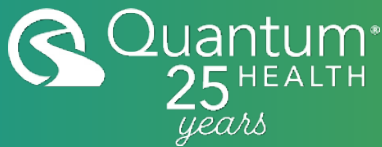


the INDEX



MedCity
News

The 2024 Benefit Consultant Sentiment Index

Benefit Consultants' Perspective on the
Shifting Employer Healthcare Landscape



Introduction

We're pleased to share the findings of the second annual Benefit Consultant Sentiment Index (The Index): Benefit Consultants' Perspective on Shifting Employer Healthcare Landscape. In the spring of 2024, Quantum Health and MedCity News partnered to survey more than 100 skilled healthcare consultants, who shared their unique perspectives of the self-insured employers they advise. The report revealed where they see the biggest focus among their clients.

The navigation experience is an important theme in this year's report and permeates the conversations between consultants and self-insured employers across their employees' healthcare journeys. Consultants report that the healthcare landscape continues to shift in areas where healthcare navigation can better support employers and their employees, including cancer care support, pharmacy costs and preventive care, all with more insights into how healthcare benefits can impact ROI.

Looking ahead, the ways in which AI will integrate into healthcare navigation will be an interesting trend to watch.



Key Findings

- **84%** of consultants report that digital health point solution fatigue continues among their clients with **63%** reporting that their clients are considering consolidation of digital health point solutions all under a healthcare navigation solution.
- **41%** of consultants say employers are using care navigation tools and software to support employees with cancer.
- Consultants report the importance of preventive care benefits for clients rose significantly in 2024 to **42%** compared with **29%** last year.
- **61%** of consultants are advising clients more often on new drug costs and pricing strategies for their self-funded employer plans.
- **Almost 40%** of consultants do not believe that navigation through an employer's existing carrier meets a self-insured employer's needs. **62%** of consultants who guide their clients to independent healthcare navigation say it offers a better member experience with access to dedicated care coordination services.

Other findings:

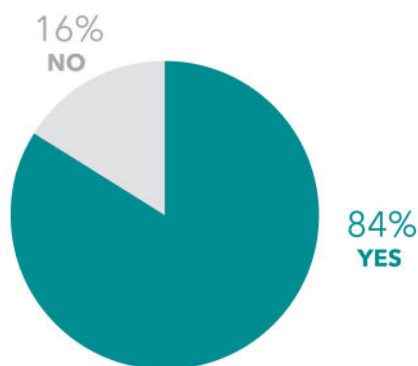
- Consultants report an increasing emphasis on wellness resources for cancer care support (compared to last year).
- 50% of consultants advise clients on using AI to facilitate personalized decision support to help employees make better benefits decisions.
- Consultants say employers prioritizing virtual care have remarkably diverse opinions when it comes to measuring ROI within their benefits program.

The figures used to express survey findings were rounded to whole numbers.

Consultant Survey Results

The need to consolidate digital health point solutions remains a focus in 2024.

As you consider the current landscape of digital health point solutions, are you continuing to see point solution fatigue among your clients?

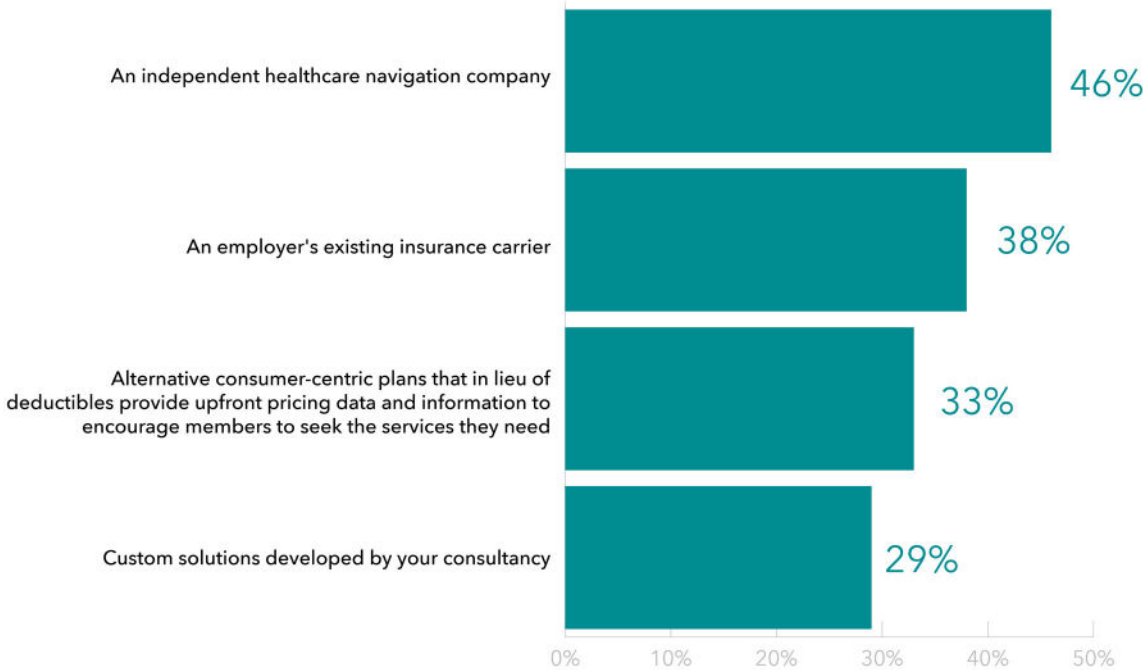


Consultants say employers need their employee healthcare benefits to be easier to utilize. That begins with ending digital health point solution fatigue, according to 84% of respondents.

Are your clients considering consolidation of digital health point solutions all under a healthcare navigation solution?



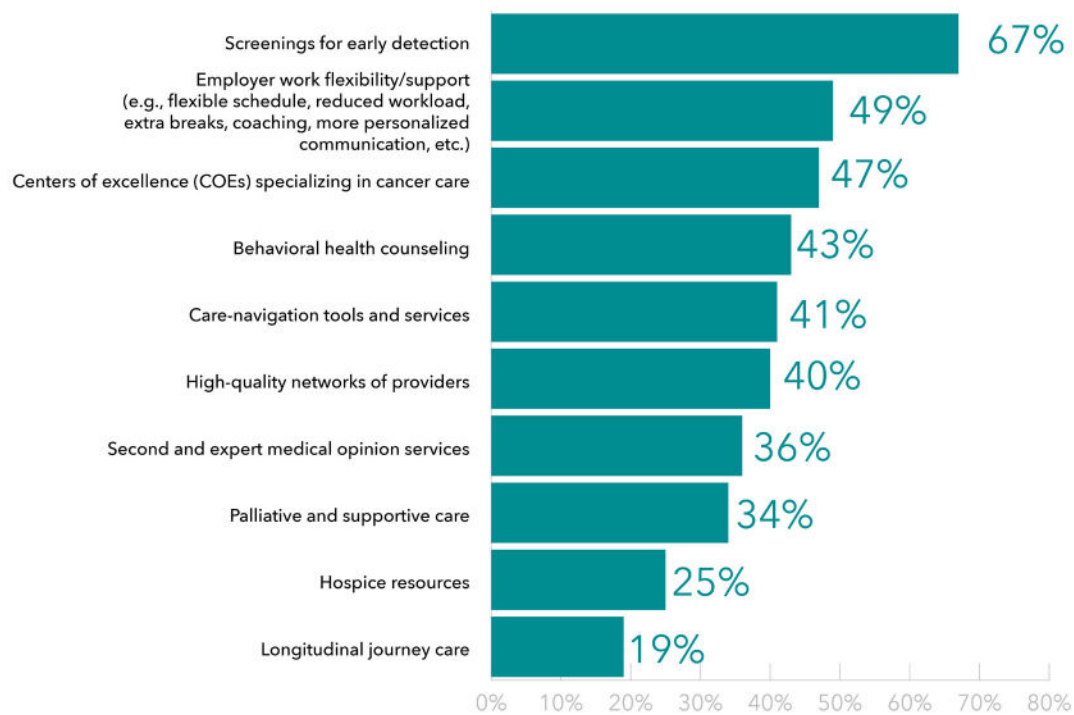
If yes, are your clients considering consolidating most often through:
(select all that apply)



The majority of consultants, **63%**, say their clients want to consolidate their point solutions under one navigation solution, consistent with 2023 findings. Nearly half, 46%, say they would use an independent navigation company to achieve this consolidation.

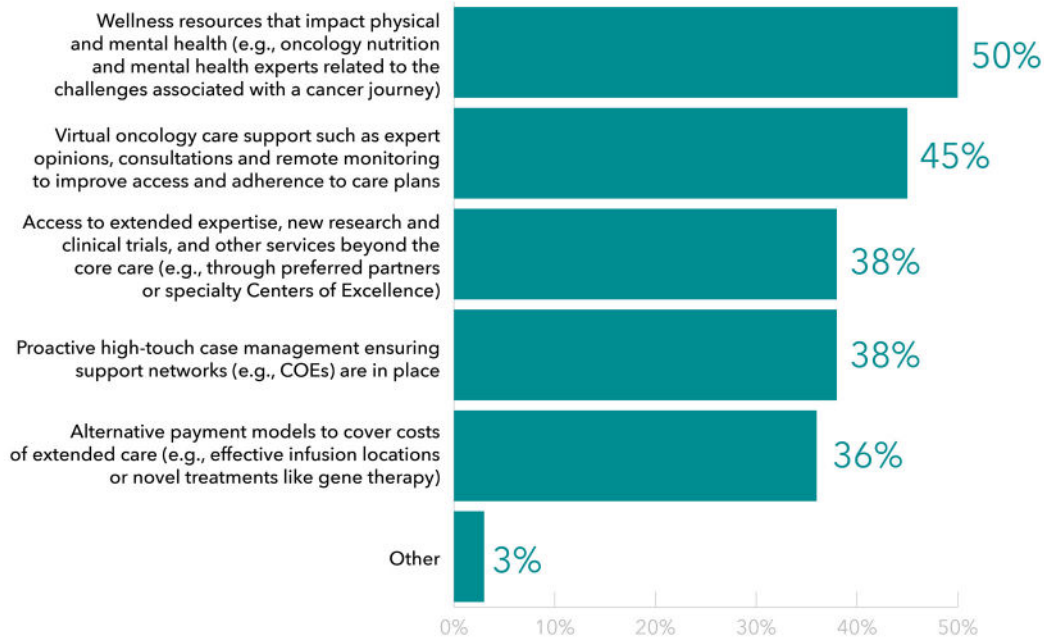
Best practices for employee cancer care continues to be an important focus for employers.

Among leading-edge employers, what best practices are you seeing used to support their employees with cancer? *Select all that apply.*



Consultants say screenings for early detection are the most common best practice among leading-edge employers for their employees, according to 67% of consultants. Other popular best practices include Cancer Centers of Excellence (47%), counseling (43%), and **care navigation tools and services (41%)** to support employees with cancer.

Which health benefits plan options below are you most often recommending to your self-insured clients with employees who need cancer care support? *Select all that apply.*

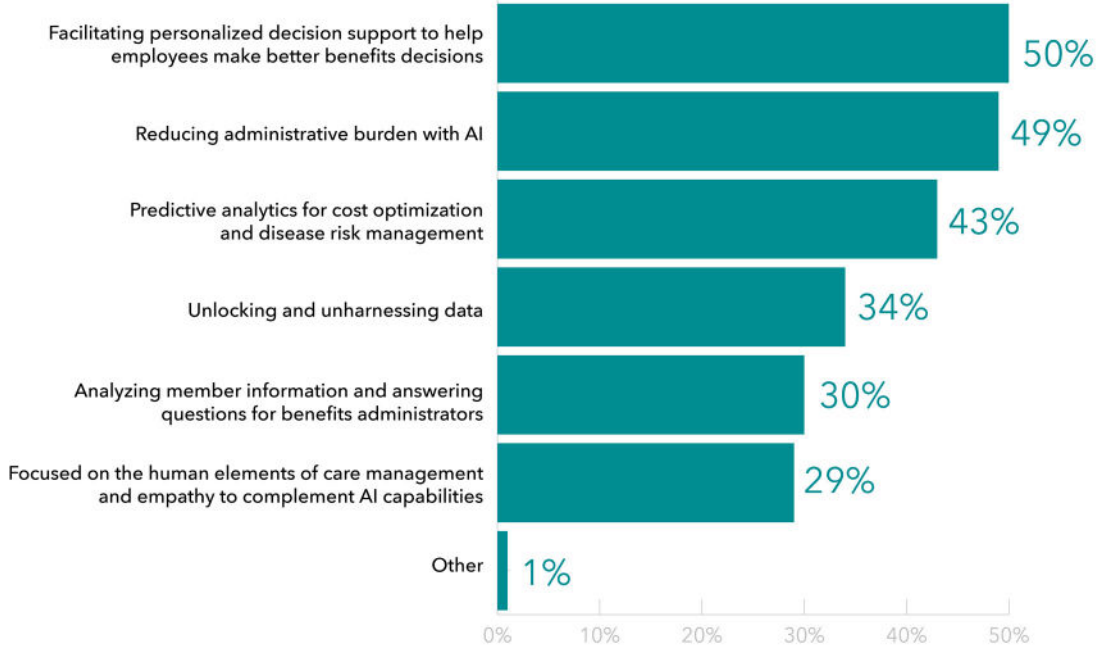


The number of consultants who say they recommend **wellness resources** that impact physical and mental health, such as mental health experts and oncology nutrition, **rose to 50% this year**, a significant rise from 33% in 2023. Clinical studies have produced evidence of connections between mental and physical health when it comes to cancer treatment. They underscore the importance of managing anxiety and stress in cancer patients, which helps them adhere to a care plan with beneficial results.

Consistent with 2023 findings, **virtual oncology care support**, such as expert opinions, consultations and remote monitoring to improve access and adherence to care plans, **was the second most popular option recommended by consultants at 45%**.

The rise of AI tools shows potential role in healthcare benefits management.

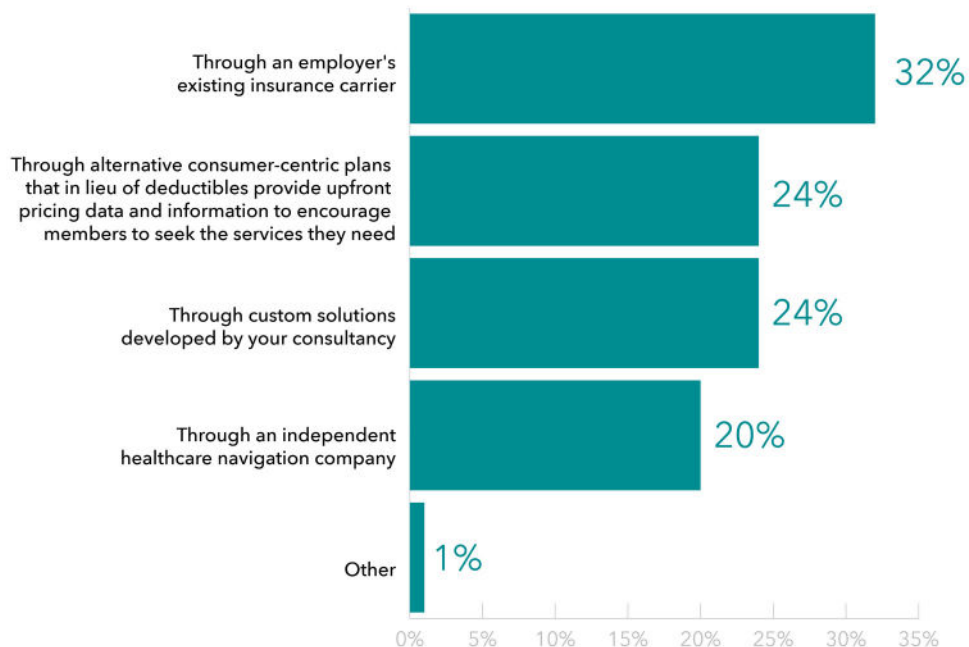
What areas of AI impact are you most often counseling on?
Select the top three.



AI is a growing part of consultants' conversations with employers, particularly in the area of **personalized decision support** so employees make better benefit decisions. It's also a part of **cost optimization** and **disease risk management** for employers.

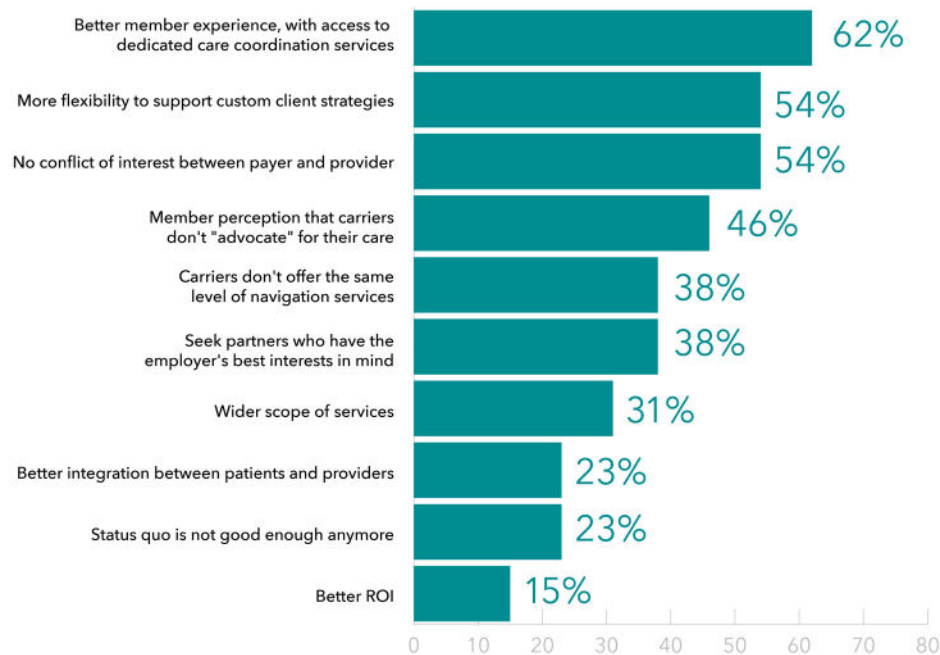
Healthcare navigation can best be described as an approach to improving healthcare delivery that helps individuals access the care they need at the right time and cost effectively.

When thinking about healthcare navigation, where do you typically guide your self-insured employer clients to get healthcare navigation services/solutions for their plan?



Consultants report navigation is critical not only to ongoing efforts to manage healthcare costs but also to understand and make informed choices for employees' plans to: reduce barriers to quality/timely care with benefits education; get pre-authorization and claims management; and get clinical support, powered by technology tools and/or coupled with care coordination. **68% of consultants say they are guiding their clients to navigation services other than through an employer's existing insurance carrier**, with 20% through an independent healthcare navigation company.

If you are guiding your self-insured employer clients to an independent healthcare navigation company, why? *Select all that apply.*



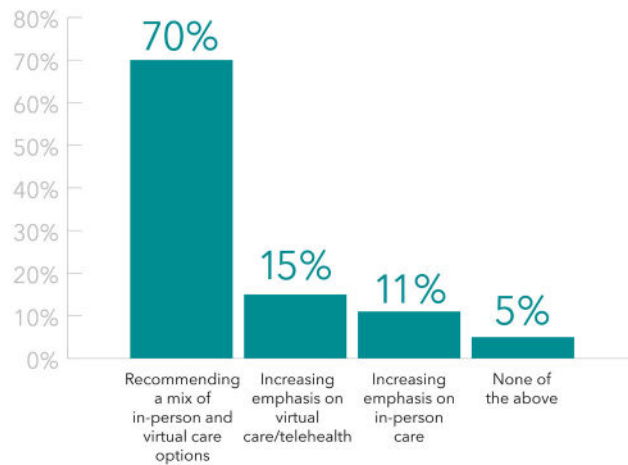
A better member experience with access to dedicated member services is the top reason 62% of consultants say they recommend using an independent healthcare navigation company. Other popular factors include flexibility to support custom client strategies, lack of conflict of interest between the payer and provider, and the member perception that carriers don't "advocate" for their care.

If you do not believe healthcare navigation through an employer's existing insurance carrier meets a self-insured employer's needs, what is missing or what could make it better?

- "The models are siloed, antiquated and inconsistent. Care is also not often understood at the local level by the carrier."
- "It doesn't allow for new and more innovative solutions. If they are evaluating ROI and eliminating those programs that aren't successful, then it can be helpful."
- "Avoidance of conflict of interest—integration with third-party solutions and client procured Centers of Excellence (COEs)."
- "Lack of coordination across medical, pharmacy, specialty pharmacy components. Lack of handholding and care navigation. Lack of price transparency."

Consultants have reduced the emphasis on virtual care as part of benefit plans.

How are you guiding your clients around virtual care/telehealth solutions within their benefits plan?



The majority of consultants (70%) report that they are recommending a mix of in-person and virtual care options. Only 15% of consultants report increasing the emphasis on virtual care/telehealth when guiding their clients on benefit plan solutions. It's a predictable shift because although the pandemic led more people to experience virtual health firsthand, reimbursement metrics favor a balance of in-person and virtual care.

Consultants say the lack of uniform adoption across clinical conditions, age groups, geographical locations will be a factor for the foreseeable future.

What do you think is leading to the downward trend of virtual care/telehealth utilization?

Inability to conduct physical examinations.

Lack of uniform adoption across clinical conditions, age groups, geographical locations and types of insurance.

Technical access and difficulties.

Communication difficulties.

Contributes to higher costs given lack of more stringent oversight by providers.

Consultants report that virtual care and telehealth exploded on the scene, providing patients with **greater convenience, more access to physicians and specialists**, and the promise of **lowering healthcare costs**. Research now indicates decreases in virtual care/telehealth usage post-pandemic and particularly among specific modalities (e.g., adoption highest for behavioral health; lowest for procedural specialties).

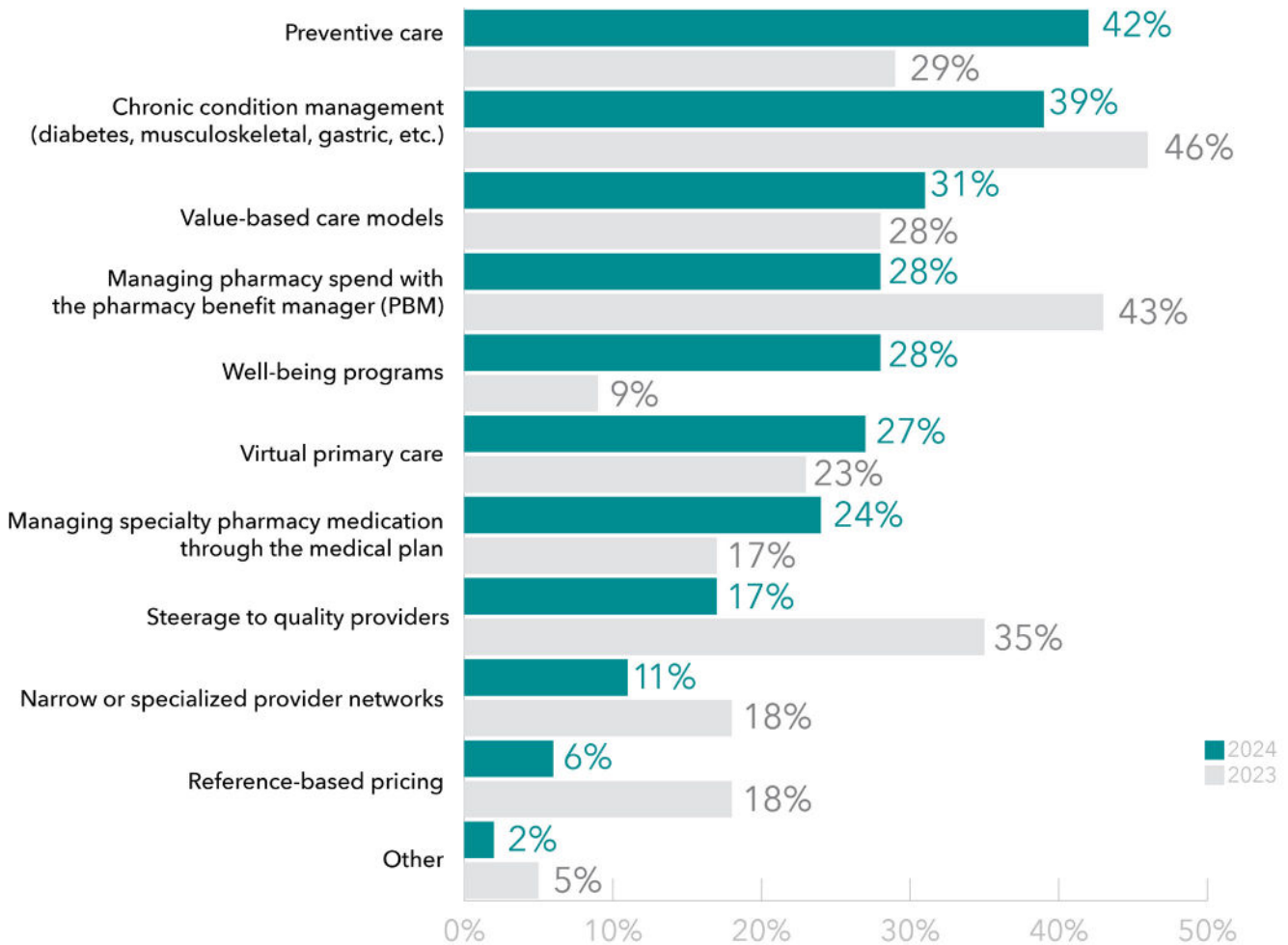
For your clients that are prioritizing virtual care, how are they measuring ROI within their benefits program? (Some responses have been lightly edited for clarity)

Employers prioritizing virtual care have remarkably diverse opinions when it comes to measuring ROI within their benefits program. The rise of virtual-first care indicates some employers continue to embrace virtual care, even if it means an in-person appointment will also be necessary. For others, it comes down to comparing the cost of virtual care to in-person care or what's more practical for patients.

- *"We use a third-party provider for virtual care to reduce plan utilization and reduce rate increases."*
- *"We review whether these services are not only helping patients access care more easily but also whether the total cost is more expensive than offering in-person care only."*
- *"We review whether these services are helping patients access care more easily. We also look at whether the total cost of care is more expensive."*

Consultants say they are more frequently recommending preventive care programs.

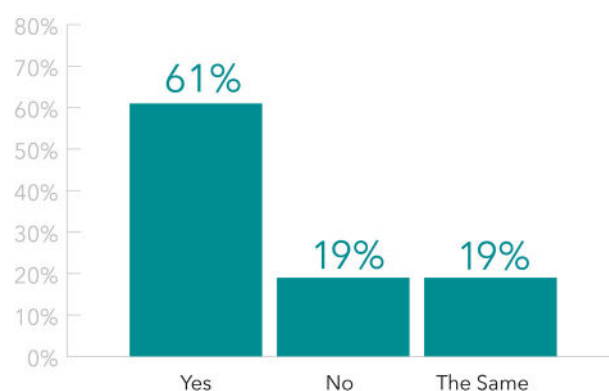
When benefits cost management is important to clients, which of these initiatives are you most often recommending to your self-insured employer clients to improve healthcare cost/spend? *Please select the top three.*



More consultants recommend preventive care initiatives to self-insured employers to improve healthcare spending in 2024, a shift from last year when chronic condition management initiatives were the most popular option. **Interest in well-being programs** also soared in 2024 to 28% compared with a meager 9% last year.

Consultants say they are taking more time to advise employers on prescription drug costs.

With prescription drug spending a billion-dollar problem for the industry, have recent efforts to reform pharmacy benefit management (PBM) practices required you to advise clients more often on drug costs/pricing strategies for their self-funded employer plans?



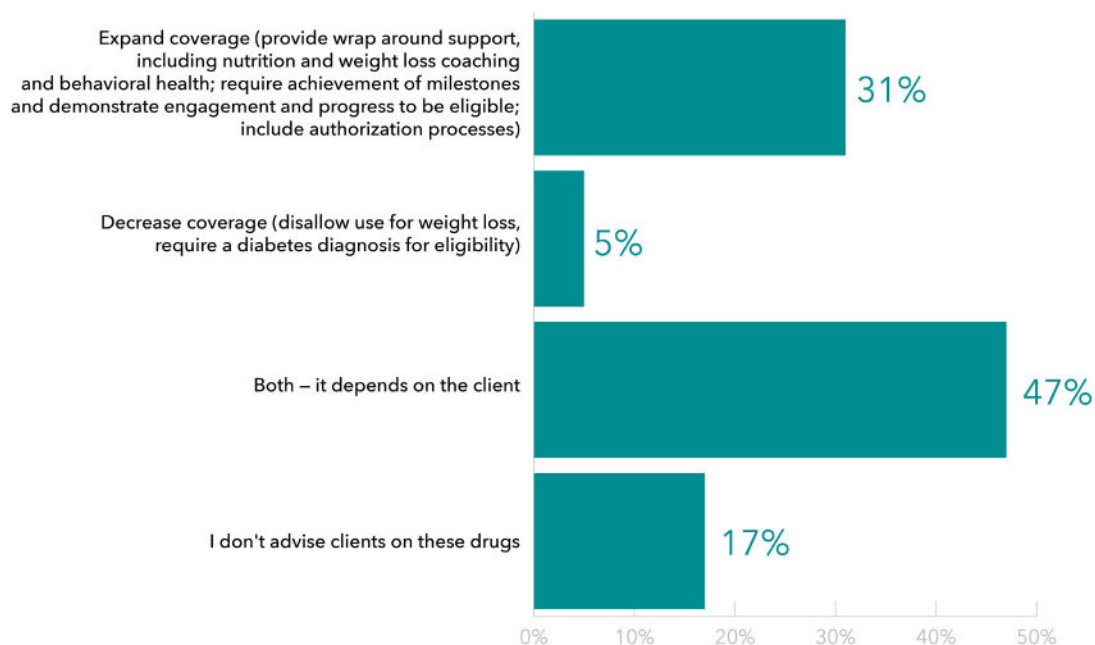
Consultants report that recent efforts to reform pharmacy benefit management practices **have compelled 61% of consultants** to advise their clients **more often on drug costs/pricing strategies** for their self-funded employer plans.

The top areas where consultants provide the most counsel to support their objectives include:

- Helping clients evaluate their existing pharmaceutical and PBM contracts
- Active formulary management
- Providing options for collaboratives or other arrangements offered by consultants' organization
- Helping ensure that clients are compliant with emerging and existing regulations
- Creating new strategies for managing PBM reform-related costs
- Developing tiered network options
- Helping clients with employee communication

GLP-1 drugs are having an impact on the high-cost pharmacy landscape. Self-insured employers increasingly need guidance on whether or not to cover them and criteria to validate them.

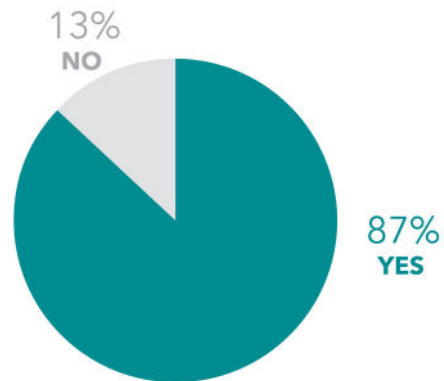
How are you advising your clients to expand or decrease coverage to include GLP-1s for weight loss?



More than three-quarters (83%) of consultants say they are advising clients to expand or decrease GLP-1 drug coverage for chronic conditions, particularly high-risk obese individuals, depending on what their clients' needs are.

GLP-1 drugs are a hot topic in the insurance industry because it generates so many questions about **current vs. future healthcare costs**. This is definitely a category to watch in the future, particularly as **the long-term effects of these drugs become more widely known** and to see how coverage trends for the costly drugs evolve.

If you are advising your clients to expand coverage of GLP-1 drugs, are you also helping them develop requirements as well as ensure quantifiable positive cost and value outcomes?



Given how pricey and tough to obtain GLP-1 drugs are, consultants report that clients need guidance on how to quantify outcomes. Of the 78% of consultants who say they at least sometimes advise clients to expand coverage, 87% report they also advise employers on how to quantify outcomes. Consultants are also advising clients to **add utilization management** programs such as prior authorization, quantity limits, step therapy, ensuring only FDA-approved treatments and more.

Other ways consultants are guiding clients on managing the risk and cost of offering GLP1s for weight loss include:

- *“Negotiating favorable pricing and rebates with pharmaceutical manufacturers to minimize the cost of acquiring GLP-1 medications.”*
- *“Setting up strict guidelines and step-therapy measures for appropriate prescribing and coverage of GLP-1 drug therapy for weight loss. I let them decide (with my input) on the appropriate parameters for approval or denial of coverage.”*



Conclusion

MedCity interviewed more than 100 skilled consultants with a wide range of experience who advise self-insured employers for this report. These employers vary in size from as small as 500 or fewer staff to as large as 50,000 employees. The survey findings also serve as a snapshot of the healthcare landscape and provide vital insight into how companies are weighing healthcare benefit decisions for employees. The information contained within this report is important because the kinds of healthcare benefits companies offer can make a great difference in a company's ability to engage and retain employees, while also focusing on areas of improved cost management.

Healthcare navigation is central to the tasks of balancing healthcare cost management with outcomes as well as adding to employees quality of life.

How companies balance investment in healthcare benefits with outcomes is especially interesting with relatively new treatment options for cancer patients and people with Type 2 diabetes. The high cost of these therapeutics forces companies to make tough decisions about coverage. The growing interest in wellness and preventive care solutions provide a way for employees to better manage healthcare spend in the future.

Consultants play a vital role to keep self-insured employers informed about healthcare reforms, emerging trends, prescription drugs, digital health and virtual care. The insights they share in this report offers a clear picture not only of companies' healthcare priorities, but also how companies are making these crucial decisions.

With an increasingly complex healthcare landscape, recommending a care navigation solution is more relevant now than ever before, as consultants guide their employer clients.

About MedCity News

For the second year, MedCity News conducted this annual research and report exploring the insights of benefit consultant leaders.

MedCity News is the go-to digital destination for B2B healthcare innovation news, informing decision makers of trends in the healthcare industry. MedCity News produces dynamic and unique innovation-focused events for the entire healthcare ecosystem, gathering experts from across disciplines to address the challenges facing the industry. MedCity News also produces the Debunked videocast, as well as several podcasts: MedCity Pivot, MedCity Moves and MedCity FemFwd.

MedCity News is owned by Breaking Media, a network of websites, e-newsletters, events and social media channels for influential, affluent business communities.

About Quantum Health

This is Quantum Health's second year to sponsor this insightful report of trends in the healthcare benefits space. Quantum Health celebrates its 25th year as the industry-leading consumer healthcare navigation and care coordination company that delivers an unparalleled consumer experience to its members, as well as validated claims savings and high satisfaction rates for its self-insured employer and payer clients. Quantum Health's proprietary Real-Time Intercept® capability identifies opportunities for early intervention in a member's healthcare journey, resulting in better engagement, outcomes and cost efficiencies.

Founded in 1999 and based in Dublin, Ohio, Quantum Health has earned numerous awards and honors, including being named among the Fastest-Growing Private Companies by Inc. 5000, a Great Place to Work by FORTUNE Magazine and Entrepreneur Magazine, and one of FORTUNE'S Best Workplaces in Healthcare. The Women Presidents' Organization has also ranked Quantum Health as one of the 50 Fastest-Growing Women-Owned/Led Companies for over 15 years.

To learn more about the company, visit [Quantum Health](#), and connect with us on [LinkedIn](#) and [X \(formerly Twitter\)](#).

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