

## BENEFITS ADMINISTRATOR JOBS

"I like to think about myself as a teacher," said one benefits administrator, and her job description seemed to match up with her perspective. Benefit administrators explain, summarize, and publish material which describes to employees their rights and obligations under their benefit plans. Benefit administrators handle grievances, take suggestions, and act as intermediaries between benefits providers and employees. Administrators with strong communication skills, sharp minds, and the instinct to explain, to teach, find their choice of occupation gives them a high degree of satisfaction. Over 40 percent of the benefits administrator's day is spent on the telephone, either with providers or clients, explaining procedures and getting information. Another 40 percent of the day is spent writing, reading, and researching reports.

Benefits administration is one outcropping of the corporate culture it supports; many who enter the industry with the belief that employee benefits should help the employee at any cost are rudely awakened. Decisions on benefits are made in the context of this corporate culture, particularly with an eye to the bottom line. Benefits administration is a way of providing employees with support, a safety net, and advice on investments, but any decisions that help the employees should help the company as well.

Administrators must have a strong sense of self and an ability to explain benefits plans clearly. "Expect to be blamed for everything from the client not filling out their forms properly to a rude pharmacist," said one seven-year veteran. Balanced delicately between the clients and the providers, benefits administrators prove good targets for dissatisfied members of either side. This was cited as the largest downside of the profession, and may contribute to the number of administrators who leave the field between years three and six (nearly 35 percent). But this frustration is frequently offset by the general sense of helpfulness that benefits administrators feel in offering people options, educating them about their plans, and helping them through a confusing and intimidating healthcare system.

### How to Become a Benefits Administrator

Candidates should have at least a bachelor's degree. Favorably viewed majors include English, communications, psychology, history, business, and economics. While benefits administrators work for large and small firms alike, most entry-level opportunities exist in larger firms with entire benefits administration departments. Smaller companies usually combine benefits administration duties with other responsibilities. No professional accreditation programs are required in this profession, but a familiarity with issues in the field, an understanding of the areas of responsibility for benefits administrators, and a willingness to work hard and learn are all critical.

### Careers Related to Being a Benefits Administrator

Benefits administrators make business decisions and help others, and the two fields that people enter from benefits administration most often satisfy these two needs. Business-oriented benefits administrators go into a variety of banking and financial positions, such as management consulting and securities analysis, while people-oriented administrators go into human resources, career counseling, and job training programs. A few administrators enter the insurance industry.

### The Past And Future: Is Being a Benefits Administrator a Good Career Choice?

As corporations grew in size and personnel issues and benefits programs became a significant portion of employee compensation beginning in the 1960s, benefits administrators came into being. Initially employed only by the largest companies to handle questions and respond to unusual situations, benefits administrators, or at least their responsibilities, have become part of the human resources department in most companies.

Health care, once an afterthought for most companies, has taken center stage in the discussions of employee benefits. Most benefits programs are moving toward managed care (HMOs) as a part of cost-cutting measures, and this means that benefits administrators have a large job to do in terms of coordination and education. As benefits plans and insurance procedures become more complex, the number of administrators is expected to grow through the year 2000. Benefits administrator training programs and professional societies are likely to become more significant, but they will not affect the daily job or create licensing pressure for people entering the field. Today, benefits administrators are the fastest-growing level of vice-president at U.S. companies that employ thirty people or more.

### Quality of Life

#### Two Years Out

Two years into the profession, the benefits administrator has been exposed to the major areas of responsibility--insurance, compensation, and bonus structure--and has significant responsibility in each. Duties include co-authoring (with more senior personnel) summary description plans of benefits services, managing the distribution of materials to clients of the system, and meeting with members of the insurance industry who explain their products and services. Most attain the title "analyst" and begin to specialize in one specific area.

#### Five Years Out

Five-year veterans separate into two categories: Those who have taken one area of specialization, and those who have chosen to move to a number of areas. The latter role isn't necessarily chosen--many people are plucked out of the mix and asked to make themselves experts in a variety of fields. This "star-selecting" is based primarily on performance and capabilities; many mentioned that the political process of networking, while existent, was not the primary means of advancement. Those who have chosen to specialize have mostly attained the title 'senior analyst' in their area of expertise, and are managing less senior employees. Input is accepted on a variety of high-level issues, such as performance of plans and potential modifications to these arrangements. Hours are average; salaries rise significantly.

#### Ten Years Out

Ten-year veterans' lifestyles differ based on the size of the company they are associated with. Those in smaller firms head up departments, negotiate directly with vendors, work with top executives on benefits packages, and set corporate policy. Those in larger firms have areas of responsibility such as "domestic packages of compensation" or "dental plans for North America." While this requires a degree of specialization, the head or vice president assumes all responsibility for planning, implementation, and education. Decisions are still overseen by generalists who have risen faster or who have greater experience, but are rarely countermanded. For those in small firms, salary increases are limited beyond this point; for those in larger firms, salary increases can still be significant.

### Professional Profile

# of people in profession	52,500
% male:	55
% female:	45
average hours per week:	40

### Professionals Read

Employee Benefits News  
Best's Review of Business Insurance  
Benefits Administrator  
Pension Performance

### Books, Films and TV Shows Featuring the Profession

*Long-Term Care*  
*The Crisis of Care*

### Major Employers

Farmer's Insurance Group Aetna	Cigna Corporate
6901 South Yosemite Street 151 Farmington Avenue	1601 Chestnut Street
Suite 107	46th Floor P.O. Box 7728
Hartford, CT 06156-3400	Philadelphia, PA 19101-9463

Englewood, CO 80112

Tel: 303-770-4449

Fax: 303-796-8719

Tel: 860-273-0123

Fax: 203-273-1757

Contact: Recruiting

Tel: 215-761-2244

Contact: Human Resources

#### **You'll Have Contact With**

Actuaries

Compensation Analysts

Human Resource Personnel

Pension Consultants

#### **Major Associations**

American Compensation Association  
14040 Northsight Boulevard  
Scottsdale, AZ 85260  
Tel: 602-951-9191

American Society for Training and Development  
1640 King Street  
Box 1443  
Alexandria, VA 22313-2043  
Tel: 703-683-8100  
Fax: 703-683-1523  
Contact: Customer Service

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