

Better by Design



FROM COST TO INVESTMENT A MINDSET SHIFT IN BENEFITS DESIGN

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, many organizations made a mindset pivot.

Faced with unforeseen change and unprecedented urgency, their view of traditional benefits and employer responsibility suddenly shifted to a wider perspective. This involved caring for employees in response to new needs and new working arrangements. Amidst disruption, fear and uncertainty, there was more focus on mental health and ergonomics to cope with working from home, along with new safety and screening measures in the workplace.

Traditional thinking on benefits typically revolve around coverages or reimbursement on medical expenses, with a focus on remediating an employee after they have fallen ill or gotten injured. Shifting to a new mode of thinking on benefits typically begins through a process

of realizing employee needs and proactively supporting employee wellbeing. For many, the pandemic has accelerated this realization.

Telehealth, for example, was widely known to be a viable alternative to in-person consultations, and an important way of providing health assistance that might otherwise not be accessed in a timely manner. But based on our [MMB Health On Demand](#) study, as of February 2020, telehealth had less than a 20% adoption rate. Six months later, the rate was 70% due to pandemic restrictions and concerns.

PRESSURE PROMPTS ACTION

From a design perspective, consultants articulated the value of integrated wellness long before the pandemic

struck, and organizations increasingly understood the strengths of approaching health and wellness holistically. But as the telehealth example highlights, drastic pressures often are needed before actions are taken. It does not have to be this way; a mindset shift, especially among leadership, can be the impetus.

That shift begins with the acknowledgement that health is not a cost but an investment — in society, community and prosperity, and business leaders are rising to the challenge. The COVID crisis, along with unrest bred by racial and other injustices, have shone a light on the disparities that exist between us, and employers have begun to embrace the role they can play in facing both the pandemic and in remedying inequality.



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Traditionally, benefit plans have provided more comprehensive benefits for the people at the top of the organizational pyramid, but it is the people at the bottom who need support to address accessibility, affordability and quality issues. In emerging markets especially, the COVID crisis has underscored the complex extended family realities people must deal with, and the need for flexible policies. MMB's Health on Demand survey tells us that 93% of Indonesian workers have caregiving responsibilities, as opposed to 25% in the UK.

FROM VALUE TO REVOLUTION

Progressive leadership understands the need to provide benefits that deliver maximum value to both employer and employee. This means modernizing plans, ensuring that money is spent on things that improve health, performance and employee engagement in a pandemic environment — and for the long term. These extend from existing wellness initiatives — and the need to better communicate their availability — to the telehealth revolution.

In addition, investment in low-cost healthcare services that have proven long-term value can prevent the escalation to crisis care. Making sure employees are aware of governmental resources is a good example — in the US the National Institutes of [Health's Wellness Toolkits](#) highlight evidence-based tips for living well and improving health.

Ensuring access to basic pharmaceuticals and encouraging workers to take advantage of screening and other forms of preventive care can reduce crisis-care costs and outcomes. It has been widely reported that the pandemic has discouraged many healthy people, along with those with existing health conditions, to avoid routine and preventive visits to healthcare providers. But through their communication and benefits programs, organizations can lead in overcoming fear and stasis in maintaining employee health.

Just as importantly, the mental health issues that have arisen during the pandemic are a good example of how employers have had to think about value more strategically. The current crisis has shone a light on how people's resilience and overall wellbeing has a major impact on performance and reflects on a brand. A supportive work environment with adequate mental health support is needed to help workers deal with isolation, pressure and protect their mental health. But our MMB Health on Demand research shows that 32 per cent of insurers do not provide plans covering mental health services.

A PRO-HEALTH NEW NORMAL

Indeed, when asked what employers could do to help promote health and well-being at work, 43% of both workers and employers wanted their companies to foster a more “pro-health” environment. Employers need to challenge the status quo and drive others in their ecosystem to change for the better.

More than ever, people want care that is personalized, convenient, affordable and secure. Developments such as telemedicine and digital cognitive behavioral therapy are opening up worlds of access to employees, and leadership has a real opportunity to make the most of this shift. The MMB Health on Demand research reveals that in growth markets, respondents reported far greater confidence in digital wellbeing solutions — if the solutions are promoted by their employers. In fact, 81% of growth market workers expressed this confidence, versus 48% of workers surveyed in mature markets.

If anything, the pandemic has exposed and amplified how unprepared many companies’ benefits plans have been — even for mature organizations. It has revealed

how traditional benefits were insufficient in the face of the new needs of a new normal.

As a collective — clients, brokers, health providers, and insurers — we need to pivot to a new ecosystem that can address actual needs, especially for companies implementing more sustained remote working arrangements. And for companies planning to resume pre-pandemic business activities, mental health and preventative care are crucial, on top of the need to prepare for the next pandemic. Be prepared to enhance your collaboration with carriers and consultants, to challenge them, and hold them accountable to your commitments. Be prepared to pilot and make mistakes, and be open to insurtech and healthtech.

The pandemic is a human crisis, and we all face similar levels of isolation, fatigue and stress. But our response has shown that we can rise to the challenge by employing creative solutions and committing to managing change and designing benefit systems to help rebuild organizational strength. The key now is to maintain this momentum to align our benefits ecosystems to the new normal.

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