

Employee Assistance Programmes

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1. Introduction

The Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA) defines an employee assistance programme (EAP) as 'a work site-focused programme to assist in the identification and resolution of employee concerns, which affect, or may affect, performance'. Work concerns can include working relationships, stress, workloads, fairness at work, work-life balance, harassment and bullying. Personal matters, which are usually also addressed, cover health, personal relationships, financial and legal matters, alcohol and drug dependency, and anxiety. The aim of EAPs, according to the EAPA, is to provide mechanisms for 'counselling and other forms of assistance, advice and information to employees on a systematic and uniform basis, and to recognise standards'. (1989)

In North America 33 per cent of employees are covered by EAPs compared to only eight per cent in Britain (Walton, 2004). However, during the 1990s the workforce coverage doubled in the UK (IRS, 2000). According to the EAPA (2004) over two million employees have access to a scheme.

In the light of this increase in popularity, this paper aims to identify why organisations chose to offer this service, as well as what provision is available, and how organisations decide on a certain provider and service. It will also look at how effectively organisations monitor employee usage and satisfaction. Guidance is also given on what should be thought about when considering provision of an EAP, as well as suggestions for evaluating existing EAPs.

2. Why Do Organisations Offer this Service?

When considering the introduction of an EAP, three main factors were found to influence an organisation:

- statutory obligation and a common law duty of care for its employees
- provision of support to staff and wanting to be seen as a caring organisation
- improved productivity and attendance, and other financial outcomes.

(IRS, 2000)

A survey conducted by IRS (2003) suggests that public and voluntary bodies are twice as likely to offer an EAP (86 per cent of respondents) as manufacturers are (41 per cent). The figure for private services fell between these, with 56 per cent providing EAPs. Alker and McHugh (2000) found that companies that had experienced major organisational change in structure and working practices were more likely to introduce EAPs.

Reasons for employers not providing an EAP include:

- support already provided for employees, usually from the occupational health service
- belief that EAPs are ineffective because employees do not respond positively to their introduction
- the view that provision is too expensive, and not having time to research the best provider.

IRS, 2000

2.1 Other ways of managing work-related stress

Before looking at the role of EAPs, which address employee problems in and outside the workplace, it is worthwhile to consider what employers can do to reduce employee stress while at work. There are many different stress management techniques available. One way of classifying them is by their aim:

- **Prevention** – concerned with removing the work-related stressor, through changing aspects of the design, management or organisation of work
- **Timely reaction** – improves the organisation's or individual's ability to deal with problems as they arise. May involve developing appropriate management systems and responses, and training employees and managers in stress awareness
- **Treating the effects** – helps employees who are already experiencing work-related stress and usually involves offering them counselling and medical support.

The provision of timely response and rehabilitation for individuals is important because of the problems that can occur due to the complex nature of stress (Thomson, 2002). However, it is suggested that provisions that target the organisation as well as the individual are the most beneficial (Cox, Griffiths and Rial-Gonzales, 2000).

2.2 An internal or external service?

Having decided to offer an EAP service, the first decision an organisation has to make is between internal or external provision.

2.2.1 Internal EAPs

In 1998, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) found that certain organisations felt that providing an external service would be more expensive than an internal service, and that an internal service was also more likely to fit with the organisation's needs. Another advantage for the provision of an internal service is that it can be more easily monitored to ensure that the best possible service is provided. It may also be easier to find appropriate solutions to problems (IDS, 2002).

A major disadvantage with this type of service is that the staff do not perceive it as independent and confidential. Also, there may be problems for an organisation trying to deliver a service to a large number of employees located at different sites (IDS, 2002).

2.2.2 External EAPs

There are advantages to having an externally provided EAP and, with large numbers of companies offering this service, it should be possible to find one which fulfils specific organisational needs. Clearly the main advantage is confidentiality and the perceived independence of the service by employees. Also, an external EAP provider has specialist staff and a structure already in place. This ensures that all employees from an organisation can access a high level of support from different geographical locations. External providers offer 24-hour support on a wide range of issues which

in-house services may not be able to replicate. Convenience is also an advantage, as once the contact is made by the employee, the employer has a limited role to play in its provision (IDS, 2002).

2.3 What is offered from EAP providers

EAP providers offer a range of services. In their survey, Highley-Marchington and Cooper (1998) identified the key and peripheral activities for EAPs, as below.

Key activities:

- initial and on-going promotion of the EAP service
- orientation sessions for managers
- orientation sessions for staff
- face to face counselling
- advisory service for managers
- statistical feedback.

Peripheral activities:

- financial and legal help
- on-going telephone counselling
- crisis back-up.

The above items vary between EAP providers. For example, different providers offer varying numbers of face-to-face counselling sessions for employees, but this is often between six to eight. The fees for EAPs also vary but Highley-Marchington and Cooper (1998) found that the average fee was £25 per employee per year.

2.4 Utilisation of EAPs

In a review, McLeod (2001) indicated that the average annual utilisation rate for organisations using EAPs is between four per cent and eight per cent of eligible employees. The low level of agreement between several reviews of EAP utilisation indicates the need for further rigorous research in this area. Figures range from one per cent to 20 per cent depending on the particular research and the type of EAP being provided (McLeod, 2001; Highley-Marchington and Cooper, 1998).

Highley-Marchington and Cooper (1998) reported that usage rates were predominately by employees, at 91 per cent, and the remaining nine per cent were family and dependants. McLeod (2001) found that women are more likely to use the services than men. However, this trend may be mirroring the pattern of

counselling use in society as a whole. The report did not find any trends to indicate the services were used predominately by individuals of any particular age, status, service length, marital status or type of job, implying that this service is acceptable to a wide range of employees.

Highley-Marchington and Cooper (1998) reported that employees in British organisations used the services to address problems and difficulties in the areas as shown in Table 2.1.

The table reveals that only approximately one in five of the employees seeking help needed advice directly about work issues. The fact that the schemes were more commonly used to handle personal problems should not deter employers from using EAPs. These difficulties will equally have an adverse effect on performance at work and it is to the benefit of both the organisation and the employee that they are addressed. Arthur (2002) emphasises the importance of taking an integrated approach to mental health care, as stressors can come from various sources, such as the individual, the group, the organisation or from socio-economic status.

2.5 EAP evaluation research

McLeod (2001) reviewed the literature of reported outcomes from users and concluded that EAPs are not seen as less effective than other types of alternative interventions, with over 90 per cent of clients indicating that they were satisfied with the counselling they had received. The reasons for the success of EAPs, according to Cuthell (2004), is that they offer a range of support for individuals experiencing problems, they are free to the employee and they are confidential.

Cooper and Sadri (1991) evaluated the Post Office's workplace counselling and found improvements in mental well-being and reductions in sickness absence compared to a control group. Shapiro, Cheesman and Wall (1993) also found improvements in mental well-being but not in job satisfaction or other organisational measures in their review of EAPs. Highly and Cooper (1995)

Table 2.1: Type of problem or difficulty

Type of problem or difficulty	%
Emotional	31
Work-related	22
Family or marital	19
Financial or legal	18
Alcohol	4
Drugs	1
Other	5

reported that the service does affect the individual being counselled but does not have any impact on the organisation, based on an evaluation of British EAPs. This is largely to be expected, as the intervention is personal rather than general.

There is limited research into the cost effectiveness of EAPs; however McLeod (2001) indicated that even the more conservative estimates of cost-benefits ratio show the EAPs do at least cover their costs. The review also found that external services are less costly than internal service. However, the higher cost EAPs are associated with higher utilisation and therefore can be viewed as having greater cost effectiveness.

There is also limited research investigating the role of the counsellors' characteristics on the effectiveness of EAPs. Highley-Marchington and Cooper (1998) found that a majority of counselling providers only employ counsellors with advanced qualifications and experience in counselling. It could be expected that the experience and knowledge of counsellors in a specific client environment may influence the success of a service (McLeod, 2001), however this issue has not yet been investigated.

The review by McLeod (2001) found that, because of the small number of studies, it is difficult to identify specific trends associated with positive outcomes of workplace counselling. More research is needed to establish what type of counselling is most effective and under what circumstances. For example, should it be solution focused or client centred, and how should it be delivered?

2.6 Methodological problems in EAP research

A range of methodological problems and limitations have been identified within EAP research. Some of the main concerns are discussed within this section.

Lack of audits and evaluations. Only 30 per cent of organisations performed a stress audit before introducing an EAP, in order to assess if this service was required in the organisation (HSE, 1998). Once the service was in place only 45 per cent of organisations carried out an audit or evaluation (HSE, 1998). If these audits are not completed, organisations have no way of identifying if the EAP was needed initially or if it is performing well once established.

Confidentiality. Employees are extremely concerned about confidentiality and may not want their personal file to indicate they have used a counselling service. This results in difficulty for researchers attempting to collect organisational data on workplace counselling outcomes such as improved performance, attendance and promotion (McLeod, 2001). Because of this, it is difficult to assess the true effectiveness of many EAP schemes.

Lack of control groups. Ideally, several control groups should be used over different sites. Barkham (1991) suggests that clients can be used as their own controls as long as information is available on the situation before counselling was introduced. Longitudinal studies are also needed to determine if improvements are maintained over time.

Commercial sensitivity. It must be recognised that EAP providers are competing with each other and that employers are sensitive about publishing figures of the number staff requiring support. These two factors result in a lack of published information about the outcomes of EAPs and stress audits (McLeod, 2001) seriously hindering the evaluation of the effectiveness of EAP schemes.

Gaining access to organisations. Because of commercial sensitivity, critical research is also avoided. Organisations are reluctant to allow research that highlights problems within the organisation, such as employees experiencing high stress levels because of management problems or poor work–life balance. This results in researchers adopting subjective methods such as client satisfaction studies (McLeod, 2001). Consequently there is a lack of variety within EAP research.

Incomplete data. Many studies reviewed by McLeod (2001) reported difficulty in obtaining completed questionnaires from the counsellors and their clients, so there was not sufficient data to come to accurate conclusions. As a result, the inferences that can be made from these studies are limited.

Assessment of workplace counselling. McLeod (2001) suggests that satisfaction ratings have a limited use in assessing EAPs' effectiveness. Questionnaires are administered at the end of counselling and are dominated by assessing the ability of the counsellor to listen and the client's appreciation of this. However, such satisfaction ratings do not show how effective the intervention has been in helping the individual over the long term. Instead, it is suggested that changes over time should be considered.

Lack of robust costing research. Sickness absence rates have often been the only indicator used in studies costing the impact of EAPs. Research could be improved by using additional cost indicators, such as reduced management time, increased productivity, and identifying the cost of recruiting and training replacement staff (McLeod, 2001). This would enable organisations to establish and appreciate the true value of their EAP support to employees.

Organisations are now beginning to look critically at their EAP schemes, but there are serious problems with current research. As Battle found in 1988, good quality, independent evaluation research was needed to increase the evidence for the reliability and the effectiveness of EAPs. Little progress has been made in addressing this during the intervening years.

2.7 Criteria for satisfactory EAP research

Future research into the value of EAPs should take into account the following criteria recommended by Arthur (2000) to provide a sound basis for assessment.

- The first is the collection of standardised and uniform data to enable comparisons with other EAP schemes across organisations. This would improve knowledge of the EAPs that are effective and what factors make them successful.
- The second recommendation is the use of work-performance indicators and cost-benefit or economic analysis. This would enable organisations to assess if an EAP scheme was providing good value for money.

The third point is to use an experimental research design. This involves the use of control groups as well as random assignment of employees to different treatment groups. Data should also be collected from at least three years before and after the EAP intervention to see if the beneficial effects are temporary or longer lasting. The inclusion of employees who use other mental health services would be useful to compare EAPs with other forms of support. Linking the mental health status of employees with their counselling utilisation rates would also be beneficial.

Unfortunately, as Arthur (2000) states, no single study has met all these criteria, so it is clear that further rigorous research is called for in this area.

2.8 Best practice guidance to introducing an EAP

This guide to introducing an EAP from IES is combined with suggestions from IDS (2002) and outlines the main points for consideration.

2.8.1 Considering introducing an EAP

In this initial phase the following aspects need to be taken into account:

Assess the needs and aims of the organisation. Carry out a stress audit to see if there is a need for a counselling service to investigate the pressures affecting people and groups (Wood, 2002). Consider if this is the most appropriate response.

Internal or external service. Decide if an external or internal service would best suit the organisation. (For the advantages and disadvantages of each, please see Section 1.4.)

Culture. Find a service provider that fits with the organisation's outlook and will learn about organisational culture.

Type of service required. Decide what services are required from a provider. An integrated service may provide access to legal or financial advice, and access to support on work-life balance issues, as well as a counselling service.

Related areas. Assess if the provider can supply any additional services which are required, such as stress audits or occupation health services

Qualifications of the individual counsellors. Check the qualifications and experience of the provider's counselling staff to ensure an employee counselling service can be delivered. Enquire about the procedures in place for checking a good quality service is provided.

Experience of provider. Select a provider who can fulfil the type of contact you require. This is especially important if a large number of staff are involved or they are in geographically dispersed locations.

Coverage. The counselling service could cover employees and their families; if this is required, check for the extra cost.

Telephone lines. Decide on the requirements for phone cover. The service could provide free phone numbers, local rate, 24-hour availability or office hours only. Phone lines can be provided directly or by a third party.

Face-to-face counselling. Decide how many face-to-face sessions will be available to users.

Speed of delivery. Decide on the maximum referral response time. The maximum distance a service user is required to travel for appointments also needs to be considered.

Cost and fee arrangement. Payments can be arranged as a fixed fee per employee or as a pay per usage system. Decide which is better for the organisation and when this will be re-assessed in the future. Be clear about what is included in the fee and what other cost could be incurred.

Promotion of the scheme. Ensure the service is launched and promoted to all staff effectively. Check the literature used is available to all in written form and on the intranet. Include a discussion of EAP provision in the induction of new recruits.

2.8.2 Providing an EAP scheme

After the introduction of an EAP scheme, these items are important in its successful management:

Evaluation of the EAP. Agree with the service provider what reports and feedback on the service will be available. Confid-

entiality should be maintained, however, take-up rates and analysis should be made available to evaluate the success of the interventions.

Implement changes when required. Management reports and feedback from the EAP are essential to ensure that required changes to the service are identified. Changes should then be implemented accordingly and communicated to employees.

2.9 Guidance for evaluating an EAP

Highley and Cooper (1993) suggest that even if a programme is not being evaluated to justify its existence, it should be reviewed to confirm that it is meeting objectives and to find ways to improve performance. According to the UK EAPA (1989), evaluation of an EAP may be split into two main areas, the individual and the organisational.

2.9.1 The individual level

The following items may be used to evaluate an EAP at the individual level:

- Completion of employee feedback forms. This enables the service user to comment on the EAP service that they received and provides insight into the service.
- Pre- and post-counselling questionnaires. These will enable evaluation of the outcomes and benefits of the scheme for the individual.
- Individual's job performance before and after referral to identify if the counselling has been beneficial.
- Manager rating of individual employees pre- and post-counselling. These will also indicate any individual changes over a period of time.
- The length of time to return to work compared with that before the EAP was introduced. This will indicate if the scheme has been effective in rehabilitating the employee.
- The extent of stress alleviation identified in stress audits. This provides information to see if the scheme has been successful in one of its main objectives.

2.9.2 The organisational level

The following measures may be used to evaluate an EAP at the organisational level. Data can be provided by both the organisation and the EAP provider. Additionally information and views from employees can be obtained from surveys.

Examples of measures that can be used to evaluate an EAP are given below:

- the uptake or usage of EAP services
- the number of clients re-contacting the service
- the percentage of work-related issues. This could include referrals and issues raised with the EAP
- changes in overall time keeping
- quality, efficiency and performance indicators
- number of customer complaints
- number of employee absences and return to work figures
- group performance indicators
- number of grievances and reported harassment
- amount of time saved by managers and supervisors
- number of accidents at work
- number of private medical insurance claims.

Questionnaire data collected from employees can be used to assess:

- awareness of the service
- morale and motivation of employees
- adequacy of the assessment and session limits
- the extent that the EAP management and counsellors understand the culture of the organisation
- stress audits and any improvements
- current issues, concerns and trends in the organisation.

It is vital for organisations to evaluate their EAP schemes to ensure the aims and objectives are being met, to highlight any problems and to identify potential improvements.

2.10 Conclusions

EAPs are designed to help employees cope with stress and should be used with other strategies to maximise employee well-being. These approaches require the involvement of immediate and senior management, human resources and occupational health. EAPs clearly have a role in promoting employee well-being and are increasing in popularity in the UK.

Research shows why organisations implement EAP schemes. However, there is currently very limited research into the actual benefits of providing this service to employees. Further rigorous research is required to clarify the benefits of schemes and to determine which services are most appropriate and cost effective.

There are methodological problems in investigating a potentially sensitive area but the careful use of aggregate, rather than individual, data and anonymous confidential surveys, can provide the means to overcome these.

At the moment many employers are investing in schemes for their employees but have little idea if they represent value for money or if they are bringing real benefits to staff and the workplace. EAPs are generally perceived to be a 'good thing' but this does not mean that they should be exempt from critical evaluation to confirm that they are delivering their promises.

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