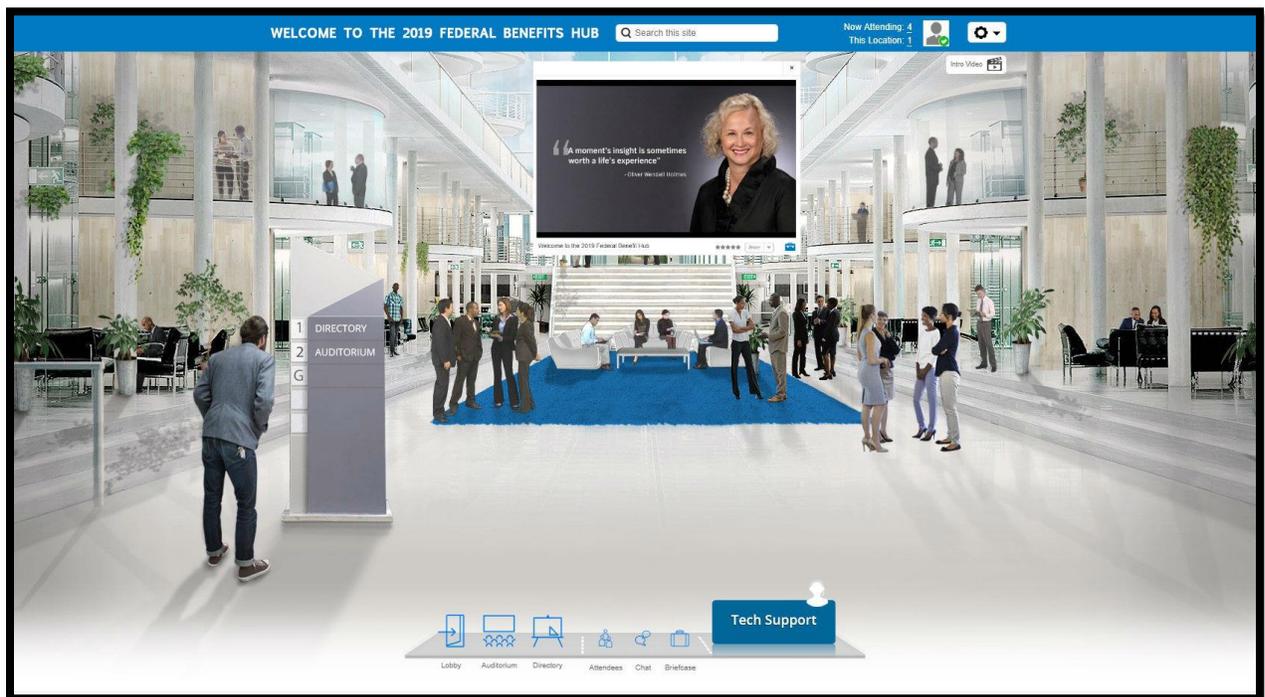


Why Organizations Increasingly Use Virtual Benefits Fairs for Open Enrollment

In addition to large multi-national companies, small and mid-sized organizations are increasingly employing employees that telework or are geographically dispersed in remote office locations. This makes the annual open enrollment process a much greater challenge.

In most organizations, it's all too rare that employees get opportunities to ask questions and engage with benefits representatives – often simply due to lack of time and resources.



Last year, Affiliated Computer Services, Inc., a Xerox company, decided to manage the process by creating a [virtual benefits fair](#) in support of its open enrollment season.

The company provided 45,000 of its U.S.-based employees an entirely new way of taking ownership of their health care options through an interactive, realistic and personal experience – all from the comfort of their homes or offices.

“We felt [the virtual Benefits fair technology] was ideally geared toward an enrollment event to help drive better success for employees as they’re making some pretty complex decisions that require a level of engagement that, historically, has been tough to garner. Traditional benefits fairs are costly and only attracted about 11 percent of the ACS employee population in the past,” says Rohail Khan, executive managing director for total benefits outsourcing with ACS.

The virtual benefits fair not only gave employees greater access to HR support via the educational tools and access to documents provided in the environment, it also helped the company eliminate some of the fixed costs associated with enrollment, such as paper and postage for enrollment kits.

Thousands of employees took advantage of the virtual benefits fair, with more than 20,000 documents being downloaded and the average visit lasting more than an hour.

During the first week of the four-week enrollment period, over 5,000 employees spent an average of 45 minutes in the interactive, virtual benefits fair.

“What that showed us was that if the information is presented in a way that will engage an associate in the right kind of conversation, then associates will actually take the time to understand it and try to leverage it to drive a better outcome,” says Khan.

The virtual benefits fair looked like a convention center, with various booths and kiosks.

“We felt the virtual benefits fair technology was ideally geared towards an enrollment event to help drive better success for employees and their spouses as they’re making pretty complex decisions that require a level of engagement that, historically, has been tough to garner.”

Employees were welcomed with a video from a senior executive, explaining how the fair worked and what they were about to experience. Employees could click on the booth they were interested in, learn more and save relevant information in their “briefcase.”

“It was a way for them to walk a convention floor, collect information that was important or germane in their briefcase and then refer back to it when they wanted to,” says Khan.



The booths included voluntary benefits, planning for your expenses, choosing a medical plan, changing your benefits, dental and vision benefits, life and disability benefits, and new hires and rehires.

After clicking on a booth, employees could open a chat window with the person staffing that booth (usually someone from a provider company) or open a Skype video chat. Employees could also choose to chat via text or have the person staffing the booth contact them by phone.

There was also a conference hall employees could visit to watch flash videos on such topics as health plan options, the consumer choice plan (is it right for you?), the health savings account and making the most of your flexible spending account.

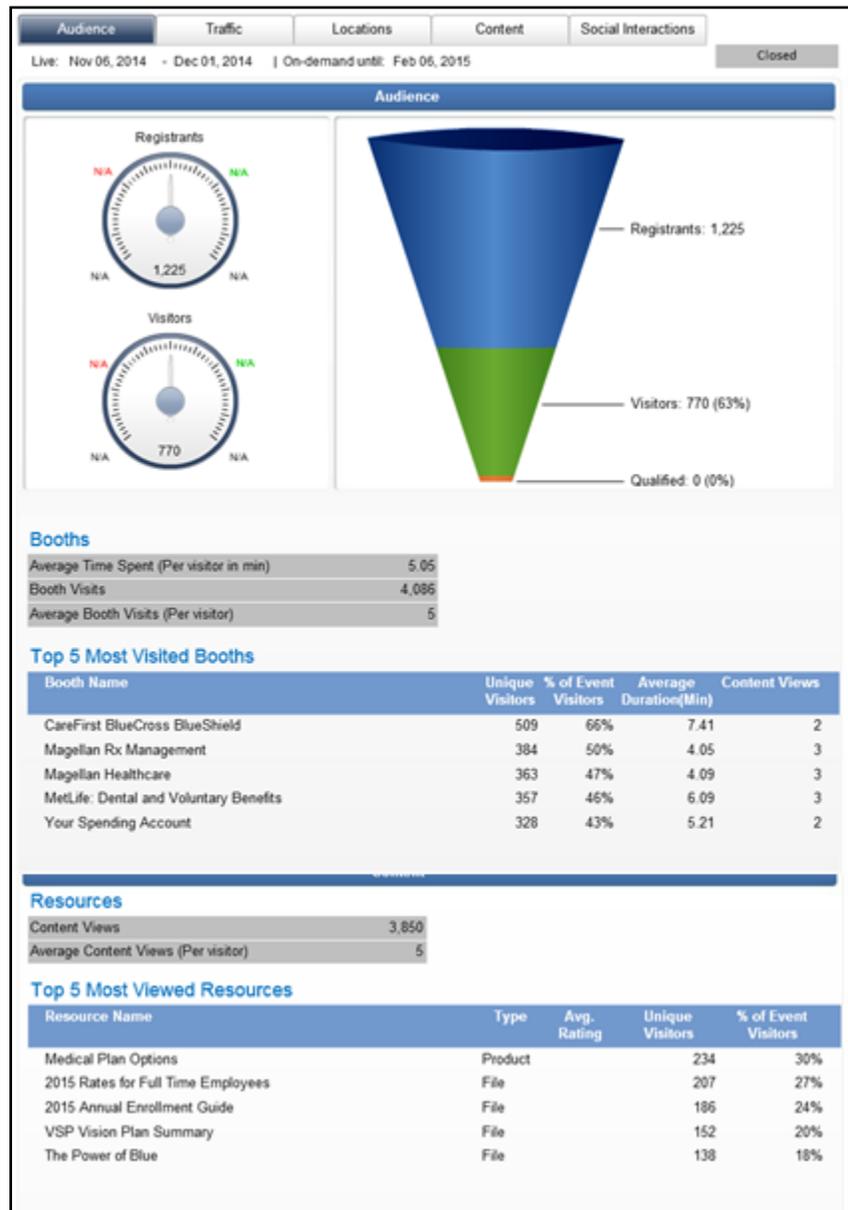
The fair also included a virtual lounge where employees could chat with each other about the various benefits and plan features.

ACS didn't supplement its virtual benefits fair with a physical one because it would have been too cost prohibitive to get a heavy concentration of employees in one place.

The technology can be used by multinational organizations that have employees in multiple locations. Language translation components can be added and different versions for different countries or even different departments can be created.

Another benefit is that employers can get immediate feedback on what the high traffic areas are, which can help them design their communications.

“Our testing showed a virtual fair cost less, provides a better vehicle for employees to engage with the information, allows spouses and family members to participate and ultimately leads to more informed enrollment decisions,” he says. “We know that the future of enrollment is to engage employees and affect behavioral outcomes, and this application provided an enrollment experience that was easy to access and relevant.”



FAST FACTS

- Employee education is one of the biggest challenges when it comes to HR staff that deal with benefits
- A survey from AFLAC shows that half of employees only spend 30 minutes or less making complex benefits selections during open enrollment. Organizations have a short window of time to educate employees make informed decisions
- VBF's give employees greater access to HR support, educational tools and access to documents provided in a central portal. It also helps companies eliminate fixed costs associated with enrollment such as paper and postage for enrollment kits
- VBF's can also be opened to allow spouses and family members to join and help make enrollment decisions

Connecting the dots

Each year, most employees engage in some way with their annual health benefits enrollment.

New research from Bank of America Merrill Lynch shows that when employers present employees with an easy, one-click option to enroll in or make a contribution change to their 401(k) plan during the annual health benefits process, the result is significant increases in 401(k) participation – either through new employees signing up to contribute or through current employees increasing their contributions.

Among Bank of America's large clients who have implemented the feature, 401(k) plan participation has doubled. "It's clear that this unified process, at this time of year [during open enrollment], makes it easy for people to take action. It's revolutionary, much like auto-enrollment was years ago," says Crain. "And when you hit them this way, it's year after year because you do health care [enrollment] every year."

As retirement and health care benefits become increasingly intertwined, employers have an opportunity to increase employee engagement in their benefits plans.

"When we think about where health care reform is headed, and you layer pension reform on top of that, the decision criteria employees will be facing going forward will be materially more complex than what they've had to deal with historically," says Rohail Khan, executive managing director for total benefits outsourcing with ACS. "And anything we can do to create ease of navigation to get them to the right place is fundamental."