

## PEOPLE &amp; HR LIVE CONFERENCE RECAP

# Balancing Cost, Impact, and Personalization in Employee Benefits

BY JESSICA SWENSON | NOVEMBER 19, 2025

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In the face of steadily rising healthcare costs, innovation in benefits programming is key to meeting the evolving needs of today's workforce. At [From Day One's Boston conference](#), employee benefits leaders discussed the innovative approaches some companies are taking to provide relevant benefits to their employee populations while attempting to neutralize cost.

By evolving its employee feedback program from an annual survey to a multi-layered employee listening strategy, Marina Vassilev, VP and head of total rewards and performance at [Schneider Electric](#), has created an ongoing conversation that has boosted employee trust in its benefits strategy.

"Now we are using different channels and different tools to get employee feedback, and account for that as we build our strategy. We are also partnering with an organization that looks at how our employees value our benefits," she said. Schneider's shift from broad industry benchmarking to a more personalized approach informed by employee pulse surveys, focus groups, and quarterly office hours allows Vassilev to stay closely connected to employees and their needs.

Highlighting the challenge of offering robust benefit plans without causing confusion, Laura Welz, VP of U.S. total rewards at [Sun Life](#) says that it is essential to make benefits less intimidating through simplified communication.

She recently facilitated the company's first employee panel focused on benefit spending and allocation, which she believes helped demystify the process for others. "Having other employees hear directly from their peers was a great way to simplify and make things feel a little more manageable, so folks understood that it's not as complicated as it may seem."

## Proactive Mental Health Support

"It's easy, in a world where constant transformation and new global events are taking up the news, to forget that we're in a mental health crisis," said Nick Taylor, co-founder and CEO of [Unmind](#).

Taylor is a strong advocate for rethinking mental health as a strategic performance priority rather than something to be treated only in a state of crisis. "Within any population in this room, for 75% of the workforce, we should be focusing on promoting well-being." He added that Harvard and Oxford Universities have recently [published studies](#) showing the correlation between employee well-being and organizational productivity.





The session, titled, "In Employee Benefits, Balancing Cost Efficiency with Good Employee Outcomes" was moderated by Paris Alston, co-host, Morning Edition at WGBH

At Schneider and Sun Life, employees can utilize sabbatical programs that reinforce permission to fully disconnect from work and prioritize themselves and their families. Both companies find that these programs help them attract talent and boost retention while deriving other organizational benefits from improved employee well-being.

"Employees are saying that they choose Schneider as an employer, and they stay with us as employees, because they're looking forward to their [sabbatical]. So it's clearly a retention and attraction lever for us," said Vassilev. "It's helping the business financially, and it's allowing employees to focus on mental health and personal priorities."

"I think we all feel the sense of responsibility that things are going to fall apart if we're not at work," said Welz. "And it's a bit freeing for employees to know that they can actually step away." The program directly helps with talent recruitment and retention, she added, and helps maintain mental wellness. "There's not a time that our employees don't rave about the program."

Another tool helping employees get time back is AI. John Grossman, a physical therapist and clinical specialist at [Sword Health](#), is grateful for the increased data and time that he receives from the company's use of AI. Sword Health offers AI-powered home-based physical therapy solutions to its members. "It's not taking me out of it; it's giving me more information to be able to help these people, and makes it way more convenient for them."

Taylor calls AI "the new member of the multi-disciplinary team." With clinical rigor, transparency, and in alignment with the World Health Organization's guidelines for the ethical integration of AI, it could help bridge provider supply-demand gaps in preventive mental healthcare.

#### **Personalized Benefit Options While Maintaining a Budget**

One way that Schneider Electric employees gain some direct control over their benefit offerings is through the company's Benefits Bucks program—a flexible credit that employees can allocate toward benefits that best suit their needs, like savings planning accounts, sabbatical programs, and additional PTO.

"Everyone has different preferences and different needs," said Vassilev. "When we give them that opportunity to make the selections that work best for them, we're being most useful for them and we're being mindful of our resources."

At Sword Health, Grossman understands that no two people are the same, and no two conditions are the same either. The company utilizes AI on its digital platform to ensure that everyone has offerings specific to their needs, he says. From women's pelvic health to injury avoidance, and pain prevention, AI helps them personalize needs and "give them the exact tools, resources, support that they need to go through recovery."

To ensure a positive return on investment and mitigate growing costs, Vassilev takes a multi-layered approach to vendor management. "We look closely at the ROI they can bring to us, whether they're a good fit for our ecosystem, and how we can integrate with them," she said.

By conducting regular RFP reviews and auditing existing contracts, Sun Life ensures it is getting the best value and modern offerings from its vendors. "It's really important that we are looking at the market, that we are making sure that we're getting not only the best services, technology platforms, but that we're also getting the best prices," said Welz.

(Photos by Josh Larson for From Day One)

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