

PEOPLE & HR LIVE CONFERENCE RECAP

Personalizing Benefits While Keeping Costs in Check

BY JESSICA SWENSON | MAY 22, 2026

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Employers are shifting employee benefit models away from fragmented vendor ecosystems toward integrated solutions focused on outcomes rather than utilization, says Cara Dochat, PhD, clinical specialist at [Sword Health](#).

“We want options that are easy to use, easy to access, that help us manage our everyday conditions—not just the catastrophic ones when we’re in crisis—and that also feel personalized to us,” Dochat said.

As budgets tighten amid continuously escalating economic pressures, organizations are seeking ways to improve employee health, engagement, productivity, and retention through personalized benefits, all while reining in spending. This was the topic of a panel at [From Day One’s Seattle conference](#), moderated by journalist and healthcare communications specialist Alexis Hauk.

By collaborating with vendor partners whose programs meet employees where they are, says Paris Ramsey, VP of health solutions for [Aon](#), employers can help their teams reduce absenteeism and burnout through personalized care. Aon has identified an employee demand for virtual care pathways since the pandemic; virtual care also benefits workers who may live in areas known as care deserts. “Working with vendors that have really good access to care in that virtual manner allows employees to get the care that they need when they need it,” she said.



Panelists spoke about “Personalizing Benefits While Keeping Costs in Check” in Seattle

Dochat described the evidence-based, personalized mental health services available to users through Sword Health’s clinician-driven, AI-supported platform. By shifting away from a session-based model of care to an always-on solution, she says, the company is able to offer in-the-moment mental healthcare to an expanded audience.

An increasingly diverse global workforce means that organizations must also consider customizable benefits menus that can flex for local customs and culture. Ongoing employee feedback and demographic awareness has been critical to program design for her organization, says Vivian Hung, head of total rewards & HRIS at [Enphase Energy](#).

"The approach we take is global guardrails with local execution. We standardize on our global strategy and guiding principles. We make decisions based on external market competitiveness, internal equity, statutory compliance and, of course, employee experience," she said. "Then we allow flexibility for our regions to execute based on what is best suited or best trending for that particular country."

However, even the strongest benefits programs can fail if employees don't know what is available to them or how to use it. Panelists agreed that employee education and communication is key.

For example, veterans transitioning from the military to a corporate environment may not know the differences between government healthcare and private employer systems, says Nick Rettenmyer, VP of total rewards at [Shield AI](#). "When you have a population that hasn't necessarily grown up in a corporate environment, there's a big opportunity there to make sure that they understand the benefits, and what it can mean to them and their families."

Some companies use AI technology to drive engagement and help with decision-making. Hung highlighted ways that Enphase is "finding creative ways to optimize the programs [they] offer." The company hosts monthly educational sessions about existing benefits and provides on-demand libraries of AI-produced videos that help employees learn more about how to engage and utilize those benefits, she says.

"We've put a lot of tools in the hands of employees to help them to navigate that, especially around health benefits in the U.S.," said Tristan Orford, VP of total rewards and M&A for [SentinelOne](#). "You need to do the education to help employees understand what [specific health plans] look like in their own situation."

AI-powered decision support during open enrollment helps Aon employees proactively ask risk-based questions to narrow down solutions, reducing confusion, says Ramsey. "You get the engagement that you're looking for because employees feel that they had a hand in the decision-making process, and they also understand what they're buying at the same time."

Rettenmyer and his team are building a total rewards portal that will demonstrate the value of employee benefits programs in a meaningful way. By offering "a consolidated place where [employees] can start to self-select," he said, "your spending becomes much more effective."

Jessica Swenson is a freelance writer and proofreader based in the Midwest. Learn more about her at jmswensonllc.com.

(Photos by Josh Larson for From Day One)



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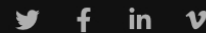
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