

Benefitfocus Implementation for Spire Energy

The Client

Spire Energy is a publicly traded natural gas distribution company headquartered in St. Louis, Missouri. Spire Energy has over 7,000 employees between its location in Missouri and its newly acquired operational base in Alabama. The culture at Spire Energy is driven by a focus on empowering employees. In line with those efforts, the company's HR team set out to deploy a new benefits management platform, Benefitfocus, to increase employee access and ownership of individual benefits. Migration to the Benefitfocus platform would also allow Spire Energy to completely digitize the organization's benefits enrollment process, where previously completion of paper forms was the norm.

The Project

Spire Energy partnered with HRchitect for the implementation of their Benefitfocus platform. In addition to implementation services, Spire Energy elected to utilize HRchitect's full-service testing management, and communication portal development services.

The scope of the project included configuration of the full Benefitfocus platform for the organization's two separate benefits populations, which were determined based on employee location relative to the two major areas of operations. The St. Louis employee group had a benefits plan year coinciding with the calendar year, and the Alabama employee group had a benefits plan year with a mid-year start and a mid-year end in alignment with a fiscal year cycle. This delineation added complexity to the implementation because it would be necessary to configure two different sets of benefit plan offers, which would equate to building two companies in the Benefitfocus system.

The HRchitect team engaged on this project included a Project Manager, a Payroll Specialist, a Solution Consultant, a Test Manager and a Solution Architect. A Project Sponsor, the company's two Benefits Managers and the Payroll team from Spire Energy were assembled as the key project team members on the client side. Spire Energy's IT team was also a key resource in this project, participating collaboratively with the HRchitect and client teams to ensure proper data flow from inbound and outbound data files. Additionally, representatives from each of the client's 15 benefits carriers participated during the testing and go-live phases of the project.

The project timeline indicated that this project would take eight months for completion and the implementation was approached in phases, commencing with a comprehensive requirements gathering phase. During the onsite requirements gathering sessions, all current benefits and related processes such as rules for new hires and life events, were documented.



This documentation was then used to plan how the Benefitfocus system should be configured for both employee groups, in order to allow for compliance with these current processes, balanced with best practices for benefits technology. Upon completion of this phase, the HRchitect and Spire Energy teams moved immediately into the configuration phase, where the HRchitect team conducted the actual build of the system with a standard demographic file feeding into the Benefitfocus system and a custom deduction file being exported out of the system, to be sent to both the payroll system and the benefits carriers.

In the period following the completion of system configuration, configuration testing commenced. Spire Energy elected to utilize HRchitect's end-to-end testing management services, which took a significant amount of the heavy lifting for this project off the Client team's plate. This was especially welcome as the Spire Energy HR team was already quite busy with their day to day duties. The testing phase included HRchitect writing and conducting onsite, hands-on testing of those scripts over a period of four weeks to make sure that every possible instance of the configuration was tested and verified to be working as designed. This was done prior to loading employees in the system, and paid dividends in the form of peace of mind for Spire Energy's HR team, the risk of employees running into unexpected system errors when utilizing the live system were virtually eliminated. This, combined with additional change management efforts, had a dramatically positive impact on user adoption of the new Benefitfocus system.

Subsequent to the configuration testing period, was the data load phase. Spire Energy's existing data files extrapolated from the legacy benefits and HR systems were loaded in to the recently validated Benefitfocus platform. Data loading was followed by system integration testing, which differs from configuration testing in that it focuses on validating that data is flowing into and out of the system as expected. This round of testing also validates that the most impactful element to employees – the benefits deductions – are accurately being deducted from the bi-weekly payroll and being paid to the benefits carriers. Since Spire Energy had multiple employee groups, testing in this phase was expanded to ensure that the appropriate benefits were being offered to the differing employee groups as intended, in addition to verification that the one-off new hire benefits enrollment process was fully functional. This also familiarizes additional stakeholders, the client's payroll team, with the future expected data flow.

When planning for the project, the HRchitect team built in a period of time into the project timeline for the client's Benefits Managers to test a sandbox environment of the platform. This helped to give the superusers of the platform an introduction to day-to-day utilization of the system, with the ability to test occurrences such as processing a life event for an employee.



To round out the true end-to-end testing process involved in benefits systems implementations, testing continued with the transmission of sample carrier files to each of Spire Energy's benefits carriers. This is often the most challenging aspect of benefits systems implementations, as it is necessary to involve carriers as a stakeholder group into the project to ensure success, but each additional carrier adds a significant amount of complexity to the project. Spire Energy provides a robust benefits package to employees, with 15 different benefits carriers, which is approximately 50% more benefits carriers than are typical for clients of a similar profile. A strong Project Manager was essential in this phase. This individual made sure that project work with each of the 15 benefits carriers was moving forward as scheduled. This helped to avoid project delays due to carriers taking several days to assign a resource on their team to test a deduction file, which can be a common occurrence in system implementation projects.

Following the completion of successful system integration testing, the project team tackled the remaining aspects of the project: go-live, communication portal development, and change management. The system go-live date was strategically planned to be well ahead of either of the employee group's scheduled benefit open enrollment periods. The system went live with no issues.

In preparing for open enrollment, Spire Energy elected to have HRchitect create a full benefits communication portal, an additional module of the Benefitfocus platform which is designed to educate the end users of all of their benefit offerings with vendor specific Summary Plan Descriptions (SPDs), and benefit guides. The Communication Portal is also the landing page for all end users once logged into the Benefitfocus platform, giving employees their first impression into the new landscape for everything related to employee benefits. Clients who utilize a communication portal have higher benefits participation and see an increase in user adoption of new systems, therefore leveraging the communication portal was a logical choice for Spire Energy.

Change management was incorporated into this project at many points, in order to ensure an effective system roll-out to the client's multiple employee groups. The HRchitect team provided the client with a change communication strategy guide, which had been developed based on lessons learned from hundreds of similar projects. This resource is a standard part of HRchitect's services offerings and for the Spire Energy team, it helped to simplify what to communicate to which stakeholders or employee groups at different points in the implementation, before go-live, and before the upcoming benefits enrollment period. The Spire Energy team utilized this timeline and the associated communication templates, which significantly boosted user adoption of the Benefitfocus system.



THE RESULTS

The client-side project team was incredibly engaged on this project and was willing to dedicate the necessary time and effort to ensure this project was wildly successful. In particular, the team prioritized availability for testing, including having multiple resources testing, while still balancing and staggering resource scheduling throughout the implementation to ensure that the team was still able to handle their regular benefits-related workload and that responding to employee inquiries throughout the duration of the implementation, was still a priority. Since the best way to become acclimated to a new system is to spend time utilizing the system, the client-side team did just that. The team's hard work paid off, as the client-side team members possess expert-level system knowledge.

The outcome of the project was an on time and under budget completion of a fully functional Benefitfocus system with accurately configured online benefits options for Spire Energy's 7,000+ employees. Thanks to HRchitect's white glove service provided by our dedicated consultants, the client facilitated a seamless open enrollment process to employees, staggering the introduction of employee groups to the Benefitfocus system based on each group's open enrollment window. This allowed the Spire Energy team to be more responsive to initial system-related employee inquiries, as not all of the 7,000 employees were using the system for the first time, at one time. This high level of responsiveness, as well as targeted change communications resulted in a high rate of user adoption and satisfaction with the new benefits system. Partnering with HRchitect to implement the Benefitfocus platform was an incredible step forward for the Spire Energy team, resulting in drastically increased employee ownership of benefits.

