

Beyond Basic Benefits: Employee Access to Other Types of Benefits, 1979-2008

by John E. Buckley
Bureau of Labor Statistics

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Since the late 1970s, the Bureau of Labor Statistics has collected data on employee access to various employer-provided benefits beyond the basics of health insurance, retirement savings, and vacation, sick and holiday leave. Periodically, BLS has modified the list of benefits by adding those that were increasing in popularity and dropping those that showed no growth, remained rare, or had limited user interest.

For many decades, the BLS [National Compensation Survey \(NCS\)](#) and its predecessor surveys have collected and published data on employee benefits. The early surveys concentrated on the presence among workers of major employee “fringe” benefits within sampled establishments. (The percent of workers that have enrolled in a particular benefit or have it available for their use is known as the “incidence rate.”) Generally, the data obtained from surveyed firms were tied to commonly known benefits for which information was readily available and concepts easily understood. For example, one question might be, “Does your establishment offer health insurance to a majority of your office or plant workers?” Responses were limited to *Yes*, *No*, or *Data not available*. If the answer was *yes*, the funding of the benefit was determined—that is, whether the employer paid all of the costs or costs were shared by the employee. If a majority in a group was offered a benefit, all workers were considered covered; if fewer than a majority was offered a benefit, no worker was considered covered.

In the early part of the 20th century, nonwage benefits were sparse, and the term “fringe benefit” was appropriate. In a 2001 article by BLS economists Robert Van Giezen and Albert E. Schwenk, the authors noted that the cost of benefits in the mid-1920s “was still a very small part of a workers compensation package, accounting for less than three percent of the employers cost for employee compensation.”¹ In recent years, however, that figure has grown considerably. Data from the BLS [Employer Costs for Employee Compensation \(ECEC\)](#) program show that benefits accounted for about 30 percent of total compensation in December 2008.²

The advent of the BLS Employee Benefits Survey (EBS) greatly expanded the types of benefit details collected and published. The EBS was developed in the 1970s, during a period when the Federal Office of Personnel Management initiated its Total Compensation Comparability (TCC) program, which was designed to compare Federal and private pay and benefits.

In 1979 and 1980, BLS conducted experimental surveys of benefits in medium and large firms.³ The EBS was designed to provide a timely and comprehensive measure covering all elements of employees nonwage compensation. If the EBS was to be comprehensive, newly appearing benefits had to be monitored and collected when they showed growth potential. In the 1981 EBS bulletin, a number of these benefits were published as “other benefits,” which covered benefits as disparate as paid funeral leave, subsidized meals, and employee parking.⁴ Table 1 shows these “other benefits” data for three occupational groups in private industry in 1981: professional and administrative, technical and clerical, and production employees.⁵

Table 1. Other benefits: Percent of full-time employees in medium and large establishments providing specified benefits by percent of eligible employees, private industry, 1981

Benefit	All workers eligible	Some workers eligible
Professional and administrative employees		
Paid leave:		
Funeral leave	87	1
Military leave	79	1
Profit sharing, savings, and stock plans:		
Profit sharing	20	5
Savings and thrift	32	8
Stock bonus plans	11	2
Stock purchase plans	16	3
Other stock plans(1)	21	3
Income continuation plans:		
Severance pay	53	4
Miscellaneous benefits:		
Employee discounts	46	1
Gifts	11	3
In-house infirmary	48	4
Relocation allowance	75	9
Full defrayment of expenses	59	5
Partial defrayment of expenses	16	4
Recreational facilities	21	1
Full defrayment of cost	10	1
Partial defrayment of cost	10	(2)
Subsidized meals	25	4
Full defrayment of cost	1	1
Partial defrayment of cost	24	3
Educational assistance	78	4
Full defrayment of expenses	30	2
Partial defrayment of expenses	48	2
Parking	67	10
Provided at no cost	64	8
Provided below commercial rates	2	2
Automobile	2	25
Without reimbursing the company	1	19
Partially reimbursing the company	1	6
Technical and clerical employees		
Paid leave:		
Funeral leave	88	1
Military leave	76	1
Footnotes:		
(1) Other stock plans include Employee Stock Ownership Plans and Tax Reduction Act Stock Ownership Plans.		
(2) Less than 0.5 percent.		

Benefit	All workers eligible	Some workers eligible
Profit sharing, savings, and stock plans:		
Profit sharing	21	5
Savings and thrift	26	8
Stock bonus plans	7	2
Stock purchase plans	15	3
Other stock plans(1)	15	4
Income continuation plans:		
Severance pay	51	5
Miscellaneous benefits:		
Employee discounts	55	2
Gifts	12	3
In-house infirmary	38	7
Relocation allowance	40	5
Full defrayment of expenses	30	4
Partial defrayment of expenses	10	1
Recreational facilities	16	1
Full defrayment of cost	8	(2)
Partial defrayment of cost	8	1
Subsidized meals	23	5
Full defrayment of cost	2	1
Partial defrayment of cost	21	4
Educational assistance	69	3
Full defrayment of expenses	27	1
Partial defrayment of expenses	42	3
Parking	61	14
Provided at no cost	58	11
Provided below commercial rates	3	3
Automobile	1	2
Without reimbursing the company	(2)	1
Partially reimbursing the company	1	1
Production employees		
Paid leave:		
Funeral leave	83	3
Military leave	64	2
Profit sharing, savings, and stock plans:		
Profit sharing	13	4
Savings and thrift	14	5
Stock bonus plans	5	1
Stock purchase plans	9	1
Other stock plans(1)	16	3
Footnotes:		
(1) Other stock plans include Employee Stock Ownership Plans and Tax Reduction Act Stock Ownership Plans.		
(2) Less than 0.5 percent.		

Benefit	All workers eligible	Some workers eligible
Income continuation plans:		
Severance pay	28	5
Miscellaneous benefits:		
Employee discounts	46	1
Gifts	9	2
In-house infirmary	47	3
Relocation allowance	26	5
Full defrayment of expenses	13	4
Partial defrayment of expenses	12	1
Recreational facilities	15	(2)
Full defrayment of cost	7	(2)
Partial defrayment of cost	8	(2)
Subsidized meals	11	3
Full defrayment of cost	1	1
Partial defrayment of cost	10	1
Educational assistance	56	5
Full defrayment of expenses	18	3
Partial defrayment of expenses	39	2
Parking	76	6
Provided at no cost	76	5
Provided below commercial rates	1	1
Automobile	1	1
Without reimbursing the company	1	1
Partially reimbursing the company	(2)	(2)
Footnotes: (1) Other stock plans include Employee Stock Ownership Plans and Tax Reduction Act Stock Ownership Plans. (2) Less than 0.5 percent.		

The data in table 1 show similarities and differences among the three occupational groups. For example, the percent of workers who were eligible for funeral leave ranged from 83 percent for production workers to 88 percent for technical and clerical. In contrast, 75 percent of professional and administrative employees were eligible for relocation allowances, but only 40 percent of technical and clerical employees and 26 percent of production employees were eligible for relocation allowances.

The “paid leave” category grew over the years, starting only with paid funeral leave and military leave, but expanding to include paid sick leave, holidays, vacation leave, leave for jury duty, and personal leave, and paid and unpaid family leave. The items in the “profit sharing, savings, and stock plans” category moved from the “other benefits” category to form an entirely new category called “defined contribution plans,” which is now part of the retirement benefits category. Several benefits that were published in 1981 are no longer collected in the NCS, either because they lacked growth potential or because the costs, in terms of respondent burden and BLS resources, did not justify the collection effort. Table 2 shows the benefits that were studied at some point between 1979 and 2008 and subsequently dropped from the NCS.

Table 2. List of miscellaneous benefits dropped, 1979-2008

Benefit	Years of publication
Adoption assistance	1988-2008
Child care: funds(1)	1995-2008
Child care: on-site or off-site(1)	1995-2008
Child care: resource or referral(1)	2003-2008
Company automobile for personal business	1981-1984
Education assistance: work and nonwork unspecified	1981-1985
Education assistance: work and nonwork specified	1988-2008
Employee discounts	1981-1991
Employer-provided home computers	2003-2008
Eldercare	1989-1995
Financial counseling	1985-1989
Fitness centers	1995-2008
Gifts	1981-1991
In-house infirmary	1981-1993
Paid lunch time	1979-1993
Paid rest time	1980-1993
Parking	1981-1991
Prepaid legal services	1985-1993
Recreational facilities	1981-1993
Relocation allowance	1981-1988
Sabbatical leave	1991
Severance pay	1981-2000
Subsidized meals	1981-1991
Supplemental unemployment benefits	1985-2000
Travel accident insurance	1985-2008

Footnotes:

(1) An estimate of the total (the percent of workers with one or more of the three separate child care items) first appeared in EBS publications in 1994.

Note: Pilot studies were conducted by the Employee Benefits Survey in 1979 and 1980; annual publications of the Employee Benefits Survey began with the publication of the 1981 survey year data.

Some of the dropped items had elements that were retained in the later NCS lists of benefits. The three child-care items, for example, were combined and are shown as one benefit on the new list. In addition, wellness programs now include some of the activities related to fitness centers. (See the accompanying article by the same author in this issue of [CWC Online](#).)

Two traditional benefits that were included in the EBS--paid lunch time and paid rest time--were dropped from the EBS after being collected from 1979 through 1993. During that period, in medium and large private establishments, the percent of full-time workers with a paid lunch time ranged from 13 percent in 1979 to 8 percent in 1991. A paid rest time was much more widespread than a paid lunch time, but the percent with the benefit dropped from its high of 76 percent in 1982 to 67 percent in 1991. The two benefits were eliminated from the survey because they showed little growth over time, there was limited public interest in them, and the collection costs could no longer be justified.⁶

Recently, there has been a renewed interest in rest time, in the form of napping. Some advocates of a napping break maintain that there is a productivity gain rather than a loss when napping is allowed, because the employee returns from his

or her break feeling more energized. In an article by stress management consultant Elizabeth Scott, the author notes that because there are “pros and cons to each length of sleep” any amount can be helpful. “If you only have 5 minutes to spare,” she writes, “just close your eyes; even a brief rest has the benefit of reducing stress and helping you relax a little, which can give you more energy to complete the tasks of your day.”⁷

For 2009--that is, published data collected after March 2008--the NCS once again changed the list of benefits to better reflect current practices in the benefits environment, to conserve both BLS and respondent resources, and to drop items that were rarely encountered, showed no growth, and had limited user interest.

Over the years, there were several different lists of “other benefits,” with the list for 2009 collecting data on 23 benefits, down from the 28 benefits collected for the 2008 survey year. Table 3 shows some of the benefits previously collected, some new benefits, and some benefits that existed but have been changed, such as combining a three-part child-care benefit into one question, the addition of retiree health plans for those under 65 years of age and those 65 years and older, and financial planning benefits.

Table 3. Percent of private industry workers with access to quality-of-life benefits, pretax benefits, and miscellaneous benefits, and survey status of benefit item, National Compensation Survey, March 2008

Benefit(1)	Percent of workers with access(2)	Kept or dropped for 2009 survey year?
Quality of life benefits		
Education assistance of any type	(3)	Dropped
Work related	50	Dropped
Nonwork related	15	Dropped
Adoption assistance	11	Dropped
Child-care assistance(4)	15	Kept
Employer-provided funds	3	Kept
On-site and off-site childcare	5	Kept
Child-care resource and referral services	11	Kept
Dependent care reimbursement account	31	Kept
Flexible workplace	5	Kept
Employer-provided home computers	2	Dropped
Employee assistance programs	42	Kept
Subsidized commuting	6	Kept
Long-term care insurance	13	Kept
Fitness centers	13	Dropped
Pretax benefits		
Cash or deferred arrangements with no employer contribution(5)	17	Kept

Footnotes:

- (1) For definitions, see the Technical Note in National Compensation Survey: Employee Benefits in Private Industry in the United States, March 2007, Summary 07-05 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, August 2007), pp. 37-39; available on the Internet at <http://www.bls.gov/ncs/ebs/sp/ebsm0006.pdf>.
- (2) All workers in private industry = 100 percent
- (3) An estimate for the entire category is not available.
- (4) The total is less than the sum of individual child-care provisions because many employees have access to more than one of the benefits.
- (5) Cash or Deferred Arrangements with no Employer Contribution is the new title for out-of-scope salary reduction plans. There was no change in the definition.
- (6) Items listed under "Miscellaneous benefits" may have appeared under other categories in other years.
- (7) Stock options moved to the "nonproduction bonuses" category.

Benefit(1)	Percent of workers with access(2)	Kept or dropped for 2009 survey year?
Health savings account	8	Kept
Section 125 cafeteria benefits	(3)	Kept
Flexible benefits	17	Kept
Health care reimbursement account	33	Kept
Dependent care reimbursement accounts	31	Kept
Miscellaneous benefits (6)		
Stock options(7)	8	Kept
Wellness programs	25	Kept
Job-related travel accident insurance	23	Dropped

Footnotes:

- (1) For definitions, see the Technical Note in National Compensation Survey: Employee Benefits in Private Industry in the United States, March 2007, Summary 07-05 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, August 2007), pp. 37-39; available on the Internet at <http://www.bls.gov/ncs/ebs/sp/ebsm0006.pdf>.
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- (6) Items listed under "Miscellaneous benefits" may have appeared under other categories in other years.
- (7) Stock options moved to the "nonproduction bonuses" category.

Table 3 also shows the percent of workers with access to “other benefits” in 2008. (Employees are considered as having access to a benefit plan if it is available for their use.) The benefits with the highest rate of worker access were work-related education assistance (50 percent) and employee assistance programs (42 percent). Among the benefits with lower access rates, 2 percent of workers in private industry had access to employer-provided personal computers for home use, and 3 percent of workers had access to employer provided child-care funds.

Some of the “other benefits” items published in 1981 are no longer in the NCS program, while others are now regularly studied. This is a direct result of the NCS keeping pace with changes in the labor market and responsive to data users requests. Since 1981, paid funeral and military leave became part of the regularly studied benefits. In 1981, approximately 88 percent of private industry employees were eligible for paid funeral leave; the estimate for 2008 was 69 percent. The estimate for paid military leave also declined, from about 80 percent in 1981 to 48 percent in 2008. Education assistance is another benefit that had published estimates in 1981 and 2008. About 78 percent of employees were eligible to get the benefit in the earlier period and approximately 65 percent had access in 2008.⁸

John E. Buckley
 Economist, Division of Compensation Data Analysis and Planning, Office of Compensation and Working Conditions, Bureau of Labor Statistics.
 Telephone: (202) 691-6299; E-mail: Buckley.John@bls.gov.

Notes

- 1 Robert Van Giezen and Albert E. Schwenk, “Compensation from before World War I through the Great Depression,” *Compensation and Working Conditions*, fall 2001, p.19.
- 2 The [Employer Costs for Employee Compensation \(ECEC\)](#) data provide estimates of employer costs per hour worked for employee compensation, with the benefits broken down by cost and percent for the component parts. For example, in table 1 of the publication providing December 2008 ECEC data, employer costs per hour worked for employees insurance totaled \$2.45 (or 8.4 percent of total costs), with health insurance accounting for most of the insurance bill, \$2.31 (or 7.9 percent of total costs). See [Employer Costs for Employee Compensation--December 2008](#), USDL 09-0247 (U.S. Department of Labor), March 12, 2009; available on the Internet at http://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/ecec_03122009.htm.

³ Medium and large establishments are those with 100 or more workers, except for the early years of the Employee Benefits Survey, when employment size varied by industry. For more information on establishment size, see the technical note in *Employee Benefits in Medium and Large Firms, 1981*, Bulletin 2140 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, August 1982), pp. 41–44; available on the Internet at <http://www.bls.gov/ncs/ebs/sp/ebbl0038.pdf>.

⁴ See *Employee Benefits in Medium and Large Firms, 1981*, Bulletin 2140.

⁵ The data in table 1 are from *Employee Benefits in Medium and Large Firms, 1981*, Bulletin 2140.

⁶ For more information, see Hilery Simpson, “Paid Lunch and Paid Rest Time Benefits: Highlights from the Employee Benefits Survey, 1979-93,” *Compensation and Working Conditions*, December 1996, pp. 18-23.

⁷ See Elizabeth Scott, “Sleep Benefits: Power Napping for Increased Productivity, Stress Relief & Health,” About.com: Stress Management, updated July 7, 2008; available on the Internet at <http://stress.about.com/od/lowstresslifestyle/a/powernap.htm>.

⁸ Additional 2008 estimates of “other benefits” are available on the BLS website at http://www.bls.gov/ncs/ebs/benefits/2008/benefits_other.htm.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics | Division of Information and Marketing Services, PSB Suite 2850, 2 Massachusetts Avenue, NE Washington, DC 20212-0001 | www.bls.gov/OPUB | Telephone: 1-202-691-5200 | [Contact Us](#)