Does an employee assistance programme benefit employers and employees alike?

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EAPs are a clinically and corporately balanced service which benefits the employee, via the direct services and the employer, via the feedback in the form of usage statistics derived from the continuous tracking of the account through which organizational and employment issues are identified. Well positioned EAPs offer employees confidential, and information services including legal, financial and child-based issues and are able to offer employers tailored training and consultancy.

Key words: EAP; benefits; confidentiality; consultancy.


There has been for some time, a common misconception in the UK EAP market that EAPs are solely employee support services, offering crisis intervention counselling on an ad-hoc basis: a convenient psychological sticking plaster for what is perceived as an increasingly distant and disinterested management. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Professional definitions of EAPs from both the American and the UK EAPA, (Employee Assistance Professionals Association) place equal emphasis on the duality of the EAP provision, i.e., the service is there to be of benefit, to both the employer through indirect services and to the employee through direct services.

The benefits to the employer are apparent in the 'indirect' services of an EAP. These indirect services are provided by the EAP provider's account manager, typically an experienced HR professional with organizational awareness.

The account manager will continually track activity within the account, focusing primarily on employment issues. Where generic patterns are identified such as harassment or bullying the account manager will ensure that this is sensitively fed back to the organization, often with recommendations for remedial action. In addition regular statistics and reviews are provided for the organization outlining service activity whilst protecting confidentiality.

A further service feature directly relevant to the employer is managerial consultancy. Well-positioned EAPs, through tailored training, encourage managers and supervisors to use the service for both their personal needs. Ideally placed to spot declining performance amongst their teams, managers can constructively nudge their employees towards the EAP for support by focusing on performance issues.

The employer therefore has mirrored back through the account manager, organizational issues brought by all levels of employees to the EAP and is therefore in a position to take informed and focused remedial action.

The benefits to the employee, known in EAP jargon as direct benefits, whilst frequently ‘hidden’ in service delivery because of the confidentiality issues are obvious to the purchasing organization. An EAP will typically offer the employee personal support in a variety of ways, the most common being:

- information services — legal, financial, child or elder-care and general issues;
- telephone counselling and
- face to face counselling where appropriate.

Good EAPs will evaluate the effectiveness of these services to employees through individual confidential feedback forms, through counsellor feedback and through generic feedback questionnaires.

In addition to this, the EAP, through the direct services outlined earlier, helps employees reduce the distractions in their lives, allowing them to be more focused. This naturally impacts on their work performance and productivity. Less time is lost through accidents, absence and more particularly through presenteeism, where an employee is still attending work, but is too distracted to perform well.

Empirical studies of the impact of EAPs on organizations’ bottom lines are in their infancy in the UK. The US has more to offer, the most well-known study being...
of the McDonald Douglas Corporation where the financial benefits of EAPs to the organization was indisputably proven.

However the anecdotal evidence is strong in the UK: comments from employees indicate the value placed on the services as does the continued high service usage. Employers are using EAP feedback more and more to influence both corporate policy and practice. EAP providers who no longer provide sophisticated and smart account management are out of the running.

To those of us who have worked in the EAP field for some time, it is evident that with their increasing acceptance in the UK, and effectively their coming of age, EAPs are clearly focused on providing a clinically and corporately balanced service which benefits both the employee and employer.