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How top-tier EAPs can facilitate the post-pandemic return to work

By W. Dennis Derr, E.d.D, President, Integrated Human Solutions; Bernard S. Dyme, President and CEO, Perspectives; and Kathleen Greer, Founder, KGA

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Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, organizational leaders have contended with the pandemic's employee impact while managing their own reactions and quickly developing strategies for business continuity. Soon, another burden will strain their shoulders: reintegrating employees back into the workforce.

The challenge is unfamiliar to most leaders, managers and supervisors, daunting under any circumstances and potentially overwhelming after an event like the coronavirus shutdown. History tells us that when pandemics end, recovery is slow and successful reentry is crucial for

ensuring long-term organizational viability. Those who manage reintegration poorly face serious negative ramifications.

One way that organizational leaders can help ensure the best possible reentry results is to leverage the knowledge, resources and relationships of a top-tier Employee Assistance Program.

Organizational leaders must ensure a culture where people are given permission to experience a myriad of post-pandemic feelings in order to move through reentry more easily. Additionally, employers may be called upon to provide greater assistance with life at home, due to the pandemic's unexpected disruptions. For example, an employee may need the EAP's help finding childcare if summer camps are closed or may require financial counsel if a spouse has lost his or her job. A top-tier EAP can also assist HR with employees who may need ADA/FMLA accommodations related to mental health consequences or association with a vulnerable population.

Perhaps the most vital service an EAP can provide to facilitate an employee's recovery response is clinical counseling. A high-quality EAP will offer counseling sessions in whatever format is convenient for the employee or family member, including text, phone, web or in-person sessions, remaining flexible and accessible, and following up to ensure engagement. Top-tier EAPs also work with health plans and other employee benefit offerings to ensure that individuals have access to a full range of services.

Meeting clinical and work-life needs

Regardless of the counseling modality, it is critical for employers to work with an EAP that offers both clinical support and work-life assistance as the two are inextricably linked.

For instance, an employee struggling with depression may inadvertently reveal that the root cause is an aging parent requiring elder care. Or a mother calling for a nutrition plan may disclose that she's worried about her son's response to the pandemic.

"We see work-life services as a prevention and early intervention tool," says Stacie Westhouse-Milam, LPC, Vice President of Operations for Perspectives LTD in Chicago, which provides clinical and work-life support to employees worldwide. "Everyday life issues can be precursors to more serious behavioral or medical problems. By recognizing the problem early, we can provide the appropriate counseling and address the issue before it spins out of control."

Conversely, counselors helping employees address emotional issues may recognize that a work-life resource, such as legal or financial services, could help decrease employee stress or contribute to a greater sense of security.

Because employee issues do not exist in isolation, it is critical for an EAP to provide an integrated model of care that encompasses employees, family members and management. This enables the provision of counseling within the context of the organization, which increases the likelihood of re-adjustment and alignment between the employees and the organization.

Equally important, top-tier EAPs are fully aware of the role social determinants play in a person's psychological and emotional state. In a world where COVID-19 has upended determinants such as socioeconomic status and health care access, this experience is invaluable. In fact, it is likely that EAPs will do far more work finding public resources than ever before, given the pandemic's financial fallout.

Developing an employee reentry plan

One of the first steps an organization can take to re-establish its workforce is to develop an Employee Reentry Plan with their EAP. At the very least, the initiative should include:

- Individual and family counseling, including grief groups, offered online and in person to help with change management, loss, isolation, anxiety and relationship issues
- Treatments that are evidence-based, including Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), to drive positive outcomes more efficiently
- Practical support for post-pandemic daily life (i.e., childcare, eldercare, parenting, etc.), including coordination of work-life and local community resources, such as legal services
- Financial planning and recovery guidance via webinars, financial counseling, budgeting assistance, and the provision of local pandemic-related resources offering financial support
- Convenient access to articles, self-evaluation tools and other resources for managing issues such as situational depression and anxiety
- Resources related to domestic violence prevention and substance use, along with the ability to serve as a confidential resource for situations that are troublesome or severe.

“Full-service EAPs can help with post-pandemic life in more ways than organizations may realize,” says Seth Moeller, President of KGA, a New England-based EAP firm serving 200 nationwide businesses and institutions.

“While we pride ourselves on being a trusted advisor to our clients on mental health and work-life issues, we also provide critical recovery solutions for the organization. That's key. The coronavirus crisis has impacted all enterprise levels. Reentry services need to follow suit.”

Managing issues across the workforce

In addition to meeting individual needs, top-tier EAPs can help HR, managers and leaders anticipate and address issues that may affect the entire workforce.

How will the organization deal with employees who are ambivalent about returning to work? Or afraid? Or insistent upon working from home? What messages should be delivered to a workforce that is considerably smaller or less stable financially? What steps are necessary to alleviate safety concerns and promote compliance with new health protocols?

Putting it simply, the workforce and workplace we once knew are most likely gone forever. Employees may be subject to thermal temperature readings before being allowed to enter. Work hours may be staggered to maintain social distancing. Virtual meetings and handwashing may

become the new status quo. These changes are apt to have complex psychological consequences. With the aid of a top-tier EAP, organizational leaders can mitigate their impact.

Restoring organizational strength

While there are many ways an innovative EAP can help management and leadership address post-pandemic organizational issues, the major services include:

- Consultation with leadership and HR on how to manage a workforce that is returning under a cloud of uncertainty, as well as how to monitor employees' well-being
- Executive coaching to fortify the leadership skills that are critical to revitalizing the organization
- A review of workplace changes and their potential impact on individuals, their families, their jobs and their home life
- Education and support services for managers and supervisors on topics such as having difficult conversations with employees, managing a workforce that has experienced dramatic change and facilitating readjustment to prior routines
- An open, transparent communications plan that encompasses all employee levels, with attention paid to each cohort's distinct needs, resiliency level and other psychological factors
- Crisis/risk management services, including preparation for future disruptions, such as a COVID-related employee deaths, the threat of recurrence and non-virus-related traumas
- Ongoing outreach campaigns to promote the services and resources available through the EAP to ensure optimal engagement.

What to expect from your EAP

As organizations prepare to move through this crisis, management should confirm that the company's EAP is truly top-tier. In general, top-tier EAPs are those that offer:

- Ease of access, with multiple service delivery formats
- Extensive benefits integration, encompassing clinical, work-life and client partner services
- Flexible scheduling, counseling, and pricing models
- A personal "high touch" approach
Individualized treatment plans

In our post-pandemic work world, access is particularly key. For years, higher quality EAPs have been expanding access by complementing their telephone and in-person modalities with technologies like tele-counseling, message-based (text) counseling and online health solutions. More recently, HIPAA-compliant video platforms have widened the access path, serving as tools for individual interventions and group debriefings. However, as a result of COVID-19's "sheltering in place" mandates, technology has become a preferred method of access for many and a primary modality for critical incident responses.

Hopefully, this newfound comfort will be permanently adopted for both physical and mental health, as it enables top-tier EAP firms to do what they do best: tailor services to all

demographics and provide multiple access options, including telephone, in-person, video or online chat interventions.

Interestingly enough, in recent years, “point solution” vendors, such as mobile-based counseling companies labeling themselves “digital EAPs,” have been making the case for a digital-only model in an attempt to disrupt the market. But the post-pandemic needs of the workforce are quickly exposing the drawbacks of these approaches, including limited access options, lack of work-life integration, negligible organizational support and minimal crisis management experience.

The good news? 97% of America’s large companies already have an EAP in place, waiting to provide the services, structure and support the organization and its employees will need to succeed in a post-pandemic world. Now is the time to fully leverage those resources.

Your EAP should be able to quickly help you determine your needs and work to find a multitude of solutions to address them. As with any enterprise’s pandemic reentry efforts, the goal is to help people and organizations return to a state of equilibrium and full functioning. With the aid of a top-tier EAP, your organization can reduce the psychological impact of the pandemic and enable employees to more smoothly transition back to normal, however “normal” may come to be defined.

[Kathleen Greer](#)
Founder , KGA