

In the Spring 2018 John Burke officially retired from the EAP Field. We asked if he would write down his reflections of his 45 years in the field & if he had any parting suggestions for the field.

REFLECTIONS ON 45 YEARS IN THE WORLD OF EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

John Burke

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I began my career in the Employee Assistance profession on April 15, 1973. The community mental health center in North Carolina, where I was serving as an alcoholism counselor, received a grant through the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) to fund an EAP initiative in our two-county mental health service area. The center leadership approached me about taking on the development and sale of EAPs to employers in our area. The concept of EAP was very intriguing to me even though I had never heard the term Employee Assistance Program. I was promised time to self-educate and “learn the ropes” so I took on the new role. It should be noted that EAPs were in its infancy at the time with NIAAA funding the “Thundering 100” in 1971 and subsequently funding an expansion grant in 1973 with North Carolina being one of ten states being the recipient of expansion money.

In 1973, the country was in a recession and the geography that our mental health center served, which was primarily textiles related, had an unemployment rate of around 20%. In this atmosphere, I naively went out selling to local employers and surprisingly found receptivity to the concept of EAPs. Quite likely employers were concerned about employees in those difficult financial times and saw an EAP as providing a needed resource to employees. Over the course of a year or so, many local employers contracted for EAP services and we were off and running. Interestingly, pricing became a topic of discussion with some thinking that the service should be free since it was being funded through a community mental health center, but my contention was that employers would value it more if they had some investment. After much discussion, a whopping fee of \$2.00 per employee per year (PEPY) was agreed. A nearby mental health center, also selling EAPs, made the bold decision to charge \$5.00 PEPY which I thought was a bit unreasonable at the time.

After a little over a year with the mental health center, I was approached about taking on a regional state mental health position directing the EAP movement in 35 counties. After three years in that position, I advanced to the state office where I managed the statewide EAP services for North Carolina’s 100 counties. In 1979, while serving in the state office, I became aware of the evolution of private, for-profit EAP companies like Human Affairs and Personal Performance Consultants.

As a side note, the mental health system was very generous in allowing me the time and money to get immersed in the EAP field. I took the time to learn best practices and the key players. Networking became an obsession. I broadened my knowledge base beyond North Carolina and studied activity throughout the country. In 1975, I joined the Association of Labor Management Administrators and Consultants on Alcoholism (ALMACA) and attended their yearly conferences

and other sponsored events. I was the proud 269th member and watched with excitement as ALMACA became the Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA). In the late 1970's and 1980's, I was also very involved with an organization called the Occupational Program Consultants Association (OPCA). OPCA was an organization founded by the Thundering 100 as a way for the first 100 EAP consultants to stay connected and learn. It preceded ALMACA/EAP and never established firm footing through the years and eventually dissolved in the early 1990's.

My move to the private, for-profit EAP world happened in 1981 when I founded a company originally call Burke-Wall Associates and later Burke-Taylor Associates. Our company began by serving employers in western and central North Carolina and experienced slow growth until 1985 when we signed a contract with a major employer named GTE (General Telephone & Electric). GTE served as a tipping point for the company. Burke-Taylor began growing at a steady pace for the next several years with expansion from North Carolina into South Carolina, Georgia and Alabama. Our services were provided through a staff model with 23 offices throughout the four states serving over 300 employers. As we grew, managed behavioral health began to emerge and become an attractive force for employers. Employers were faced with rapidly rising health care costs with behavioral health costs getting out of hand. This was driven by what seemed to be, out of control admissions to in-patient behavioral health care particularly with adolescent populations. As managed behavioral health organizations (MBHO) experienced rapid growth, employers began to express a desire to merge MBHO services with EAP. This was the catalyst for the beginning of mergers and acquisitions within the EAP world in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Countless EAP acquisitions have taken place over the years, with my company, Burke-Taylor, being one acquisition that was transacted in 1994 by Value Behavioral Health (VBH).

Being the principal owner of Burke-Taylor, I became the Executive Vice-President of EAP Services for VBH and committed to serving three years with the company as part of the sale. My three years exposed me to the broader behavioral health world and the "big business" of MBCOs. My horizons went beyond the world of EAP even having the opportunity to serve on an Institute of Medicine's committee on managing managed care which produced an impactful publication for employers and beyond. At the end of three years with VBH, I decided it was time to move on. I have always regarded my time with the company as gaining a three-year graduate degree. My learnings were significant in terms of people, services and geography.

Next, I went into the consulting world. By this time, my career experiences positioned me to transfer my knowledge to the broader EAP, work/life and behavioral health world. I focused my consulting on business development, company re-invention, mergers and acquisitions and the international community. Over the next many years, I provided business development consultation services to over 100 individual service providers plus represented both the buyer and seller sides of over 20 merger and acquisition transactions. It was during my time (2000) as a consultant that I began working in the United Kingdom as a business development consultant for a 130 year-old charity called Teacher Support Network based on London. This work led to the formation of two private, for-profit companies to meet identified needs of teachers and

employers in the charity sector. One was an EAP type company for teachers based in London and the other was a call center/technology company (Connect Assist) based in Cardiff, Wales. Both of these companies were eventually sold with the last being sold in late 2017. In the last few years of my active career, I became intrigued with the role that technology would be playing in the delivery of health care services. I was given the opportunity to invest in a company named ORCAS and serve as a senior leader on their staff. The company provided research based self-management apps and was sold in late 2017. With the sale of Connect Assist and ORCAS and after a career of 46 years in the behavioral health world and beyond, I decided it was time to retire.

Reflections

- The EAP profession is an excellent example of public dollars being used to stimulate the growth of a successful private sector industry.
- Change has always been a constant in the profession as with any other profession or business. Through the years, I have witnessed reluctance to change on the part of those leading the EAP profession. The reluctance to change has brought about some stagnation and is one of the precipitators of EAP commoditization.
- The significant change events through the years include:
 - Occupational alcoholism programs to employee assistance programs
 - ALMACA to EAPA
 - US centric to global
 - Public sector ownership to private sector ownership
 - Core technology approach to a broadening of definition
 - Life experience qualifications to academic qualifications
 - Significant labor organization involvement to minimal involvement
 - Early day collaborative mindset to competitiveness
 - Drug testing or not
 - Staff office model to call center model
 - Stand-alone service to multi-focus service
 - Stand-alone service to managed care driven
 - Independent operators to roll-ups through mergers and acquisitions
 - Value in service to commoditization
 - Selling direct to employers to selling to benefit consulting houses
- It would be good to turn back the clock and revisit pricing. From the beginning, EAPs have been underpriced. This was brought about by the profession being led by individuals with social service backgrounds and not business backgrounds. Profit and loss mentalities were rare in the early days and the effect of that mentality deficiency has plagued the profession through the years.
- EAP “dogma” created a reluctance to change as employer and employee needs changed. I feel that the EAP model should flex to meet the demands of an ever-changing work world.

- The EAP profession has always been made up of solid, passionate and dedicated professionals. Focus has always been on delivering high quality, hands on service. The evolution of EAP companies from being privately held to large for-profit corporations has changed the dynamic where money tends to be the driver more so than service.

What I have witnessed, over the years that I spent in the profession, has been astonishing. To have been involved from the very early days of the profession to retirement in 2018 has been very rewarding and amazing. I have had the opportunity to witness, first-hand, the lives of so many employees being changed for the better. I have watched employers embrace EAP as a necessary component of doing business. I have watched research findings support the significance of EAP I have watched EAP professionals mature through the years and develop high skill levels. I have watched the profession evolve from a “pencil and paper” standard to a highly sophisticated, technology driven standard of practice. Change has been challenging thorough the years, but, as I always say, where there is changed there is opportunity. I would not give anything for my time in this amazing profession. The work has been rewarding and the friendships that were created will last a lifetime. I regard myself as a very fortunate person for the time spent in the world of Employee Assistance Programs.

John Burke