



WORKFORCE

7 WAYS TO EASE OPEN ENROLLMENT

Increasing participation in your employer-sponsored health insurance plan is a good business move for employee health and retention.

By **National Restaurant Association** on Jul. 22, 2019



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An increasing number of restaurants offer health insurance to both hourly and salaried employees. And if you're an employer with 50 or more full-time-equivalent employees, you're required to offer your full-time employees health insurance or pay a penalty under the Affordable Care Act.

Yet insurance companies require that a certain percentage of employees enroll in the plan you offer, or they won't issue the policy. Those minimums—anywhere from half up to as high as 75%—can be tough to meet.

At the same time, restaurant employees often are reluctant to accept smaller paychecks in exchange for health coverage. Many of them are young and healthy; their car payments take precedence over unforeseeable medical expenses.

Here are ways to ease the open-enrollment process to help you reach the minimum participation requirements set by your insurer:

Start early. It takes two to three months to get plan options and pricing, to explain the plans to employees and get them signed up with all the proper forms, so that time needs to be built in. Many operators pad the “official” enrollment deadline by at least two weeks to hunt down missing information on forms and to answer any last-minute questions from employees. Make sure enrollment doesn't interfere with other company initiatives such as a menu rollout.

Communicate often. Constant communication is critical in open enrollment. Downers Grove, Ill.-based Cooper's Hawk Winery & Restaurants, for example, talks about open enrollment during preshift meetings, mails postcards to home addresses, sends messages over its smartphone-based scheduling platform and broadcasts information on kitchen LCD screens. Some companies set up information hotlines. Remind employees constantly where, when and how to get information and sign up.

Communicate the way your employees communicate. Tailor how employees enroll to the format they're most comfortable using. For Gen Z and millennials, put forms on a smartphone-based platform for them to fill out. For older employees, paper and online forms work.

Use technology. Technology can help with employee communication. Set up the insurance plan options in a way that lets employees compare, click benefit summaries and drill down on details that interest them—much like an online shopping experience.

Appoint an on-site point person. Designate someone at each of your locations to field employee questions. It's important to have an engaged champion at the restaurant level who is tracking the process and getting employees the information they need.

Offer decent coverage. It may seem obvious, but offering a robust plan will inspire more participation. When employees see cohorts in their same socioeconomic situation taking advantage of a great plan that fills their need for the basics—yearly checkups, flu shots and prescriptions—and protects them in the case of a major health issue, they're more likely to consider signing up.

Incentivize. Many restaurants find that they can entice participation in the enrollment process by offering those who sign up or attend info sessions the chance to win gift cards or iPads. And if long-term health or protection against a major health event is too abstract to motivate an employee to sign up, many plans can include coverage with more immediate benefits. For example, restaurant employees are on their feet, tallying huge numbers of steps each day. Some insurers offer wellness plans that let employees earn money for these efforts. The money goes into an individual health savings plan they can use to cover copays, prescriptions and other healthcare costs.

Association offers new insurance info resource

The National Restaurant Association recently enhanced its educational offerings on employer health insurance for restaurant operators. The new restauranthealthcare.org/resources website has resources such as an FAQ, glossary of insurance terms, news articles and more with additional information posting on a regular basis.

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