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ASK LIZ

What are employee benefits worth?

Benefits make up more than 30% of the typical compensation package, but companies aren't always clear about how much value they add for employees. Knowing what benefits are worth can help you evaluate job offers or better negotiate your next raise. When reviewing your employer's current offerings, start by checking your pay stub for health insurance contributions. Next, evaluate your retirement plan and company match. Finally, consider other benefits like dental insurance, disability insurance and tuition assistance. After you've reviewed your benefits, weigh what they're worth to you and your personal situation.

Benefits make up more than 30% of the typical job's compensation, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. But figuring out what your benefits are worth isn't always easy.

You may need to do a little digging to find how much your employer contributes toward health insurance, retirement plans and other perks. Some benefits also have nonmonetary value, and people can value the same benefits in different ways.

For example, people with health conditions are likely to appreciate guaranteed access to disability or life insurance that could be hard to get or prohibitively expensive otherwise. Someone with student loans may value a program to help with education debt far more than someone without student loan debt.

Now that open enrollment season is upon us again, it's a great time to review your employer's current offerings. Understanding what your benefits are worth could renew your commitment to your current job — or make you realize it's time to seek out a better deal. If you're thinking of becoming self-employed, you can better understand how much more you'll need to earn to replace your current benefits.

Here are some of the most common benefits, along with typical employer contribution amounts, according to Mercer, an employee benefits consultant.

Health insurance: \$5,000 to \$20,000

Employer-provided health insurance plans range from bare bones to fairly extravagant. On average, though, employers paid 83% of the \$7,739 premium last year for single coverage and 73% of the \$22,221 premium for family coverage, according to KFF, a health insurance research organization.

You can find what both you and your employer paid for your health insurance last year on your 2021 W-2, says Paul Fronstin, director of health benefits research at the Employee Benefit Research Institute, or EBRI. The annual figure is often reported using a "DD" code.

Your employer also may break out its contribution on your pay stub. A pay stub is a document that provides the details of your gross and after-tax pay along with various deductions. You often can access your pay stub through your company's online payroll system; ask your human resources department for details.

Premiums are just one factor in evaluating your health care coverage, of course. Deductibles, co-pays and provider networks matter as well. Having access to different types of plans can make open enrollment more confusing, but it also can help you tailor your coverage to your situation.

See **Weston / B2**



James and Emilia Barnum pose outside their new Big Tooth Family Dentistry in Wallowa on Thursday, Nov. 3, 2022. The Barnums' oldest son designed the office's logo.

Filling a need

James Barnum brings dental care to Wallowa with Big Tooth Family Dentistry

BY BILL BRADSHAW • Wallowa County Chieftain

WALLOWA — It's no circus, but Wallowa has a dentist of its own now that James Barnum opened shop downtown Monday, Sept. 26, in Big Tooth Family Dentistry.

"No, we're not part of the circus," said James, in a joking reference to his distant relative P.T. Barnum, the famous American showman of the 19th century.

This Barnum is a general dentist who provides cleanings, advanced cleanings, composite fillings, crowns, bridges and dentures. He's planning to begin doing denture realigns, where he re-bases a denture to give it a better fit.

The Barnums

Wallowa's new dentist moved to Wallowa County with his wife, Emilia, and their five children. They came from Milwaukie, a Portland suburb, where they operated a dental practice for 12 years and she worked for a corporate pharmacy.

They first came to visit and then decided to make the move 14 months ago.

"We visited here and the people here are so friendly," Emilia said. "We saw there wasn't a dental office here and the doors seemed to just open."

Both adult Barnums got their respective degrees at Oregon Health & Science University. James earned a doctor of medicine in dentistry. He said it's a little different than the usual DDS in that its focus is on whole-body health.

Emilia earned her degree in pharmacology. James is a native Oregonian, but Emilia has a different tale to tell. She was born in Romania and came to the U.S. with her parents at age 10.

"I spoke zero English," she said.

But that's hardly evident now, since she worked really hard to get rid of her Romanian accent.

"Now when I see people with an accent, I think, 'Oh man, it's nice' (not to have one)," she said. "It was a teenage thing, wanting to fit in. It was pretty life-changing for me. I was pretty shy and timid."

The couple's five children range in age from 4-15. They homeschool the kids, who are also able to take part in sports programs at Wallowa schools. Their oldest son is on the high school basketball team.

The office

Located right downtown, Barnum's office is housed in a building built in 1890 that's gone through several incarnations.

The building has "a fairly rich and weird history," he said.

"It's housed almost everything under the sun,"

Emilia said, adding a tie to her profession. "One of the last things was a pharmacy."

The building was one of the few that didn't lose all its windows during the disastrous Aug. 11 hailstorm that pummeled Wallowa. However, the Barnums did have to replace the roof.

The practice

So far, the dentistry is attracting customers locally. He said they're getting calls from Union and Umatilla counties, but they are primarily interested in keeping their clientele limited to Wallowa County.

"We want to keep it on a local level," Emilia said.

James agreed. "We've been saying no," he said. "We want to just stay loyal to this little community."

Emilia works alongside James — when she's not homeschooling the kids — putting her knowledge as a pharmacist to work.

"She comes in really handy when it comes time to talk medical histories and medications with patients," he said.

James said he hopes to bring to Wallowa dental services that residents have had to leave town for in the past.

See **Dentistry / B2**

Oregon business taxes middle of the pack

BY MIKE ROGOWAY

The Oregonian

SALEM — Oregon's business taxes, long among the nation's lowest, have risen considerably over the past few years and now place the state near the middle of the pack, according to a prominent annual survey.

The Tax Foundation is a think tank that ranks state tax policies each year. The organization advocates for lower taxes and publishes its ranking as part of its campaign to push for more business-friendly tax policies, so it operates with a clear agenda.

Because it applies a consistent methodology across states, though, and because the Tax Foundation has published its results for many years, its ranking is a widely watched barometer of how states measure up against one another.

Oregon ranks No. 24 in the Tax

Foundation's most recent tally, down two places from last year's survey. Among neighboring states, that puts Oregon roughly on par with Washington (No. 28), well ahead of California (No. 48), and behind Idaho (No. 15).

As recently as 2019 Oregon ranked eighth. The state's favorable ranking reflected the absence of a sales tax, a rare thing in the United States and a major boon to businesses.

So what's changed?

Oregon's ranking fell in large part because of the state's new corporate activity tax, which the Legislature approved in 2019 to fund education and early childhood programs. It generates more than \$1 billion a year by taxing companies' gross revenues. Employers are also paying more for Oregon's new paid family and medical leave program.

The Tax Foundation notes a succession of new taxes in the Portland area, the state's population and commerce center. Those pay for homeless services, clean energy programs and other government functions. And the organization says tax cuts in other states reduced Oregon's relative placing.

Curiously, the Tax Foundation docks Oregon for reforms to its unemployment insurance taxes. The foundation reduced the state's ranking in that category in 2021 and 2022 and now ranks Oregon No. 36.

Oregon businesses, though, roundly hailed the reforms, passed by lawmakers last year with resounding bipartisan support. The state estimates they will save businesses \$2.4 billion over 10 years.

The Tax Foundation didn't respond to questions last year or this year

about its methodology, but the unemployment taxes don't appear to be among the leading factors in Oregon's falling ranking.

Oregon is beginning the process of taking a broad look at its tax climate. Tax breaks created for factories in the 1980s now go overwhelmingly to wealthy tech companies for data centers and warehouses. In their upcoming session next winter, lawmakers plan to consider reforms that could reduce the scope of those incentives.

Additionally, state leaders plan to examine the competitiveness of its tax incentives and business climate in hopes of luring chipmakers to build billions of dollars in new factories in Oregon. Some legislators and gubernatorial candidates want to take the opportunity for a broader assessment of the state's business climate.