

INSURANCE

Setting up a health plan can be tough

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AT BUSINESSES across the country, health care costs get an added focus in the last months of the year.

Companies that offer their workers a variety of health insurance choices hold what are called open enrollment periods, allowing employees to change their benefits or sign up for special savings accounts. And at many small businesses, owners are deciding what, if any, coverage they can afford for their employees.

Amy Falk, who owns a public relations firm in New York, is in the market for health insurance for the first time. She's always had coverage through her husband's employer, but now that he's starting his own business, Falk is shopping for a plan for herself and her one employee.

"It's a challenge," Falk, said adding that at this point, she doesn't know whether she needs to budget \$800 a month or \$1,500 a month for a plan.

Health care costs have been cited as the biggest financial problem facing small businesses over the past decade. With prices for energy and raw materials climbing and interest rates also higher, the price of health coverage is now even more of a concern.

Owners who provide health benefits consider the expense to be an investment in their employees and their companies.

But finding health insurance can be a daunting process, and one that is time-consuming and possibly confusing, given the variety of plans and choices within the plans: HSAs, health maintenance organizations, preferred provider organizations and more.

Business owners should approach getting insurance in the same way they'd look for a lawyer or accountant — don't just go to the phone book or online and pick out a name. If you decide to use a broker, get a referral from someone you know, maybe even a couple of referrals. You can also contact a trade or industry group you belong to; many offer group plans you might want to join.

Before you speak to any broker or insurance provider, it's a good idea to give yourself some grounding about what's available. The Internet is an excellent source for information, but be aware as you browse the different sites that many are trying to sell insurance.

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