

Lake County Case Study:

Still Paper-Based For Enrollment, One Northern California County
Modernizes Benefits Administration and ACA Reporting



Lake County, in California’s lush wine country, has obviously transformed since the first business was established in the area in 1855. One sign of modern times is that the county today has a workforce of more than 820 employees who are responsible for everything from road maintenance to multi-modal transportation planning to running the county court system. What Lake County didn’t have until fairly recently was a modern, online system for enrolling those employees in their benefits or administering benefits during the year.

The Company

Located due north of the San Francisco Bay Area, Lake County covers 1,329 square miles, has more than 65,000 residents, and has more than 820 people on the county payroll. The county is also responsible for providing and administering benefits for about 20 individuals who receive benefits through COBRA and more than 650 retirees.

The Challenge

While Lake County continued to manually enroll employees for their benefits and used a paper-based system to manage benefits administration, the demands on HR and the complexities of benefits grew increasingly difficult. By 2011, the county:

- Was managing plan offerings for as many as nine unions
- Had to provide plans for employees who worked in several satellite locations and had access to different healthcare systems
- Had an array of role structures
- Had to allow for and manage enrollment in passive benefits (optional for enrollment at any time without coverage ramifications) and mandatory benefits (e.g., adding a newborn must be done within the first month after the child’s birth or be added during the next annual enrollment period)
- Was managing benefits programs for active employees, COBRA-eligible individuals, and retirees

The county’s geography added another layer of difficulty to its paper-based benefits and HR management system: Clear Lake, the largest natural lake wholly within California, sits smack dab in the middle of the county.

“It can take 90 minutes to circumvent Clear Lake — a huge burden and time restraint for HR during annual enrollment when you’re doing everything on paper,” said Jesse Puett, the county’s HR analyst.

The Journey

In 2011, Lake County changed the insurance agency with which it negotiated and purchased employee benefits. The primary reason for the change was to stabilize the rates the county paid for employee health insurance. As part of moving to a new broker, Lake County asked who the agency would recommend as a third-party administrator to help HR accurately and more efficiently handle its complex structure of roles and plans.

The county wanted a system that would ensure smooth benefits setup and administration, and that would position it to more easily and safely accommodate changes that might result from new state or federal laws or requirements, including ACA reporting and compliance.

However, the county wasn’t ready to move to — and, in fact, still hasn’t adopted — an online enrollment system. “We have a relatively older population who’s not particularly technologically savvy,” Puett said. “We still do the data entry manually.”

The county went to bid for a third-party benefits administration solution.

The Solution and Implementation

“We went with the one we felt safest with,” Puett said. “We chose WORKTERRA for its ability to handle role structures and rules.”

In fall of 2011, Lake County began planning its new benefits administration system with WORKTERRA. Specific goals were a smooth implementation and accurate records setup and mapping. The WORKTERRA BenAdmin module was online for the 2012 enrollment season. Lake County added the WORKTERRA ACA Compliance module in 2014.

During implementation, Lake County’s testing uncovered some rates that were incorrect and a few radio-button functions that didn’t work — bugs that WORKTERRA fixed without delaying the launch date.

“The next year, for annual enrollment and the new rates, we had no bugs,” Puett said. “That was great.”

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The Results

“It’s a very easy system to work with,” Puett said. “It’s customizable, which is fantastic for us with our employee population, and the customer service is fantastic.”

A plus of working with WORKTERRA, Puett said, was that the people representing the company “understand the nuts and bolts of the system ... they know how it works and what we need it to do.”

“What they do,” Puett said, “they do very, very well.”