

views you can use



Insurance & Benefits

Navigating the Maze

By Paul Breslau

Choosing the right health insurance agent from the hundreds in Scottsdale or the tens of thousands in Arizona is important. As expected, there are many good agents, a few excellent ones, and a handful of rotten apples. Here are guidelines for you to find an excellent agent for health insurance and benefits.

Complicated, Costly

You need an excellent agent because health insurance and benefits are complicated and costly. A top agent can help manage relentless, year-after-year premium increases which are the first part of the maze. Regularly review and modernize your program and compare competitive bids to make sure you maintain the best health insurance and benefits at the most affordable cost. The agent will help implement the changes. There is no cost advantage to going direct, so you might as well find the best agent possible.

The second part of the maze is that insurance companies often overburden their service staff. Insurance company growth, employee turnover, and systems challenges are common in these low-level customer service positions. Important insurance company enrollment and claim departments are frequently located several time zones away in other states or countries. Call wait times can be long and online self-service portals difficult to navigate. This makes the role of the agent even more important.

Needs Match

The objective is to find an excellent agent with expertise and experience for your situation. For example, if you are an

entrepreneur with a small business, an entrepreneurial agent who specializes in small groups is ideal. This agent knows the innuendos of the employer group market with 50 or fewer employees. Conversely, if you represent a large, publicly-traded company, you may be best off with the expertise of an agent working from one of the larger agencies in town. Some agents specialize in individuals and families and others in Medicare supplement and advantage plans. Find a health insurance and benefits agent that matches your needs.

Expertise, Experience, Education

Continue with finding a health insurance agent who has expertise and experience. One question to ask is how long has an agent been in the industry? Insurance is a relationship business, and you want to benefit from having an agent with relationships with key managers at the insurance companies. Try the Arizona Department of Insurance (www.id.state.az.us) for the agent's authority and dates first licensed.

Other questions you might ask include: What is the agent's depth of knowledge of billing, enrollment, and claims? Does your agent represent many insurance companies, or just a few? What kind of backup support will be available at the agency? Does your agent have any specialized insurance education? Will the agent stay involved with you or just pass you over to service staff and move on to the next sale?

Value-Added Services

"Find out if value-added services will be provided by the agent or agency,"

advises Rick Shuckerow, Managing Partner of Leavitt Group Benefits. "These can include COBRA administration, HR Consulting, monthly new employee enrollment meetings, custom Web portals, wellness programs, etc. Your agent should always be evaluating products and services and helping to select and implement the appropriate ones," continues Shuckerow.

Two-Part Process

Employers have two choices to make. The first is to choose an agent who will represent them over the years and help decide on, implement, and maintain their health insurance and benefits program. The second is to select the health insurance companies and benefits providers. I find that the two-step process is many times lumped together, and this may not be the best long-term interest. Some suggest that an agent should be selected off renewal with plenty of time in advance to plan and implement new strategy.

Agreeable with Shared Values

"Finding an agent you like, trust, and have rapport with is key," according to Pete Gorman of HUB International. "Many agents will have the expertise and technical knowledge, but find someone with your shared values. Your agent is the person who will help during difficult financial times and critical health events." ■

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