

Newfront Insurance - Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Interview conducted on February 09, 2023

Topics

Employee Benefits, Consulting, Brokerage Services, Large Clients, Small Clients, Market Intelligence, Simplification

Summary

During a conversation between a Tegos Client and the Director of Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC, they discussed the services provided to smaller clients, which vary depending on whether the plan is fully insured or self-funded. The Director works as a consultant and focuses on program development and strategy, while smaller clients may have brokers handling their needs. They also discussed the role of people managers and their responsibilities, as well as the types of services provided by Willis Towers Watson PLC, including ben admin support and eligibility. The conversation then shifted to trends in the industry, including the simplification of offerings through productized approaches and the use of SharePoint and Teams for organizing information and sharing files. The Director noted that there are no best practices for using these tools and that incentives for profitability are not currently in place at their organization.

Expert Details

Director of Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson

Director of Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson. Expert has been working in the healthcare & benefits space for 15 years and currently oversees WTW's largest clients throughout the mountain states. Expert works across a myriad of company types across different verticals and can speak to the needs and demands for benefits at companies based on industry, size, geography etc.

Prior to Willis Towers Watson, the expert was a benefits consultant at Buck Consultants. In this role, the expert led the consultation and implementation for Xerox.

The expert can speak to fertility in HR & consults with employers on their family planning journeys. The expert explores strategies and compares to benchmark peers on best-in-class vendors. The expert has experience reviewing the vendor landscape for fertility, maternity, and caregiving.

Q: Did you or your team offer employee benefit consulting services to clients between 100 and 500 lives?

A: The team, I don't work on this size life group.

Q: Can you speak to the scope of services that you offered to clients as part of employee benefits consulting? Specifically, what services did you offer clients and how did you charge for those services?

A: I won't speak to charging though can speak to services offered.

Q: Can you speak about your staffing model: specifically, how many people were assigned to service a client, and what were the roles of the people assigned?

A: I can speak to this.

Tegos Client

Hello. Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today about the employee benefits space.. It

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sounds like you've had awesome experience kind of over 15 years in the space. I'm curious, in that time, like what's the size of clients that you've primarily worked with?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

It's ranged like with the smallest being like 3,000 in the U.S. to like 40,000 or 50,000 in the U.S.

Tegus Client

Okay. And have you had much exposure to clients below that, like whether it's just seeing it at the brokerages you're at, other people in the space that you've observed? Or is your knowledge going to be pretty much like the 3,000 and up?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

It's going to be 3,000 and up. I see it like peripherally, but I do not work with them. So like to your point, I have colleagues that work with them, but I'm not the one working with them.

Tegus Client

That's helpful. So we're learning a lot about clients who might fall anywhere from 50 employees up to 2,000. So it's going to be probably quite a bit smaller than where you focused. So we will have a bunch of questions that are going to be much more broad like the org level, people management level, which I think will be applicable no matter kind of the size of the client.

I'm curious where you've worked, when you think about the scope of service that you're providing to a client, how much that defers just based on the client size, if it's a client that might be under 500 employees, it's level funded, fully insured versus maybe one that's getting up above 500 and self-funded. Any kind of difference in kind of the scope of service that's being provided for those?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Yes. And some of my clients like on the bigger end have some fully insured plans. But that has been my experience that typically a smaller sized employer is going to be fully insured. I don't know that it makes sense for them to consider like self-funding a plan, right, when there's a lot of volatility at that size of an employer. But again, some of mine have some fully insured sort of regional plans versus a national self-funded plan.

Tegus Client

Yes. And I guess for the smaller ones, like when you think of a scope as far as maybe like the types of communications you're going to do, the number of meetings you're going to have with the clients, types of comms, would you imagine those to be pretty different?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

I would. Yes, I think for more of that fully insured, and I'm using the word fully insured just because that's what I need to, but I have like kind of sort of level funded. But yes, I think it's like pretty cut and dry for the fully insured plan, right?

They are regulated by state government, it's kind of like an off-the-shelf product versus a self-funded plan where you can make more kind of those design changes and so communications may vary. And plus, I find like the self funding, you can add in a bunch of programs that might get to some sort of different communications.

Tegus Client

Yes. And between those two groups, like what does a staffing like team look like? Like what does that service team tend to look like as far as like whether it's an account exec, Tier one, Tier two, Tier three level? What does that tend to look like?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

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Those are smaller. So I would say like an account exec, an account manager and some sort of analyst.

Tegus Client

Okay. So you'd see kind of three, so you'd have an account exec plus the account manager plus an analyst?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Yes. Not always, but I think it's either between two or three.

Tegus Client

Yes. And is that actually the same staffing that you then have for the larger like self-funded groups as well?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

I think it would be broader. I think there'd be like a lead consultant, maybe a lead actuary and then some sort of project manager and then a couple of analysts and then some supporting kind of subject matter expertise, which you could also see on a smaller employer.

Tegus Client

Yes. And for the actuaries, is that someone who might be part of a centralized team and then just helps with? They have a bunch of different clients and lean in and help and are more like a shared resource? Or are they assigned specifically to that client and like part of that service team.

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

I think it depends upon consulting terms. So I think I've seen it both ways where it's either an assigned resource to that team or it's a shared resource.

Tegus Client

Got you. And do you know like where you're at now, like what determines, I guess whether it's going to be assigned to the team or whether it's like a shared resource?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

I think size of client and their needs.

Tegus Client

And is there like a size where it tends to flip, like 1,000 employees, 5,000?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Yes, I'd say closer to the second range, like 3,000, 5,000.

Tegus Client

Got you. For anything like when we're exploring below 2,000 or so, you'd typically see that as more like a shared resource?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Correct.

Tegus Client

Okay. And for I guess, where you are, are all the producers, like are you sitting on the same team of producers who might focus on the clients that are 100 employees, 300 employees? Or are you actually in just like different teams completely?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

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Kind of the same team, but we kind of like work in different kind of cohorts. So I'll be working like less with them and more with colleagues like in the work that I do.

Tegus Client

Yes. And how are the service team members split up between those different segments as well? Or I guess even like taking a step back from that, like what do you even view the segment as? Like if you were going to break it down by size, like what are those sizes?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Yes. And this is like my own personal, right? This is not my company's thoughts. So personally, I mean, I would do like 500 and less, maybe like 501 to like 2,001, and then 2,001 to like 7,500, and then 7,500 and up.

Tegus Client

Okay. And would service team members kind of specialize in one of those segments? Or do they tend to span across all of them? So like maybe an account manager, would they likely like only work on clients that are 500 and less, and that's a specialty and then a different one would specialize in this mid-market 500 to 2,000? Or do they kind of flex between all of these?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Yes. I don't really work with account managers. I have more of like what we're calling like a project manager, but the account managers, I think they could do like all of the sort of small and mid-market.

Tegus Client

Okay. And when you say you work with a project manager, what does that mean? And how does that compare with these other AEs, the AM, and the analysts that you mentioned earlier?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Yes. I think what I do versus like what a broker does, could be just viewed a little bit differently. So I think what you're asking me about is more on like that producer brokerage side, which it can be a little bit more transactional.

And I think where I'm working more like on a kind of consulting is a little bit less transactional and more sort of like thinking about program development, program strategy. So like a project manager won't just be thinking about like, oh, maybe like how do I get this answer about one employee from a vendor? It will be more of like how do I implement like an ongoing change within an organization? How do I manage this vast team of people both in my organization and at the client? So I think the roles are a little bit differentiated.

Tegus Client

Got you. And so for the clients that you're working with, which are these larger ones, is the work that maybe the account manager and the broker would be doing on a smaller client now just being done by the HR team or like at the client level? Or would you also have like a broker separately working on your client and then you're coming in more as a consulting and you'd actually have like a different role altogether?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

I think likely, yes. So at these bigger clients, that function is likely being served within the client. And then maybe with some more help and support from vendors like a medical administrator or PBM is more helpful or there's more of like a ben admin platform to support on that, that integrates with like a payroll process.

So I think some of that happens as a company gets bigger. And yes, so I don't work with brokers, like the clients I work with right now, it's only us in terms of being like a consulting firm or it's like us and one of our competitors doing sort of similar functions.

Tegus Client

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Got you. And I'm assuming at the consulting level, everything is kind of a fixed price, like you're going in, you're providing an estimate of cost and it's not commissions based. Is that fair?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

No, it can be commissions based. There's a set number of commissions and we can be paid that way.

Tegus Client

Okay. And then one thing I'd be curious about is like the people management kind of within your brokerage firm and how that is structured. Particularly for the service team members, what does that look like? Do you have full-time people managers? Is it hybrid roles where people have a book and then are also managing people?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Yes, the latter. So you have like your own clients and then you can manage it individually.

Tegus Client

Okay. Is your book reduced if you're a people manager? And do you have a sense of like if so, by how much?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

It is not reduced. For the most part, I'd say, like that's not every single person, but for the most part.

Tegus Client

Yes. And how would you define like the role of a people manager there? Like what are they doing? What's the extra work that they're doing on top of just anyone else? So the people managers, I'm assuming if they have a full book still, they're super busy. And so I'm curious on top of that, like what is the additional responsibility that they're taking on? Are they meeting with their team each week? Are they helping set like here's your career path. Are they actually helping set like quality controls? Are the people working under me performing well? Just kind of what that role is?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Yes. So I think in terms of meetings, it kind of depends upon the manager and the person they're managing. And then how often they meet and maybe like their career level, things like that. And then they are responsible for like setting goals and taking in feedback about their reports and kind of supporting those reports in their work.

Tegus Client

Got you. And I guess, what's the incentive of a people manager to be a people manager? Are they paid more for doing that? Or it just looks good, or they just love it?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

I think it can be anything. I mean, I think it could be all of the above, right? I think it's a good thing to be able to do and take on and most people get some level of satisfaction from it.

Tegus Client

Okay. So it's more on that level and they aren't getting like additional salary for taking on the people management role in addition to the book?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Yes, let's leave it there. I think that's good.

Tegus Client

Okay. And do you have a sense of how many people a typical people manager would be managing?

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Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

I don't know that there's like an average per se, but maybe like one through like eight.

Tegus Client

That is helpful. And I guess jumping focus a little bit to just like the types of services that you all provide. And again, kind of wearing a bit on the smaller side of the client spectrum. Do you all provide ben admin support?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Yes. I don't do that right now, but that is a function that's done by my employers. So it's done by my organization. I'm not currently working on any ben admin clients right now.

Tegus Client

Got you. And would that be like the service team that does that support? Or do you actually have like a centralized team that leans in to own it?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

There's like colleagues that work on ben admin that are separate from like any work that I'm doing in terms of consulting or any sort of brokerage team. It's a different line of business.

Tegus Client

And would that be, if a client was going to use ben admin support, is that just a part of their typical scope of service? Or is that something that would be kind of priced out and invoiced separately?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

The latter.

Tegus Client

Okay. And what about for like eligibility? Is that something that you all also help clients with? Or do you ask the clients to just take full control of that piece?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

It's part of the ben admin offering to do eligibility.

Tegus Client

Yes. And that would be kind of all levels of ongoing support if there's issues midway through. An employee doesn't have access to something or there was like a mistake, they'd kind of work through with your systems team and work through that?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Correct.

Tegus Client

Got you. And I'm curious when you have a new client, what does your onboarding process look like as far as gathering that information? Is it an app or website? I'm curious what the structure of that like intake form looks like and how much is like manual versus more like a tech type solution?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Yes. So that's a good question. So I would imagine it will be different between what you're asking about at the brokerage level versus like the consulting. So I can give it to you at a consulting, but I can't really do it at a brokerage level. So I think for us, the work that we do and like pride ourselves on is like really talking with the client and trying to understand them. So I think there's all sorts of like checklists that can be done through tech or not where we collect information.

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But I do think the bulk of it is kind of like really having some philosophical discussions and then getting some data and asking questions about like different information we're seeing within the data and kind of talking through like why was this decision made? Like how did you come to this conclusion? Is this correct about your demographics? And things like that. So I wouldn't say it's like any sort of automatic process that happens to onboard.

Tegus Client

Okay. And I'm curious of the trends that you're seeing with clients right now when you're talking to them, like what is it that they're looking for from you all, I guess, on the consulting side and then your brokers? What's the pain point that they're really trying to solve?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

I think, on the consulting side, they're really looking to us to bring market intelligence, like what are their peers doing? How are their peers looking to manage cost while at the same time offering the very best experience to be able to attract and retain their employees? And then at a broker level, I am guessing same holds true, perhaps more help for their HR team like that we were getting to some of that transactional support.

Tegus Client

Yes. And where do you feel like brokers today are just missing the mark, like clients are coming and they want some help and people were just not offering what they need?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

I'm not sure. Like I haven't heard anything that they're missing their mark. I mean maybe it's just like wanting more kind of like strategic support. But I'm not even sure that that's what employers of that size expect all the time.

Tegus Client

That makes sense. I was just curious if you've heard of anything or seen anything. I guess just like doing a deeper dive on services or maybe trends that you're seeing, one thing it sounds like talking with different clients, different people in the market, is there's this push for benchmarking in especially like HR and everyone just wanting to understand how their competitors are doing. Do you all do benchmarking yourselves like internally?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

We do.

Tegus Client

And what does that process look like? Like how do you capture that data? How do you frame it and structure it so that it's like the most valuable for the clients?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

I think it's just comparing them to their specific peer group, like really being able to say, this is the most important of the benchmarking data. Here is what your peers are doing. Here's what they look like and really being able to kind of customize it and support them in what we know are their goals of philosophy.

Tegus Client

Yes. And where is that data coming from? Is that just you all are big enough and have enough clients that you can just determine a peer group from your internal clients? Or is that national surveys that you're pulling from?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Yes, national, like it wouldn't be just like based on my book, right? Yes, I wouldn't have enough in my book.

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Tegus Client

Got you. And like the brokerage broadly, you just don't have enough to be able to come up with like interesting enough cuts?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Right. I don't work on so many clients.

Tegus Client

Okay. So one of the big things we keep hearing is the importance of training for brokerages as they're bringing on new service team members. Obviously, the market is changing quickly. What does the training process look like for you all?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Yes. I mean I think at a diversified level. So if someone's coming from a competitor, it's a pretty easy training process because I do think there's a lot of things that we do the same. I think coming from college, probably is a little bit of a more difficult transition. We have a number of formal training processes that we use. And then I think there's a lot of learning on the job. So I think it's kind of different by different levels and types of people and then someone coming in who is more seasoned, but without some consulting background, we have those trainings, and we have like mentors and things like that.

Tegus Client

Yes. So let's say it is someone who's just like straight out of college and joining. Do they join in and like kind of have a buddy for a while where maybe they aren't assigned clients on their own and they're doing like a buddy system? And is there kind of a ramping structure that you know of that you tend to stick with?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

I mean I do have buddies and like mentors, but I don't know that there's like a ramping system necessarily, but that is a good idea.

Tegus Client

Okay. So for producers and service team members, I guess like service team members in particular, have you seen like incentive structures implemented, whether it's based off of retaining clients, based off of book size growing a certain amount or something like that where the service team gets some bonus or something like that?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Yes. I think that's more common in sort of like a brokerage situation. I think everyone has their goals, especially as they get more senior to retain their clients. So I think a certain percentage accelerator bonus maybe based on that. And I think that's how, what we see in our organization and throughout other consulting firms.

Tegus Client

Yes. I'm curious, I'm just not sure how relevant it's going to be for your space or maybe it's more brokerage or maybe it's the same, but when you're bringing a new client in or if you think about maybe your peers on the brokerage side, how do you determine which team, like service team gets staffed to that client? Do you have almost like a pod structure where it's the producers work really closely with a certain service team. So as a producer brings something in, they always go to the same service team? Or is it just based on who has availability or industry expertise?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

I think it's availability and industry expertise.

Tegus Client

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Okay. So no, there isn't like a sense of a producer has their go-to service team and they always work together.

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

I don't think so, no.

Tegus Client

All right. So one thing we've seen a bit of a trend on is brokers trying to simplify offerings as much as possible or almost kind of create a productized type of approach where maybe you have, here's your traditional scope of service. And then you could add on a bundle, like a comms bundle or a wellness bundle in trying to make it like a more structured approach. Is that something you've seen much of?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

I have. I think that is probably an effective way to go, especially in this market, given that people just like don't have any time or they're tired. And so just making something easy to understand. I think it's probably the direction people are headed with that.

Tegus Client

I guess what trends in that space have you seen? Are there certain areas you've seen these bundles that have been more kind of taken off a bit more and more well accepted from clients?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

That's a good question. I mean I think communications bundle is always a good thing. I think benefits administration is typically very expensive. So someone comes in, they want benefits administration specifically. And so on the communications elements, I also agree to think about maybe like data analytics and kind of thinking through how to offer data analysis on top of like a standard statement of work.

Tegus Client

Yes. And then if you want some additional level of analysis, you can add on this kind of additional bundle to it.

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Correct.

Tegus Client

Okay. It seems like comms, data analytics. Have you seen a lot in like the wellness space?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

I think, I mean, yes, like in terms of like looking for point solutions to get to a variety of different conditions, but I don't necessarily see that as an add-on in the way that you're talking.

Tegus Client

Okay. Jumping again back to like the big org. This is going to be totally different than anything we talked about, but I'm just curious, how do you organize information like as a brokerage as far as like where files are saved, how there's service team members getting asked to do deep dive research into different vendors or different rules that were just passed. And I'm just curious like how you all have thought about structuring that and sharing that information easily. And if you've seen anything that is like interesting or workflow?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Yes, it's a good question. So you know SharePoint? I mean I think SharePoint is like a good way to do it and something that you can have accessibility to like wherever you are, which, I don't know if that's true about like Wi-Fi, but necessarily being like on some sort of like private networks, like how do you get access to

those trials? And I think SharePoint is something good. I think like Teams have been useful as well. And I've seen that like at many of my clients as well, like they use those types of systems.

Tegus Client

Yes. So I don't know Teams super well. Is that like can you store files on Teams?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Yes, you can like send files on it, you save files on it.

Tegus Client

Got you. So when would you use like Teams versus SharePoint?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Yes, I think it just depends upon the organization's kind of like requirements. Sometimes maybe with a client, we'll share files on Teams versus our own internal tools, we'll use the SharePoint just to make sure we all have access. I think probably everyone is in the midst of figuring out what works best. And it's not going to be the same team by team or organization to organization. But I have found over the past couple of years, those two have been helpful.

Tegus Client

And would you see like an organization use both for different reasons, like maybe one is more secure, one is better for sharing with external clients? Or have you seen like a best practice where you just need to choose one file and like stick with it and get the org behind it?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

I think there's no best practice yet. I think both are used for different reasons and depending by client.

Tegus Client

All right. So I'd be curious to understand like are you guys using any sort of time allocation technology to figure out who's spending time on what clients so that you can kind of back solve to figure out the profitability of your clients or do you not?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Yes, absolutely. I think that's the way we're able to tell, like who has time, who's too busy and all of that great stuff.

Tegus Client

Do you do that at every level? Or like is that only in like the brokerage side for the smaller clients, they're also tracking time?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Not necessarily in the same way, but my understanding is they are kind of like allocated time, but maybe not through like a very formal process.

Tegus Client

This may be more on the brokerage side than in the consulting side, but are there any incentives with the service team leaders around profitability? Like if they run a more profitable book, they can make some extra money or anything like that? In other words, have you seen incentives around running more profitably offered to the service numbers?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Yes. It doesn't happen where I work currently. That's not to say it hasn't happened before, but I'm not seeing

any right now.

Tegus Client

And I guess, back to an earlier question, we are just trying to understand is there a check-and-balance. Like if I'm working with a client, what prevents me from charging the client like the wrong number? I tell a client, oh, yes, we're going to give you 1,000 hours of time and we're going to charge you \$1.

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Yes. No, of course.

Tegus Client

Is there anything that prevents me from doing that? Like do I go check with my boss or with someone to get alignment to say, yes, you're charging the right amount, or no, you're not charging the right amount? Or is it all just like a trust-based system?

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Okay. There are checks and balances. There are ways that we budget out the time and create that check and balance where we can go and say, hey, like this is the budget. Does this budget feel right compared to other budgets of things like this? Is it accurate? Did we bring in the right hours? Did we bring in the right rate?

There are approvals that need to happen at a senior level. And if we're going too far one way or another after we start working with an employer's client, there are checks and balances for that as well, on the consulting.

Tegus Client

That makes sense. So there is kind of an internal check and balance to make sure that the budget seems like reasonable. It's like based on other clients, what we're seeing here makes sense. The budget that you're putting forward makes sense or it doesn't for these reasons.

Director, Health and Benefits at Willis Towers Watson PLC

Yes. That's it.

Tegus Client

Totally makes sense. I think that's all I've got. Thank you so much, this was super helpful. You have a good afternoon.

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