

Retail Industry: Mental Health, Other Benefits Trends

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High-stress, demanding retail positions where constant customer demands are front and center can leave employees feeling overwhelmed and burnt out, resulting in lower productivity and higher turnover for employers.

Increasing societal awareness of mental health issues, and a general push by employees to recognize their lives outside of the workplace, has fueled a growing call for retail employers to respond to the evolving workforce needs. Retail employees, particularly the younger generations, increasingly seek employers that provide non-traditional benefits as part of a comprehensive benefits program. Consequently, many retailers are prioritizing employee mental health and other wellness-related benefits. The availability of these benefits not only helps recruitment and retention, but it also shows the employer's investment in the well-being of employees as people and can help companies establish themselves as an employer of choice.

In addition to enhancing mental health coverage under group health plans (an area of particular focus for the U.S. Department of Labor given the [mental health parity rules](#)), retailers are finding creative ways to offer mental health and related benefits, including:

- Adding (or upgrading) an employee assistance program (EAP) to give employees, and often their families, access to free, confidential counseling sessions. Many EAPs offer 24/7 counseling services in-person and by video, phone, and text, giving retail employees with varying schedules the flexibility to use the benefit at their convenience.
- Implementing training to help guide frontline employees and their managers to respond appropriately to sensitive employee issues and encourage wellness in the workplace. Investing in these training opportunities is intended to bring greater awareness of, and tools for handling, common issues affecting employees, so everyone is better prepared to recognize and handle potentially difficult situations.
- Tapping into technology to provide employees with wellness tools. There is a growing number of apps employees can download and use at their leisure that focuses on issues such as mindfulness, meditation, and sleep. Other apps provide guided exercise-based activities, including yoga classes, that help refresh the mind and body. These apps can be because employees can tap into them whenever and wherever they like, adding the flexibility many employees look for and expect in today's always-connected times.
- Adopting benefits that are not usually thought of as mental health-related but can enhance employees' quality of life. These include expanded parental leave, fertility benefits, and adoption and surrogacy assistance. These types of benefits focus on the employee's life outside of work, aim at relieving stresses that could affect the employee's workplace performance while recognizing various paths to parenthood.
- Adopting programs in which employees receive free or reduced-cost tuition for classes and seminars. These programs may go beyond merely providing funds toward college

classes and have the flexibility to decide whether this educational benefit must be related to the job or simply for personal growth. Another option may be student loan assistance, either with matching funds through a 401(k) plan sponsored by the employer or as cash reimbursements for a portion of employees' student loan payments. Much like the family-building benefits described above, education-related assistance can alleviate a common source of employee stress and shows an employer's commitment to employees' long-term success with the company.

While adding these types of benefits takes resources to plan and implement, many retailers are deciding that the potential outcomes are well worth the investment. Not only can it create happier, more engaged employees, but it also can create a better customer experience.

Implementing these and other benefits requires consideration of applicable federal and state laws, including the tax consequences for the employer and the employee. For example, some benefits can be provided on a pre-tax basis if structured and documented correctly. Contact the Jackson Lewis attorney with whom you regularly work for details.

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