

## EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS: SOLVING WORKPLACE PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS *by Phillip Perry MA*



An organization's bottom line depends to a great extent on a happy, healthy work force. Most of the time employees come through with the enthusiastic performance that gets the job done.

What happens, though, when personal problems strike? Even the best workers can get hit with depression, alcoholism, substance abuse, severe marriage or family issues, financial problems or general psychological stress. Such problems often make it hard to concentrate on workplace duties and that can only result in an erosion of the employer's bottom line.

No wonder many employers are taking a new look at Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), which are organizations of professional counselors dedicated to assisting employees with psychological or other personal problems. Interest in EAPs has risen in tandem with the increased pressures, and resultant stresses, of performance-driven work places.

Each dollar invested in an EAP can save the employer \$5.00-\$16.00, according to a report from EAP Consultants, a Marietta, Ga.,-based EAP. Such savings result because counseling can reduce sick leave usage by 33 percent, work related accidents by 65 percent, workers' compensation claims by 30 percent, lost time by 40 percent, and time spent on supervisor reprimands by 74 percent.

### *Broad ranging services*

EAPs vary in terms of services offered. While some confine their work to telephone counseling, others offer face-to-face clinical

counseling of employees and assistance with work-life issues such as financial difficulties and referrals for assistance with child and elder care.

Supporting these services are a range of professional counselors, whether maintained on staff or contracted out to private practitioners. "Our clinicians include psychologists, social workers, licensed marriage therapists, and in some states Licensed Professional Counselors (LPCs)," says Tom Farris, a clinical psychologist and chief operating officer of Claremont Behavioral Services, an EAP based in Alameda, Calif. Most EAPs, he adds, do not work with psychiatrists. Individuals requiring that level of assistance are typically referred to the employer's health plan.

One of the big attractions of EAPs is that employers are given reports of total usage but not the names of individuals seeking help. Such confidentiality encourages people to get their problems resolved and their performance back on track.

Sometimes overlooked, though, are the valuable roles played by EAPs as consultants to management. "Management consultation is a particularly important part of an EAP," notes Farris. "A human resources person, for example, who suspects that an employee's work performance issues are caused by personal problems can contact the company's EAP. A representative will discuss what's going on and what outcome is desired. Then the EAP will come up with a plan to counsel the employee."

### *How to select an EAP*

Sometimes the EAP comes inside a larger benefits package. An insurance carrier may offer one in conjunction with a disability plan. Or a human resources firm may offer one as part of its general services. Employers can also seek out an EAP on their own. When doing so, one of the most important things is to find an organization with credentialed counselors. One such credential is the Certified Employee Professional (CEAP). It substantiates that the person knows the body of knowledge of EA. Certification can then be verified on their web site ([www.eapassn.org](http://www.eapassn.org)).

EAP plans differ in scope, and employers are free to select a minimal offering that provides only telephone counseling with perhaps one face-to-face session, or a plan with a broader constellation of services such as 10 or more annual counseling sessions and help with work-life services.

Questions commonly addressed when selecting a plan include: How many visits will be allowed? Many plans allow three; the most common range is between five and six. How effective have the prospective EAPs been? Obtain information about outcomes achieved at other employers. Compare utilization rates and responsiveness to phone calls. How will usage be promoted? Many EAPs are underutilized because employees do not think about them. So the EAP should partner with the HR department to create a communications campaign.

### *Costs for an EAP*

An EAP can be affordable for a business with as few as 10 individuals. Costs range from \$12 to \$24 per employee per year, with the lower rates common for basic plans that provide up to three annual face to face consultations per employee, as well as a

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24 hour toll free number for assessments, referrals and management consultations. Costs can go to \$48 or more for plans that allow a greater number of visits and which extend their services into areas such as the performance of the necessary and often time consuming legwork required to arrange for such as tasks as locating baby sitters, or arranging for child or elder care.

Smaller employers can pool their employees with those of other employers, contracting with EAPs through associations.

The employee who uses up the free counseling sessions can often continue to pay for services out of pocket. Hourly rates for self-referral vary by region, notes Farris, starting at around \$50, rising to a more typical range of \$60 to \$85 and going as high as \$100 in major metropolitan areas.

Once signed onto an EAP, the employer needs to promote its use through flyers, posters and meetings. "People don't always think



**"I know nothing about the subject, but I'm happy to give you my expert opinion."**

of the EAP until they need it," notes Norman Winegar chief operating officer of EAP Consultants, a nationwide EAP based in Marietta, Ga. "They may initially receive some information but put it aside, feeling it is something they will never need. We try to have ongoing and frequent promotional material so it is always kept in front of people."

Employers with active EAPs may discover a tremendous benefit: lower costs for disability insurance. "Depression and other behavioral problems are the number one reason why disability claims are on the rise," points out Denise Podeschi, national practice leader for behavioral health consulting at Philadelphia-based Mercer Human Resource Consulting. "Supervisors who spot a performance problem can call the EAP for a management consultation, and thereby assist the troubled employee in a way which will often avoid or reduce disability claims."

Given the cost effective nature of counseling organizations, their usage is likely to increase in the future. "Close to a fifth of people in any population are going to have over the course of their lives some kind of issue that lends itself to counseling," says Winegar. "So there is a lot of need out there. You want to reach people early on before their problems escalate and become more difficult to resolve. So you want to try to embed an EAP in the workplace so it becomes familiar and de-stigmatized."

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