than 3.6 million participants annually across a wide spectrum of sizes, industries, and complexities.

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