The 2026 Employee Benefits Report

Commissioned by

Jazmarc Services, LLC

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A Word from Joshua S. Marcus

Founder of Jazmarc Services

For the past three years, Jazmarc Services has partnered with Wired Research to better understand the changing role of employee benefits in the American workplace.

We began by listening directly to employees, exploring what they valued from their benefits and where they felt employers were falling short. Last year, we expanded that research to include HR leaders, allowing us to examine benefits from both sides of the employment equation.

That broader perspective revealed an important disconnect. Employees placed tremendous value on their benefits but did not always believe employers were delivering against their needs. HR leaders, meanwhile, expressed considerably more confidence in the benefits experience they were providing. In 2025, nearly all HR leaders believed employees were satisfied with their benefits, while 70% of employees gave their benefits a grade below an “A.”

This year, rather than simply repeat the research, we returned to HR leaders to explore what comes next. We wanted to understand how benefits strategies are evolving in response to changing workforce expectations and whether the confidence we saw a year ago is translating into meaningful change.

The findings suggest the stakes surrounding employee benefits are only getting higher. Nearly all HR leaders believe benefits have become more important to attracting and retaining employees compared to two years ago. Employers also overwhelmingly recognize the role benefits can play in helping workers navigate financial uncertainty.

Yet the research raises important questions. HR leaders remain extraordinarily confident in their benefits strategies even as many express significant concern about employee financial stress. And while organizations are making changes to their benefits approaches, those efforts must ultimately translate into programs employees understand and value. Those that listen closely to their workforce and adapt accordingly will be better positioned to make benefits a meaningful source of security for employees while strengthening their value to the business.

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Josh Marcus
Founder
Jazmarc Services

Benefits Are Carrying More Weight Than Ever

Employee benefits have long played an important role in workplace decision-making. But HR leaders believe their influence is growing. More than 9 in 10 (92%) HR leaders say employee benefits have become more important to attracting and retaining talent compared to two years ago. More than half (57%) believe they've actually become much more important.

That growing importance can be seen across the employment journey. Nearly all (94%) HR leaders say benefits have at least some impact on whether someone accepts a job offer. A similar share (92%) report that benefits influence whether employees stay with an organization while 9 in 10 (90%) believe they can affect whether workers look at opportunities elsewhere.

Year-over-year comparisons reinforce this growing influence. In 2025, 87% of HR leaders said benefits influenced whether a candidate accepted a job offer. Today, that figure stands at 94%.

The shift is even more pronounced when HR leaders consider whether benefits can send employees looking elsewhere. That number increased from 79% in 2025 to 90% today. HR perceptions around retention also remain extremely high, increasing from 88% to 92%.

Benefits have become so integral that close to half (48%) of HR leaders believe that benefits are equally important to salary, suggesting that benefits are becoming more and more intertwined with the overall employment proposition and that employers see them as an integral part of the total value employees receive from their jobs.

HR Confidence Remains High

As the importance of benefits grows, HR leaders appear confident that their organizations are delivering. Nearly all (96%) believe employees are satisfied with their current benefits, including close to half (48%) who believe employees are extremely satisfied.

That confidence extends well beyond employee satisfaction. More than 9 in 10 (93%) HR leaders believe their benefits packages are competitive enough to retain top talent over the next two years, while 95% say their benefits help differentiate their organizations from competitors when recruiting. HR leaders are similarly confident that their benefits are meeting employees' broader financial needs, with 92% believing employees have access to the financial protection benefits they need.

93% believe benefits packages are competitive enough to retain top talent

95% think their benefits help differentiate their organization from competitors

96% believe employees are satisfied with their current benefits.

That confidence is striking given what employees themselves told us last year. In the 2025 study, 70% of employees graded their benefits below an "A," despite 99% of HR leaders at the time believing employees were satisfied.

The gap around competitiveness was similarly significant. In 2025, 79% of HR leaders believed their benefits were better than those offered by competitors, while just 43% of employees felt the same way about their own packages.

This year's HR findings suggest some moderation on that particular measure. Today, 2 in 3 (67%) HR leaders believe their benefits are better than competitors' offerings, down from 79% in last year's research. Close to 3 in 10 (28%) now describe their benefits as being on par.

Financial Stress Is Forcing Benefits to Work Harder

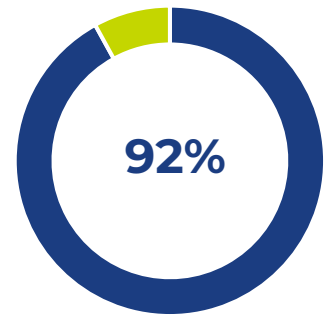
Even as HR leaders express significant confidence in their benefits programs, they are also acutely aware of the financial pressure employees face. Three in 4 (75%) HR leaders are concerned about employee financial stress, including 32% who are extremely concerned.

Employers overwhelmingly see benefits as part of the solution. Virtually all HR leaders (99%) say employer-sponsored financial protection benefits, including life and disability insurance, are important in helping employees navigate financial uncertainty. Seven in 10 (70%) consider them extremely important.

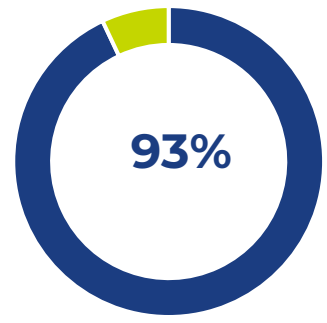
HR leaders also believe their organizations are delivering on that promise. More than 9 in 10 (92%) are confident their current benefits and support programs adequately address employee financial stress. A similar proportion (93%) believe their benefits help employees feel financially secure.

3 in 4 HR leaders are concerned about employee financial stress.

Confident Their Current Benefits and Support Programs Address Employee Financial Stress



Believe Their Benefits Help Employees Feel Financially Secure



That creates one of the most interesting tensions in this year's research. Employers clearly recognize employee financial stress as a significant issue. At the same time, they express overwhelming confidence that the benefits they provide are adequately addressing it. These two findings do not necessarily contradict each other. But taken together, they underscore the importance of understanding whether the support employers believe they are providing is having the intended impact.

Employers Are Rethinking What Employees Need

As employee expectations evolve, HR leaders are not standing still. Nearly all (96%) report that their organization is taking steps to adjust their benefits approach. One of the most common efforts involves using data and employee feedback to better align benefits with workforce expectations (49%) while about as many (48%) are expanding programs that support work-life needs.

Financial wellness is also receiving significant attention with close to half (45%) of HR leaders exploring benefits designed to provide greater financial support. Similarly, 44% of employers are also increasing their focus on mental health and well-being, while the same number (44%) is expanding flexible or customizable benefit options.

Compared to last year, the direction of movement is notable:

In the 2025 research, 38% **of HR leaders said they were exploring benefits that support financial wellness**. Today, that figure is 45%.

The use of employee feedback has increased even more substantially, moving from 33% in 2025 to 49% today.

The proportion **increasing their focus on mental health and well-being has risen** from 38% to 44%.

These changes suggest employers are becoming more deliberate about adapting their benefits programs rather than treating them as static offerings. And this may be necessary. Last year, employees made clear that flexibility mattered. Nearly half (45%) said they wanted flexible benefit packages when considering a job offer, while 41% said they would turn down a job if the benefits they needed were not offered.

The challenge now is ensuring personalization goes beyond offering more choices. Employers also need to make those choices understandable and relevant to the employees deciding among them.

Are Employers Missing What Matters?

When HR leaders were asked which benefits they believe employees value most, traditional cornerstone benefits remained at the top of the list including medical insurance (63%), retirement savings plans such as a 401(k) (62%) and paid time off (60%). Beyond those core offerings, perceptions become more fragmented. Benefits like flexible work arrangements (43%) and paid family or parental leave (43%) are lower on the list. Similarly, fewer HR leaders believe life insurance (42%) and disability insurance (31%) are valued by employees.

These figures are particularly noteworthy in light of the employee research Jazmarc Services has conducted over the previous two years. In 2025, employees placed substantial importance on financial protection benefits, as 85% considered short-term disability insurance important and 84% said the same of long-term disability insurance. Long-term care insurance was considered important by 80% of employees, while more than three-quarters (77%) placed importance on both term life and whole/permanent life insurance.

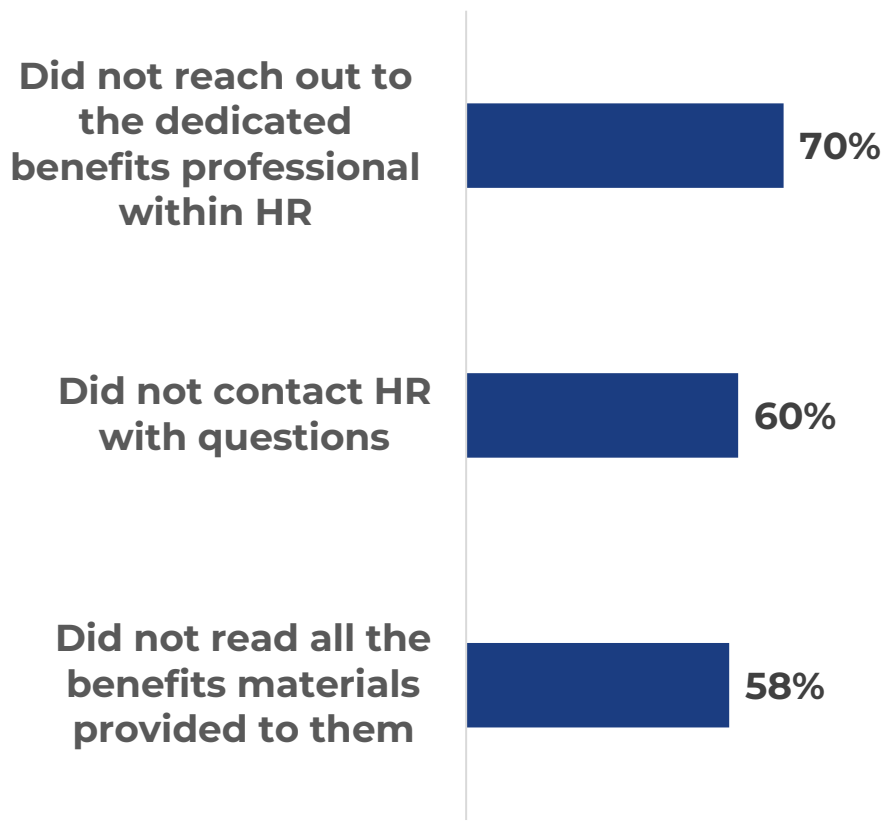
The research also revealed a significant gap between the benefits employees valued and those they reported access to. While 85% considered short-term disability insurance important, only 61% said their employer offered it.

The disconnect was even greater for long-term disability insurance (84% important vs. 57% offered) and long-term care insurance (80% important vs. 48% offered). These gaps suggest that even when employees recognize the importance of financial protection, access to these benefits may not be keeping pace with their needs.

The findings raise an important question: Are employers underestimating the value employees place on financial protection benefits? While traditional benefits remain central to the employee experience, the research suggests that the benefits that come immediately to mind for HR leaders may not fully capture the range of protections employees consider important.

The Benefits Understanding Gap

Having the right benefits is only one part of the equation. Employees also need to understand what they have and how to use it. And HR leaders overwhelmingly believe their organizations are succeeding on this front. Nearly 9 in 10 (89%) are confident employees fully understand and utilize their benefits. Yet previous employee research from Jazmarc Services paints a more complicated picture. During open enrollment:

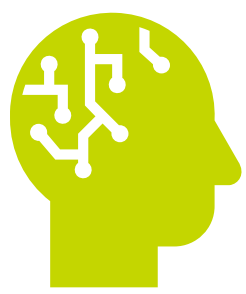


This disconnect becomes particularly noteworthy when considering the influence HR leaders believe they have over the employee benefits experience. Two in 3 (67%) say the HR team has the greatest influence on whether employees understand and utilize their benefits.

It's clear that offering the right benefits is only half the battle. Ensuring employees understand and take advantage of them is equally important. And if HR plays such a central role in that process, benefits education cannot be limited to open enrollment. Employers have an opportunity to make communication and guidance an ongoing part of the employee experience, helping employees better understand the protections available to them and make more informed decisions about their financial futures.

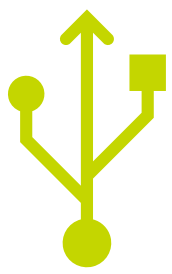
AI Is Reshaping Benefits Administration

While much of the conversation surrounding AI has centered on how it may change employees' jobs, the technology is also beginning to change how employers manage benefits. More than 4 in 5 (84%) HR leaders say their organizations are already using or piloting AI for benefits administration, employee support or communications:



35% are using AI extensively

32% are using AI in limited ways



18% are piloting AI solutions

The speed of adoption is noteworthy, particularly at a time when benefits themselves are becoming more personalized. Technology may give HR teams new ways to help employees navigate complex choices and provide support more efficiently.

But as organizations embrace these tools, technology should complement rather than replace the human guidance employees may need when making consequential decisions about their financial protection. For an industry rooted in helping people prepare for uncertainty, that human connection remains important.

84% of HR leaders say their organizations are **already using AI for benefits administration, employee support or communications.**

Closing Thoughts

The 2026 research paints a picture of HR leaders who understand just how consequential employee benefits have become. Employers believe benefits influence whether people join their organizations and whether they stay. They recognize the financial pressure facing employees, and nearly all are making changes to their benefits strategies as workforce needs evolve.

They are also remarkably confident that those efforts are working. That confidence can be an asset. But the research Jazmarc Services has conducted over the past several years suggests that it should also be tested. Last year's side-by-side research among employees and HR leaders showed that the experience employers believed they were delivering did not always match the one employees described. Employees valued their benefits but still identified meaningful gaps in what was available and how well those offerings were understood. This year's findings suggest HR leaders are responding. More organizations are using employee feedback to shape their benefits strategies. Financial wellness is receiving greater attention and employers are investing more and more in benefits designed around a broader range of workforce needs.

The next opportunity is to determine whether those changes are reaching employees in the ways organizations intend. The strongest benefits strategies will be those that employees understand, use and ultimately recognize as an important part of their financial security.

Jazmarc Services: a premier insurance planning brokerage.

For more than two decades, Jazmarc Services has helped individuals, families and financial professionals navigate important financial protection decisions with greater clarity and confidence. As a premier insurance planning brokerage, the firm develops customized strategies designed to help clients protect their income, their families and their financial futures.

Jazmarc Services works directly with individuals and families while also providing back-office expertise and support to insurance professionals across the country. With an emphasis on education and personalized guidance, the firm helps make complex financial protection strategies easier to understand and put into action.

At the heart of Jazmarc Services is a belief that greater financial confidence starts with greater financial understanding. That commitment extends beyond the solutions it provides to the conversations it helps create, including original research exploring how Americans think about, prepare for and navigate important financial decisions.

To learn more about Jazmarc Services or start a conversation, visit www.jazmarcllc.com.

About the Research

The 2026 Employee Benefits Report was commissioned by Jazmarc Services and conducted by Wired Research. The study surveyed 200 HR Leaders. Interviews were conducted online in July 2026. The study has a margin of error of +/- 6.9 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Results for subgroups will have a higher margin of error.

About Wired Research

Wired Research is a full-service market research firm that transforms human insights into compelling stories that move brands forward. Specializing in custom quantitative research and survey-driven thought leadership, Wired Research helps organizations uncover the perspectives, behaviors and cultural shifts that matter most to their audiences, then turns those findings into insights built to inform strategy and spark conversation. From research design through storytelling, Wired Research brings a journalistic lens to data, helping brands discover the story within the numbers and activate it across PR, marketing and beyond. For more information about Wired Research, please visit www.wiredresearch.com