

Benefit Administration & Online Enrollment Systems for School, City, and County Employers



Choosing the right benefit administration and enrollment software system for your school, city, or county organization is a daunting task. At National Insurance Services (NIS), we know. We recently underwent this same process - shopping on behalf of our clients - and this guide is the result of that experience.

NIS' team encountered the expected, the unexpected, and everything in between. This guide will help you benefit from our findings and more easily navigate the confusing realm of benefit administration and enrollment software providers.

Most enrollment systems on the marketplace are designed for commercial businesses. Your organization, however, won't be well served by most of these products. Forcing a standard benefits enrollment software program into a bargained or non-bargained school, city, or county environment is like forcing a square peg into a round hole.

Unfortunately, it is hard to find a provider who can accommodate the eligibility rules, job classes, union regulations, and countless nuances that are inherent in your type of plan. To help you arrive at the right destination, we have outlined a step-by-step guide and checklist of things to consider when navigating this confusing process.

Your journey will be a personal one based on the unique needs of your organization. This guide will help you tailor the advice outlined below to suit your particular employee pool, regulations, pricing, and implementation needs.

With that in mind, we offer you our research, our longstanding experience in employee benefit consultation and our expertise with school, city, and county employee benefits (since 1969).

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Step 1: Roll Call

Forming a solid committee to provide several perspectives and complete as much pre-planning as possible is crucial. Allowing for enough time to assess, prescribe, shop, educate, and implement is also very important.

We found that creating a calendar of scheduled meetings with the stakeholders identified as follows at the outset helps maintain project flow and stay on track. For most schools, cities, and counties, these members are the bare minimum for the deciding team. Again, your group may include others specific to your needs.



The Champion

This person serves as a project manager, organizes the committee, delegates work, and has a deep understanding of all aspects of the organization's employee benefits plan.



The Numbers Expert

This could be the Business Manager, your Treasurer, Financial Officer, Director of Finance, or someone who owns the financial side of the employee benefits plan.



Human Resources

Your HR Representative/ Personnel/Benefit Manager is crucial in choosing the right plan and the right enrollment software. S/He knows everything there is to know about which employees receive what benefits.



The Payroll Clerk

The Payroll Specialist/Book-keeper knows how to work with HRIS/payroll software, how to pair it with your present system, and how to input the correct information in the right place.



The Staff

We recommend at least two employee/union representatives on the team to provide input into the decision making process. They are, after all, the ones who will be enrolling on the new system you choose.



The Tech

When vendors pitch their software, you'll need the IT person to completely understand the implications and the viability of integration and adoption.



Give your team at least **SIX MONTHS** to arrive at the right plan for your organization

Step 2: Evaluation

The marketplace for benefits and enrollment software is saturated, so knowing in advance exactly what you require and what problems you are looking to solve is half the battle. Assessing your needs, your employees' needs, and the administration's needs is perhaps the most crucial step in choosing the right product.

We found that taking the time to craft a list of goals, must-haves, and preferences at the outset saved time and effort down the road. Knowing exactly what you need when speaking with software vendors is an invaluable advantage.

Following is a short list of things to consider at this stage, but no two schools, cities, or counties are alike. Get creative, be thorough, and add your specific requirements to this list.

- ✓ **Efficiency:** What will make your enrollment, maintenance, and implementation processes run more smoothly? What can be automated or made self-service (more on self-service below)?
- ✓ **Redundancy:** What is your vision of a streamlined benefits process? Are there any steps, jobs, or vendors that can be eliminated (or reallocated) once you integrate the new system?
- ✓ **Reporting:** What specific reports will you need from the system? How does the software pull employee censuses? Be as descriptive as possible.
- ✓ **Hiring and Termination:** What are the steps in your hiring and termination process? Will the software allow you to efficiently enter hiring and termination information into one place only, dispersing those changes to every insurer?
- ✓ **Eligibility:** Union requirements, job classes and everything in between means different offerings for different employees. How complicated are your eligibility rules? How many different offerings do you have for your different employee classes/categories? You will need to find a system that accommodates them all.
- ✓ **Liability:** Will the system have built-in checkpoints and will it make sure you are in compliance with ACA and other benefit legislation?
- ✓ **Online Enrollment:** Self-service saves time, jobs, money, and ensures that crucial information is complete. It also empowers employees to choose and maintain their own benefits. Whether you choose a fully automated enrollment or just employee access to update personal information, you'll need a system with an intuitive user interface to avoid having to train staff to use the application. Ask everyone on the committee to take it for a test drive.
- ✓ **Comprehensiveness:** The importance of health plans sometimes obscures the finer points, including administration processes involved in some ancillary benefits. Be sure to consider all of your benefit offerings and their complexity. For example, disability insurance administration is often especially complex. It is important that all members of the team weigh in on this issue.



Step 3: Preparation

Your team has met, you've evaluated the needs of your organization and employees, and you know what you want the system to handle. Now it's time to find the right solution and there are a lot out there.

Benefit and enrollment software providers want your business as much as you need their services and they will try to showcase every single feature of their products. Demos, reams of documentation, endless lists of services—we've found that to cut through the unnecessary add-ons, and superfluous features, be sure you've exhausted the preparation/evaluation outlined in Step 2. Next, dovetail that planning with the features you'll outline below to decide how they need to be implemented to suit your unique needs.

Our foray into this process taught us a great deal and for your convenience, we have created a score sheet you can use and modify to compare services among the providers you contact. You can also download the pricing sheet and other useful documents.

Please note that the downloads are basic guides—starting places—and are intended to be amended according to your specific needs. Also, it is recommended that each member of your committee keep a separate personal scoring system to be compared with the others before reaching a final decision.

Ease of Use:

- ✓ **Online Enrollment:** Will it work with your unique requirements and variants? Is it intuitive and easy to use for both employees and employers?
- ✓ **Training:** How steep is the learning curve? Ask for an estimate on getting your benefits personnel up to speed, then the employee pool.
- ✓ **Employee-Facing Interface:** How is the look and feel of the User Interface (UI) for both employees and administrators? Is it intuitive, well constructed, and EASY to use or is it difficult to navigate? If employees will need training or tons of how-to documentation, then the UI is not acceptable. An employee should be able to use it without help.
- ✓ **Efficiency:** How long will it take to implement and launch? Does it fit your schedule?

Integration:

- ✓ **Carrier Data Feed:** How robust is it? How do you like the electronic data interface (EDI)?
- ✓ **Platform:** Is their system compatible and easily integrated with your current technology such as your HRIS/payroll system?

- ✓ **Scale:** Can the software accommodate your organization's size? Is it flexible or is it designed for a much larger or much smaller group?

Compliance and Provisions:

- ✓ **Compliance:** Is the vendor up to speed on all state and federal regulations? Specifically inquire about the Affordable Care Act (ACA) as well as state compliance laws that affect your organization.
- ✓ **COBRA:** What are the COBRA features?
- ✓ **HIPAA:** Does the system comply with all of the HIPAA rules?
- ✓ **Retirement Administration:** How does the system handle administration of retiree benefits?

Billing and Support:

- ✓ **Billing:** Does the software provide aggregated billing and/or billing reconciliation that will work with all of your insurance carriers? Will it work with your disability insurance carrier?
- ✓ **Processing:** How are invoices handled? What sort of back room processing is offered?
- ✓ **Bookkeeping:** What processes does the software use to archive and maintain organizational data?
- ✓ **Security:** Don't shy away from insisting on airtight privacy measures and hacker-proof safeguards.
- ✓ **Reporting:** Does the software provide convenient metrics reporting features? How easily can you manipulate the data to achieve the reports you need?
- ✓ **Medical Reimbursement Plans:** Does the plan include administration provisions for FSAs, HSAs, and HRAs? Even if you don't use reimbursement plans now, you may in the future.
- ✓ **Support:** Is there a readily accessible call center, chat feature, or customer service network for you and/or employees? What are the customer service hours?



Most benefit administration and enrollment systems are designed for commercial companies. School, city, and county benefits are more nuanced and will require customization. Prepare a thorough list of questions before shopping.

Step 4: Pricing

Obviously you will have budget limitations that may prove to be the deciding factor in choosing the right benefits and enrollment provider. Our experience in this process taught us a valuable lesson we'd like to pass along: consider every cost, not just the sticker price.

Software companies will often quote you a round sum for their services but undisclosed or hidden fees can add up. When speaking with a vendor, please keep in mind the potentially expensive services not included in the package you buy. We've compiled a short list of items to mention below but make sure you also directly ask about any other fees that might be specific to your plan.

- ✓ **Pricing Tiers:** Standard pricing or partnership pricing? What is the fluctuation rate regarding the number of employees, the type of employee? (See "Per Person Fees")
- ✓ **Initiation:** Often there is a one-time fee for setting up the program. Make sure it is exactly that, one-time, and weigh that fee against the other providers you've researched.
- ✓ **Savings Accounts:** Will you be charged extra if your plan includes HSAs, FSAs, and/or HRAs?
- ✓ **Compliance:** Will you be required to pay for something standard such as observance of ACA regulations?
- ✓ **COBRA:** This is a common add-on if your provider administers it. Be sure to ask about fees regarding COBRA.
- ✓ **Customer Service:** Does the vendor charge extra for employee and employer support or is it included in the contract?
- ✓ **Billing:** How will invoicing work? How will individual employees be billed and what convenient options are available for payment? Can the provider include a file feed that will break out the various employee tiers?
- ✓ **Per Person Fees:** Is there a standard fee for each employee or does it vary based on employee class, age, or other situation? Many vendors will impose a minimum number of employees or a minimum price for smaller organizations.



Use our Price Comparison spreadsheet to document all the associated fees with a given vendor.





Step 5: Comparison

In our research, we found the below comparison websites to be useful starting points. Please note, however, that thorough preparation is the best strategy. Knowing what you want or need when going into any research with a benefit administration and enrollment software provider will save a tremendous amount of time and land you the best deal possible.

Responses to RFPs will not always be ‘in the same language.’ A package from Provider A will include different services, timeframes, and apply to opposing employee groups than a package from Provider B. Try to standardize your RFP and the responses you receive as much as possible. We have put together [some sample RFP questions](#) you may choose to ask.

- [Software Advice](#)
- [GetApp](#)
- [trustradius](#)
- [PCMag](#)
- [HRMS World](#)



Ask a potential provider for references. A five-minute anecdote from a fellow school, city, or county benefits specialist can tell you more than weeks of research and presentations.

Step 6: Cutting a Deal

You’ve prepared your questions, you’ve conducted research and received pitches, you’ve used the scoring and price worksheets, and you’ve narrowed it down to a few providers or even a final one. It’s time to take one last look before signing on the dotted line.

Things to consider, things to review:

- ✓ **Thoroughness:** Have you read everything carefully? The devil can be in the fine print.
- ✓ **Curiosity:** If there is anything you are unsure about, now is the time to gain clarity. Assume nothing; ask questions until you are satisfied.
- ✓ **Security:** Make sure everything you’ve discussed with the software representative is in black and white. Get it in writing before you sign.
- ✓ **Montage:** Have your team take a look at the big picture. Are all the i’s dotted? Does the plan make sense in the long term?
- ✓ **Launch:** Do you have a solid understanding of integration and implementation? What is the timeline? What impact will it have on your stakeholders? How will it affect your current system?

Step 7: Implementation

At long last, you've found the right provider and the best plan. It's happening now and it's time to prepare for putting the plan in place.

As with every step in the process, we've identified a few necessary items for consideration through our own experience, detailed below. Creating an implementation timeline will aid in a smooth transition and a successful launch for everyone concerned.

Note that while you'll be devising your own implementation timeline, your vendor might also have its own standard timeframe. Be sure to ask about their typical target dates and align as closely as possible.

- ✓ **Implications:** What are the tasks that need to be accomplished on your end? What tasks will require assistance or liaison with the provider?
- ✓ **Personnel:** Which departments and which stakeholders will need notification? Who will need to be hands-on? Make sure the vendor you selected has provided a point of contact, preferably one that can handle all aspects of the implementation.
- ✓ **Delegation:** Your committee members each bring expertise to the table; leverage their specialties in the implementation stage and delegate appropriate tasks to make the transition smooth.
- ✓ **Timeline:** What is a reasonable timeframe for the implementation, taking into consideration the impact on departments such as IT, HR, and Payroll, not to mention information distribution and training, enrollment, and collaboration with the provider.
- ✓ **Migration:** How is your personnel and benefits information currently stored? How will you transfer all of the data you've amassed into the new tool? Who will spearhead this task?
- ✓ **Testing:** Before wide release, it is always advisable to have one or two trial runs. Dedicate a few employees to go through the enrollment process to weed out any hiccups.
- ✓ **Notification:** Determine a reasonable advance notice to inform employees of changes to their benefits and/or procedures. If it's too far in advance, employees may dismiss the warning; if it's too close to release it may cause consternation.
- ✓ **Training:** Employees may require education about how their benefits may or may not change, assistance with the self-service software, when enrollment periods take place, and a host of other information that will affect them. Make sure you have a dedicated, informed representative to handle employee training and questions.





Conclusion: Final Thoughts on Finding the Right Partner

NIS is here for you. We've been helping schools, cities, and counties since 1969 and this guide was created to assist you with the complexities of searching for a benefit administration and enrollment system. We hope it has been instructive.

After our extensive search for a system that will work for our clients, our number one choice was BenefitBridge, a benefit administration and enrollment system uniquely poised to handle school, city, and county organizations. We encourage you to evaluate their offerings when conducting your research, though our hope for you is that you arrive at the most suited software for your needs.

Should you have any questions about the contents of this guide or your current benefits system, our expertise and experienced staff are at your disposal. Please contact us at any time through our website or our toll-free number at 800.627.3660.

About National Insurance Services:

Since 1969, [National Insurance Services \(NIS\)](#) has worked with public sector organizations such as schools, cities, counties, municipalities, libraries, and community mental health organizations providing employee benefit consulting services, as well as brokerage services for medical, dental, life, disability, and vision insurance benefits. NIS also specializes in early retiree benefit restructuring services, tax-free options for retiree payouts, as well as, on-site and near-site medical clinics.

NIS is trusted by over 2,500 public sector organizations and 500,000 insured individuals in 29 states. We are headquartered in Brookfield, Wisconsin with regional offices in Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Pennsylvania.

To learn more about NIS, visit our website NISBenefits.com.

You may also be interested in the following resources:

- [Guide to Insurance Committees](#)
- [Whitepaper: Health Insurance Rx](#)
- [Whitepaper: Why Integrated HRAs may work better than HSAs for Schools, Cities, and Counties](#)



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