

HR BRIDGES CULTURE AND ROI



Benefits VP strives to empower future leaders and employees by emphasizing opportunity and equity.

BY ED FINKEL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KIM RAFF





Everyone has days when they need a little extra motivation to get up and moving. Sometimes, the weight of the world's problems can make someone feel like there's no point. But those who find meaning in their work have a secret weapon: If you're part of the solution, it's easier to get out of bed, said Gabriela Benitez.

She's driven by multiple passions — foremost, a desire to improve access to health care and other employee benefits for low-income and immigrant workers, which dovetails nicely with her work as employee benefits vice president and inclusion and diversity (I&D) partner at IMA Corp., an insurance broker and financial services firm headquartered in Denver.

Benitez was raised by her father, a single parent and Mexican immigrant who worked as a potato harvester in her hometown of St. Anthony, Idaho. He often told his six daughters that "health insurance is for rich people. We will never have health insurance."

Her father probably first sounded off about this when she was diagnosed with kidney failure at age 4, Benitez recalled. "That really stayed with me, and I knew even then that I wanted to be part of changing the narrative, of creating better opportunities for health care for people," she said.

From the Field to the Front Office

Benitez's career in human resources began unexpectedly as a 17-year-old working in Idaho potato fields, when she was asked to help her boss with some HR-related tasks.

She didn't understand the gist of the work but thought "it would probably be better than sorting potatoes in

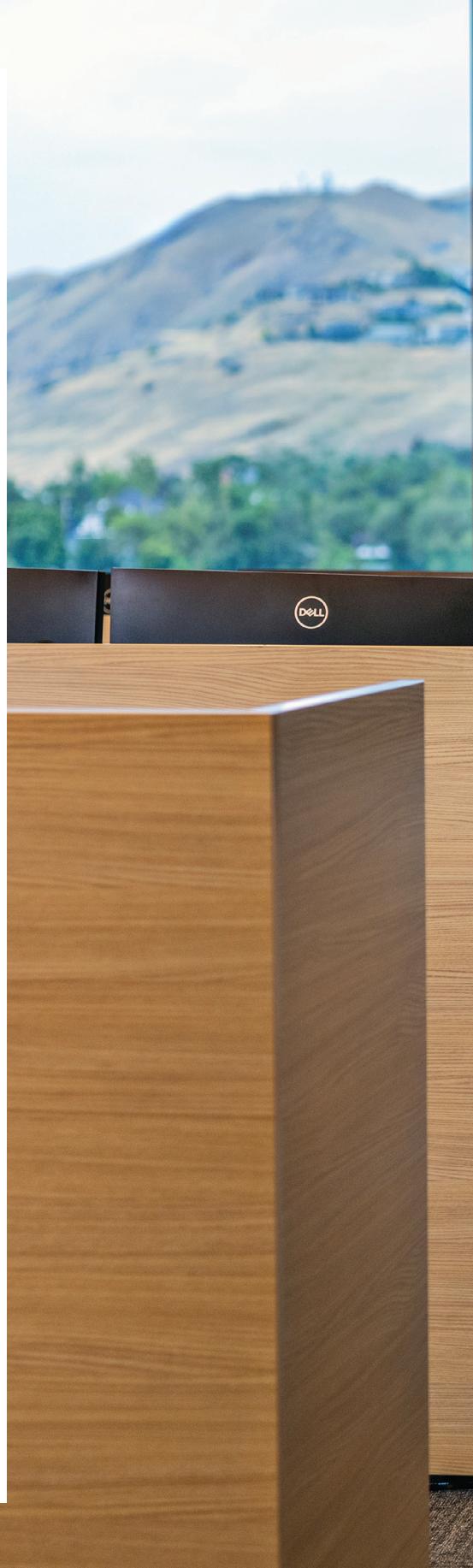
the cold weather," Benitez said. "My hands were freezing. He asked, 'Do you want to come inside a warm room where you can do this?' I didn't hear anything other than 'a warm room' where I can sit down. ... I had no idea what I was doing back then."

Two years later, Benitez came across a listing for a position with health insurer Aetna that described "educating people on health care access," she remembered. At the time, she'd been studying to be a paralegal. While her education provided a foundation in employment law and compliance, the real learning and training happened on the job, after she'd been hired by Aetna. "I immersed myself in the real work very early on and then surrounded myself with amazing mentors," Benitez said.

While working for Aetna — and later for other health insurance firms — Benitez saw firsthand how complex the insurance system can be. "Especially, how minorities weren't really understanding health care, and then also that HR didn't have the resources and the right partnerships to help them take care of their workplaces," she said. "I became really passionate about those opportunities."

Navigating Complexity, Challenging Inequity

At Regence BlueCross BlueShield of Utah, Benitez created a program aimed at blue-collar employees. The initiative provided weekly educational videos, in-person community meetings, and an internal concierge program designed to provide culturally relevant support, which is especially important for bilingual employees. The Utah Hispanic Chamber of Commerce honored her as the 2008 Business in Excellence Person of the Year for these efforts.





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Shortly thereafter, Benitez was invited to help develop the Utah Health Exchange under the Affordable Care Act and became the first exchange broker recognized in the state. In 2011, she was honored as the Broker of the Month by Utah's Office of Consumer Health Services.

"My strong background with insurance carriers allowed me to provide strategic insight into underwriting practices," she said, "and to advocate for the integration of social determinants of health into benefits design, a forward-thinking approach that continues to influence how we serve diverse populations today."

Empowering HR Leaders

Benitez has worked for IMA Corp. in Salt Lake City for about seven years and praises its company culture. Her co-workers "help each other out," she said. "We understand each other, and that kind of trust and empowerment creates an environment here where I can thrive."

However, she admitted to being challenged by the speed at which the health care world evolves and how complicated employee benefits can be. Benitez's clients are HR leaders, typically employed by midsize companies (ranging from 50 to 1,000 employees), seeking support and advice — and who face time and resource constraints, along with limited access to information.

"It's hard for them to even understand what they need, so you need to be proactive," Benitez explained. She asks them: "What can I do to help you with your problem or situation now?" But she must balance those priorities with an eye toward their long-term strategic goals.

The process starts with a fact-finding interview to learn what's working and what's not in the current employee benefits package. "That's the part I love about my job," she said. "I'm able to give them different ideas and guidance, and then they get to decide whatever they want to do ... in the way that makes sense for them."

Benitez's desire to understand client needs has "always felt super-genuine," said Jeana Hutchings, executive vice president of benefits at IMA Corp. Hutchings explained that client relationships also benefit from Benitez's close ties to the Hispanic community because "she's passionate about making sure that demographic is served in a meaningful way."

Her dedication is unwavering, even in an environment beset by shifting policies and priorities. Benitez has noticed that some organizations have reduced funding for I&D efforts, despite paying lip service to the importance of company culture. She views this as counterproductive but praises HR professionals who do their best to continue these efforts on shoestring budgets.

"I can just tell that their heart is there to implement these initiatives as much as they can," she said.

Advocacy and Community Involvement

Benitez's passions include mentoring and supporting her community. She volunteers for an organization called Women Who Succeed, a nonprofit that raises college funds for underserved girls, many of whom are students of color. Few of the volunteers are



Hispanic, which motivates Benitez to stay involved. She remembers what it was like to lack relatable role models.

"I don't want these girls to encounter that same skepticism that I did," she said, noting that representation matters.

Benitez also serves as quinceañera coordinator for FloreSer Home for Girls, an orphanage in Mazatlán, Mexico, for girls ages 9 to 18 who have been the victims of abuse, mistreatment, abandonment, or human trafficking. A quinceañera is the celebration of a girl's 15th birthday in Mexican and Mexican American culture, akin in societal significance to the bat mitzvahs that Jewish families celebrate to mark the transition to womanhood.

"One of the greatest joys in my life has been supporting this nonprofit foundation," she said, pausing a moment to compose herself. The girls at the orphanage "have the most horrifying stories and backgrounds, and yet they are so happy with the little or nothing they have. ... I help celebrate these girls' strength and inner beauty by organizing a special day. We make their dreams come true."

Benitez served on the board of the Salt Lake SHRM chapter for six years, which helped her better understand the HR community. She served as chapter president in 2023 and continues her involvement today. For example, Benitez has developed programming for professional development meetings, infusing I&D wherever appropriate in chapter meetings, webinars, or website content.

She's especially proud that Salt Lake SHRM advocated for Utah's Workplace Violence Act, which enables employers to seek



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protective orders for themselves and their employees. “It’s been nice to be able to be part of an organization that’s always thinking about ‘How do we help our members?’” she said.

This past year, Benitez served on the Salt Lake SHRM chapter president’s council and led the Salt Lake SHRM HR Awards, which recognizes Utah companies in seven different categories. She values the opportunity “to give HR the recognition that often they don’t receive from their workplaces,” she said.

The Power of Connection

Responding to feedback from senior HR leaders who wanted a dedicated space to connect and collaborate with their peers, Benitez led the launch of the Salt Lake VIP Senior HR Collective in September 2024. The quarterly luncheon includes high-profile speakers and a component in which attendees share challenges they’re navigating.

More than anything, Benitez appreciates the sense of community that the collective has helped to build. “It’s become a familia — a trusted circle of senior HR leaders who genuinely want to see each other grow, share, and thrive,” she said.

Benitez’s “innovation and her willingness to put herself out there when it comes to Salt Lake SHRM” is particularly admirable, said Crystal McFarland, human resources director at Western Governors University and Benitez’s successor as Salt Lake SHRM president. For example, Benitez supported after-hours networking events that created a culture of connection.

“She gave her heart and soul,” McFarland remembered.

During Benitez’s year as president, Salt Lake SHRM saw a 50% increase in engagement in professional development

meetings and a boost in both brand reputation and finances, according to McFarland. “If there’s one thing I learned from her, it’s the marketing component,” she said.

Marketing “ties really closely to connection,” Benitez said. “And that’s one of my superpowers.”

When Benitez was preparing to become chapter president of Salt Lake SHRM, she worried about how she would juggle her work and industry leadership responsibilities. But her colleagues never doubted her.

“If she commits to you and says she’s going to own something, she will do it,” Hutchings said, emphasizing Benitez’s high standards for her own work.

Benitez’s life and career trajectory have followed a path that taught her trust and confidence in her own abilities. She’s learned to “pursue what feels impossible,” she said. Ultimately, Benitez encourages others “to connect to their heart and lead with kindness” but also “take action — and show up for themselves.”

Unfortunately, HR professionals are often “pouring from an empty cup,” Benitez observed. “Budgets are being cut, there’s less people on their team, and yet they still have to provide all these resources or connections with employees. I always encourage HR professionals to take care of themselves first.”

That’s not always easy, but Benitez knows wellness is top of mind for most HR professionals. As HR leaders advocate for employees, they should remember that “HR leaders are the bridge between organization and company goals and their employees’ needs,” Benitez said. **IR**

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