

## Aligning Benefits Strategy with Organizational Culture with Jeff Williams

Shari Simpson: Joining me today is Jeff Williams, the President and CEO of AptiaUS, responsible for leading Benefits Administration from the Boston office.

Shari Simpson: As a graduate of Harvard's General Management program, he actively serves on charitable boards, including Habitat for Humanity.

Shari Simpson: Jeff, thank you so much for sitting down with me today.

Jeff Williams: It's great to great to do so. Thanks for having me.

Shari Simpson: So we're at the HR Tech floor. I got really excited about seeing what you were talking about here. Maybe we could start with you sharing just a little bit about your background and what you're most passionate about.

Jeff Williams: Sure. I've been in the tech-enabled services businesses most of my career. I'm a general manager that's done it at different companies, company sizes, continents, that sort of thing. Probably majored in tech and telecom the first half of my career. The second half of my career has been in the HCM benefit administration payroll space. Maybe even a competitor or two of Paylocity who I won't mention. But now I'm running Aptia's benefit administration business in the U.S. and totally fired up about it.

Shari Simpson: That's awesome. Well, I want to talk about benefits. So let's start there. How can companies align their benefit strategy with their organizational goals?

Jeff Williams: Oh, I'm so glad you asked that. I did a bit of a tech talk on this yesterday in the theater. So I'm glad you started here. I really think it starts with who you are as a company and what the culture you want to build is. I could give you a the example of how we've done it at our company, even if that's helpful. So we came to be as a carve-out of Mercer. So we're the former benefit administration business inside Mercer. We founded Aptia. It's owned by Bain Capital. It's been a great, great venture for us. And one of the things we had a high degree of conviction about early was that everybody would be owners. So we were aligning what was a benefit, share ownership, with a culture, which was we wanted all of our people to act like owners. So for us, there was this really compelling intersection of we're going to issue you equity, but in return, we expect you to act and behave like owners to each other, to our clients, to our communities. And it's worked out great. It's been really well received by our teams. And I think it's an example of always starting with who you are and what you want to be, because if your people see any distance or daylight between those two things and how you roll out your benefits, they'll smoke you out. And no amount of corporate PowerPoint can solve that problem.

Shari Simpson: That's by PowerPoint. We have all been there. How do you see, or how have you seen, in that example, because I think that's great, have you seen an increase in employee satisfaction when you've made that connection?

Jeff Williams: We have. We've been really impressed with the early ENPS scores we have on our teams. We're in the 70s. Wow. And our client scores are in the 70s. I don't think that's an accident.

Shari Simpson: Yeah.

Jeff Williams: I think those two, they're not a coincidence. I don't know which one is the causation of the other. But they're definitely correlated. And we think it's literally the bedrock of how we're going to build our culture. So the connectedness there is really high.

Shari Simpson: So we're obviously here on the floor at HR Tech. How do you see tech working with your benefit strategy? There's so many great tools out there and there's so many new things and new ways I've been hearing about utilizing tech to do things like support mental health or holistic health. How do you think about tech in the perspective of helping with benefits?

Jeff Williams: So everything starts with a great technology experience and those technology experiences are evolving and becoming more personalized, more meaningful, and more complete than they've ever been. AI is a big part of that and the leveraging of AI to enable great user experiences is really, really important and we're seeing it all over the show floor as you highlight and we're seeing it every day in our business. But we're also finding that it can be incomplete because if you look at the employee populations, you know, one third of our employee populations are mentally ill. Three quarters of our employee populations aren't confident they can afford a medical emergency. Half of our employee populations can't find \$500 this week if they need it. And I think it's really critical to give those people the confidence that they're making good choices. So I think tech really enables that journey backed by really strong expertise for when that individual needs to really understand the nature of their choices and how they better support the family.

Shari Simpson: You brought up that interesting statistic around mental health and I was, it was thinking about Gen Z specifically. So there's all this data right now about Gen Z kind of being a population or generation that has the highest mental health kind of data coming out of that. How do you see that impacting, you know, or the generations impacting how we approach benefits and how we approach the technology also that we're using for benefits?

Jeff Williams: We're seeing this emerging dichotomy, which I think people who think they have this one all figured out are probably a little bit overconfident. So I'll just give you my perspective. It's one perspective, which is there's this really neat set of data we have that says remote employees have higher job satisfaction. Yeah, we're also seeing this emerging data set that says those remote employees are feeling loneliness at a higher degree than their in-office counterparts. What we're trying to do is, for lack of a better word, democratize the experience between remote and in-office populations. Even if you think about access to care. If you're in office in a major city, you probably have access to a variety of care options. If you're really remote, maybe you don't. So that's where digital health can really help and educating your population that telehealth is

available, both physically and mentally, ensuring that we have adequate insurance coverage and options in those markets. And we can tell people how to get access to the care that they need. But definitely you're on the right point in our younger populations. We're concerned that we haven't created the same bond with corporate America that we created with their parents. We're worried that it's harder for them to get ahead and be successful. And we're worried that the remoteness is having unexpected consequences that could really impact long-term health of those populations.

Shari Simpson: Well, and if you've read up about the World Health Organization, they are doing a lot of research on loneliness right now and just how it's going to impact society going forward. So it's really fascinating to think about how we're addressing that in the corporate space.

Jeff Williams: Have you ever seen that Harvard longitudinal study done over many generations? It's a great one too, where they say the biggest predictor of health in your elder years is your social network.

Shari Simpson: Really? Wow.

Jeff Williams: It's your social network. There's all sorts of behavioral things that influence it, but they would say if you have a good group of friends and family surrounding you, that's your best shot for being healthy in your elder years. I think that and taking a 30 minute walk every day and eating your veggies are like the top three.

Shari Simpson: Right, definitely eating your veggies and taking a walk. Well, you brought up a good point about being equitable on how you approach your benefits. We talked just about generations, but there's a lot of other ways to think about equity and benefits. What are some things we should be thinking about?

Jeff Williams: I think that, uh, for us, we, we try and think of it as kind of three layers. So layer number one is you have a good health insurance program. Are you helping people save for retirement? And are you giving people time off? Like start with those big three. Then layering on things that are really ubiquitous that I think are also critical to people, vision, dental, life insurance, like get that layer correct. And then once you've done those two things, that third layer, it's almost like an investment portfolio, right? You play a little bit with that layer around where you're going to get your greatest returns. So if your population is young and right out of school, maybe a student loan repayment option is best. If your population is maybe older and skews more female, an emerging category of benefits is menopausal. And maybe you should go at that. What I would say is interrogate the data, see what's driving usage, feed your winners, starve your losers. Don't be afraid to experiment with those kinds of non-core things. Figure out what your population wants. Ask them what they want and be upfront with them and transparent of how you'll decide and how it impacts them. I think people can handle tough truths if they feel like your interests are to take care of them.

Shari Simpson: Oh, absolutely. And I love the asking them question. We

did a survey a couple of years ago in our org and I've shared this before in the podcast, but what came out was they really wanted pet insurance. And it was like, we didn't have that. And it was a no cost ad right from us, from our perspective. And it provided such great value to our employees, but we would have never uncovered that if we hadn't done that employee survey. So, so important.

Jeff Williams: Fun fact is it's the second most popular voluntary benefit in the Gen Z population. Wow.

Shari Simpson: I did not know that.

Jeff Williams: I know. Merging category.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. What, as we think of things that are emerging, what are some of the benefits trends that HR professionals should really make sure that they're staying close to?

Jeff Williams: You know, I would say that, um, it is really this idea of isolating populations and figuring out how to address that while also demonstrating equity across the group. So, so to play that through five generations of people in the workplace, what is my population look like and how do I better address that? The data keeps getting better. The technology keeps getting better. The choices keep getting more expansive. SHRM is now tracking 216 different benefit categories. So all of that can play into a more personalized experience. So we're seeing more technology, more digitization. more understanding of what's going on in specific populations and trying to address that the best way possible. Again, I would counsel the listener to this, make sure you have a really strong core because if you're given a 2.5% merit and you're increasing healthcare premiums by 10%, no amount of pet insurance is going to solve that problem for you.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. Is there any fear that we're getting too personalized or that HR people are going to have to navigate too many benefit options?

Jeff Williams: Yeah, we see this in the form of privacy issues, right? How much do I really want my employer to know about some of my conditions? Yeah. Right. And how readily available should we make claims data? You know, there are companies who've done a really great job around delivering personalized recommendations, but you got to know the person to make personalized recommendations. I think always being transparent, talking about what data you're going to gather, how you're going to use it, and what the benefit is to the employee is the way. Like, I think if you stick to those principles and give employees the choice, they feel respected, they feel heard, and they can opt into the things that can make a difference for them.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. Well, and that communication piece, I want to talk about that a little bit because, you know, I've been in HR 20 years now, most of that time as a practitioner, and communication is huge when it comes to benefits. Even now, I'm amazed at the things that are offered in our organization that I actually didn't know all the details about, or there was a perk behind a you know, behind a perk, behind a hurt, behind a perk that I didn't realize we had access to. How are you coaching people on approaching that? Kind of like the

table stakes communication, but then all this ancillary stuff that they have access to so that they do get that robust experience.

Jeff Williams: Yeah. So I'll ask you a question and then I'll answer it. How much time did you spend planning your vacation this year?

Shari Simpson: Oh, I probably spent 20 hours easily.

Jeff Williams: Okay. So you spent 20 hours planning a vacation. The average American employee spends 32 minutes planning their benefits. Oh my goodness. When you think about the criticality of those choices, it's just amazing how little investment people put into it. And 89% of employees roll over their choices to the next year. So they don't, so they're spending a small amount of time and they're doing very little intervention. They're just kind of going through the motions. So to this point around communications, we in the industry have a responsibility to do our best to find people where they are and to make sure they really understand the choices available to them. So we believe that that is a year round campaign rather than just an event based, Hey, open enrollment's coming. You better go in in the next two weeks or we swear we're going to roll over your benefits. So I think it, it really is again, understanding your population. knowing how they want to be communicated to, giving them paid time to address it. So don't make them do it on their own time. Deliver some paid time to help them understand it and give feedback. What worked? Did the text work? Did they give you permission to text? Did that work? Did the focus group work? Did you show up at the BRGs and ask your women in leadership what the benefits are women want? Did that work? I think really interrogating the communications you're doing, continuously getting better is the answer. And just recognizing people aren't investing time in it and giving them the time to do so.

Shari Simpson: Well, and if you are new in an org and you're new to benefits, right? You're new to the workforce. That can be very overwhelming. What's an FSA? What's an HSA? How do I decide if I want PPO or HMO? Do I need dental? Do I not need dental? There's so much education that is needed there. Where does that sit, do you think? Do you think that sits with HR or do you think that sits with HR's partnership with the vendors?

Jeff Williams: I think it's a shared responsibility. And you talk about that person and they're carrying in a hundred grand of student loans. So it's like, okay, where do I deploy this next dollar? What makes the most sense? So we have tools today at Aptia, for example, that can help with decision support that can, you know, give the person the confidence that if we know enough about what their issues are, if they give us enough information, we can make some pretty good recommendations and we can backstop that with a licensed professional to help them. I think we're missing some opportunities to educate people coming up around financial management and how best to save and how best to invest and how best to buy benefits. So we have to take it upon ourselves. with our vendors to bring those people along. And what we find is that if we do that, our people are happier, they're more loyal, they're more productive at work, and they're going to tell their friends about all of those things. So making that investment in

folks, just people leave companies for a variety of reasons. What we find is one of those reasons is, my benefits aren't great. And maybe those benefits actually existed and they didn't understand.

Shari Simpson: Yeah, for sure. So let's say you're an HR practitioner who's done all the things, they've done the survey, they're great at communicating, they've implemented new benefits that are impactful, and they get to, you know, their time to make decisions this year, and they're looking at all of these benefit offerings, but they only have access to so many dollars. How do they make sure that they're doing the right thing, implementing the right stuff with the funds they have?

Jeff Williams: Yeah, so they wrap themselves in bubble wrap and they go see the CFO and they ask for a 30% budget increase. No problem. No problem. Easy, easy, squeezey. Great point. Everything needs to be framed in scarcity. So I think when we ask our employee populations what they would like, we shouldn't just make it open-ended because they'll tell us they want everything. What we have to frame it in is there's a finite amount of resources. And for example, would you rather have, you know, a mental well-being platform? Would you rather have a financial fitness platform? I think getting the employees feedback on what helps matters. I go back to preserve the core, preserve the core, preserve the core. So if you're facing a choice between subsidizing a discretionary benefit for a smaller population or increasing your health care premiums by 5%, I couldn't more strongly advise you to get back to the core. Get back to the core. If you're considering I need to reduce the 401k match or there's something else out there, come back to the core. So, so I would say work really hard because those benefits really, really matter. Then again, it's like the outer edge of your portfolio. What's performing well, what's not performing well. Like you could get the vendors in and say, Hey, like justify to us your costs. Maybe you'll find something interesting. Maybe that vendor is willing to play ball with you and deliver those same services at a lower cost. Lean on your broker for help. Hey, we've got point solution A. I may have to drop that. What do you think about that? What yield am I getting from that? Framing everything in an ROI model helps the HR practitioner and HR leader play through the C-suite in a way that provides them with more voice and more access. Because it's not just, hey, here's your cost increase for the year. It's, hey, I've thought through this. Here's my recommendations. Here's the economic impact of those recommendations. And we can help you frame that. We can tell you what the price of losing an employee is, retraining an employee. We can help with those ROI models and so can your brokers.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. So as we wrap up our discussion, what are some things that as you look towards the future that you're either excited about in the benefit space or that you're going to be watching closely?

Jeff Williams: Excited about, I'm excited about the continued advent of more intuitive technologies to simplify the experience, to make a population out there who's really wrestling with these topics more

confident in the choices they're making for themselves and their families. I'm excited about that. I think this industry has a real responsibility to do that. And I think we're going to get better and better and better at that. And the watch item is watch out for Aptia because we're going to grow like crazy. And we're excited to work with, uh, with work with us employers to make sure their people are happy. We're good people doing good work. Uh, and we're, we're just really excited for the future.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. Such a good answer, Jeff. Thank you so much for sitting down with me.

Jeff Williams: It's been great. I appreciate being invited.

Shari Simpson: I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and links at [TheHRMixtape.com](http://TheHRMixtape.com) Come back often and please subscribe, rate, and review.