



COVID-19 Changes Needn't be Negative

| By Dirk Antonissen

Nearly twenty years ago, former EAPA CEO John Maynard wrote in this magazine: “Employee Assistance is the application of knowledge about behaviour and behavioural health to make accurate assessments, followed by appropriate action to improve the productivity and healthy functioning of the workplace” (Maynard, 2004).

Indeed, two decades later, improving the productivity and healthy functioning of the workplace remains a challenge – even more so in light of COVID-19 restrictions in which remote work (telework) has become the new workplace standard. Telework marks a radical change for many employers and employees, and this certainly includes Europe.

But change does not have to be negative. Notwithstanding all the troubles that COVID-19 brought to workplaces, *many employees seem to appreciate some of the adaptations* that came with lockdown and obligatory home and telework.

Pulso Europe conducted some quick informal surveys via social media. Although this was a non-academic survey and the number of responses was limited (+/- 100), it was interesting to see the responses about the lockdown period, some of which were quite positive:

- Compared to working in an office setting, most employees indicated that they work *more efficiently* from home.
- When asked about the most important work improvement since COVID, most employees mentioned having a referred to *greater balance between work and personal life*: No traffic time leads to less stress ... and more time for family.

At the same time, this new way of working has also led to perceived negative effects:

- *Employees miss the personal contact* and proximity of their colleagues.
- *Work-life balance can also be affected negatively*. For instance, working in the same house with (young) children around can lead to stressful situations. Spending additional time together with spouse and/or children with few variations to usual outside-the-home routines can lead to interpersonal conflicts.

Observations from employees like these aren't exactly “news” to employers – what *has changed* most is that for many companies, work in the post-COVID era will not be the same as it was before. Telework and homework will continue to exist. In our survey, most employees consider an ideal work week to be a *combination* of several workdays at the office and a couple of days at home.

Adapting our Approach

While the work situation marks changes for the employee and the employer, the challenge for us – as employee assistance professionals – is to adapt our approach to this new reality. Did we, or are we, adapting our approach in such a way that in the words of John Maynard, “the productivity and healthy functioning of the workplace is improved” – knowing that the workplace now is often “home” and the work often became “telework?”?

In a certain way I believe it did! In Europe, we observed a radical shift of our counselling approach. Where in many European countries face-to-face counselling was still the pre-COVID standard, telephone or video calling substantially replaced this traditional counselling method.

However, is this method sufficient? It's important to not become too complacent. As Jesuits say to their students: “Plus est en vous.” In English, “There is more in you.”

We can do more!

And indeed ...more is in us. Employee assistance practitioners can do *more* and *better*. We need to take advantage of this COVID period and use it as an opportunity to introduce new approaches.

In our EAP field, we – as EA professionals – too often behave much like the doctors and the nurses on the work floor. We help individuals and teams when they suffer with psychosocial and work-life issues and *are* often very successful. This is necessary, but it isn't enough. We *can* have greater impact on the individuals that we serve.

As it stands, employees often come to us when they have serious complaints or difficult challenges to deal with. In our opinion, EA professionals should not wait for the employees to contact them, they should reach out to employees *before* difficulties arise.

Understanding how employees perceive their work (often home) situation and what motivates them – conversely what causes stress – is crucial to is being more proactive.

Consider and Ask these Important Questions!

In an era when the employee is literally out of sight of the employer, many managers do not know what is going on with their colleagues. It's vital to consider, and ask the following questions:

- Does the employee have relevant/ sufficient/ interesting tasks to do?
- Is the employee able to work efficiently?
- Is the employee's home environment okay, in fact to *work*?
- Has the employee been able to change an unhealthy lifestyle?
- Does the employee have contact with, and/or feel supported by management?
- What about teamwork? Is there still social bonding with other colleagues?

Most employees will not reveal answers like this right away. But asking them remains vital as an important step to gauging employees' work engagement and productivity. Negative responses will lead to complaints of stress and burnout. Employee assistance professionals need to intervene faster. We have the knowledge, skills and (survey) tools to help companies improve engagement and productivity at a time when so much work is not being done at work.

The Pandemic Opportunity

The current pandemic is an ideal opportunity to address these issues! Indeed, most companies want to help employees at home, they want to know how they're doing, and they want to know how they can help their employees remain healthy and productive.

They will appreciate our advice! We can help by setting up frequent and neutral surveys as a barometer to help maintain this "pulse".

Effective survey tools – the Workplace Outcome Suite being but one example – will help EA professionals monitor crucial indicators like stress, engagement, and absenteeism. But that isn't enough. It's also vital to clarify the groups specifically at risk and understand why this is the case. Which are the most impact factors? The Wellbeing and Organisational Dynamics Tool (see <https://wod.pulso-europe.eu/>) is such a survey tool that can combine both.

Of course, surveys alone are not sufficient. They are important tools, but EA professionals must disseminate, understand, and interpret the results to take appropriate action.

Try it! ❖

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Reference

Maynard, J.B. (2004), Maintaining our heart, *Journal of Employee Assistance* 34(2), 36.



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