

## Ensuring your firm's DE&I strategy includes employee benefits

*The global pandemic and the wide ranging social justice protests of 2020 (such as Black Lives Matter) have highlighted material disparities (as well as instances of institutionalized racism) in healthcare access, treatment, and outcomes across race and gender. These events have pushed many organizations to accelerate their diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) strategies.*

While many professional service firms already recognize a connection between diversity and improved business results, there is an opportunity for strengthening the connection of already established DE&I plan to all parts of the firm. Employee benefit programs are an area commonly overlooked when considering DE&I-related reforms. This article outlines focus areas for HR leaders as they weave their DE&I strategy into their employee benefits. When employees feel personally and professionally supported by their benefits, their firm becomes more productive, competitive and resilient.

### Language Matters

A strong DE&I mission statement is a foundation for an organization's strategy, but employees may feel alienated if they encounter language in their benefits packages that contradicts that mission. It is crucial that HR leaders, as a first step, ensure that all benefits materials and communications are inclusively written and provide flexibility to all employees.

As a general principle, benefits communications should not assume that the reader is heterosexual and cisgender. For example, many large professional service firms offer coverage for "infertility treatments." This term, however, can exclude same-sex couples looking to start families. A more inclusive term would be "fertility services" or even "family building". It is also important to ensure that official plan documents and policies are written in a similarly inclusive manner and really would provide these services to same-sex couples, even when there is no medical diagnosis of infertility.

### Access Is Everything

The pandemic highlighted disparities and inequities in healthcare access, providing an opportunity for HR leaders to rethink provider networks. Employees may want information about a provider's race, languages spoken, and a measure of cultural competence. The healthcare marketplace is not currently set up to provide this type of information. That's why it's essential for HR leaders to consider more robust provider search functions, allowing employees to feel more confident that unique needs will be understood when accessing providers.

With the help of emerging vendors focused on specific DE&I requirements, firms can provide better access to this type of information. Some vendors help members of certain communities find health and wellness providers in their network's directory who are culturally competent in dealing with community-specific sensitivities. This approach can dramatically affect outcomes and it is important for firms to take into consideration.

## **Messaging from Firm Leadership Goes a Long Way**

Firm leaders need to embrace and clearly communicate to what extent DE&I is an organizational priority. If leadership is not visibly committed to embedding DE&I throughout the firm, it quickly can become a “token” program that’s recognized in one-off events but not taken seriously down the management chain.

Furthermore, the DE&I message needs to be consistent and flexible so it can be adjusted based on internal feedback. As everyone has blind spots, this feedback should be structured to come from a diverse group of individuals, like affinity or resource groups within the firm. To improve their approaches to DE&I actions, leaders must first listen to their diverse colleagues.

## **When in Doubt, Just Start**

It can be daunting to launch an all-encompassing DE&I strategy within benefits. HR leaders cannot focus on the needs of every employee subgroup at the same time.

With that in mind, it is important to identify an issue and pursue it, realizing that there is never a wrong place to start addressing this topic. Once firm stakeholders see the issues of a community being addressed, a precedent has been set that your firm is willing to listen to new needs and evolve its DE&I mission.

Above all else, employees need to be confident that leaders are not using diversity to score superficial points without any intention of pursuing change. The best DE&I strategies, within the firm and within employee benefit programs, support all employees, create real change and allow people to be themselves at work.

Aon’s **Professional Services Practice** and our **Health & Benefits** colleagues value your feedback. To discuss any of the topics raised in this article, please contact **Mark Scarafone**, **Peggy Sheedy**, and **Jake Delman**.