Experiences of Internal and Hybrid Employee Assistance Program Managers: Factors Associated with Successful, At-Risk and Eliminated Programs

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**Abstract**

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) originated as workplace­ focused programs delivered largely by peer employees. Over the past 25 years, the once standard internal EAP has largely been replaced by internal/external hybrid programs or out­ sourced EAP vendors. Many long-standing internal programs have been downsized or eliminated, along with their internal program manager positions. This qualitative study examined the organizational, leadership, and programmatic characteristics associated with the internal and internal/hybrid EAPs from the perspectives of EAP managers working in programs that have thrived and those that have depreciated. Twenty-four current and former internal or internal/hybrid EAP managers were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule. Qualitative methods were used to identify patterns and themes within the data to describe the experience of internal and internal/hybrid EAP managers and the critical success and risk factors associated with their positions and programs. Five final themes, with 15 subthemes emerged from the data, suggesting that both individual and organizational characteristics of EAP internal and hybrid programs are important to the program's sustainability. These findings offer insights regarding best practices and critical success factors to EAP professionals, EAP purchasers, and the EAP industry.

**Keywords**

Employee Assistance Programs; hybrid; internal; managers

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are employer-sponsored workplace programs designed to support employees and others in resolving a variety of personal problems and ameliorate, or avoid, negative impact to the workplace (Attridge et al., 2009a; Employee Assistance Society of North America [EASNA], 2009; Sharar, Pompe, & Attridge, 2013). As these programs became popular with employers during the 1970s and 1980s, they expanded from their original foundation as occupational alcohol programs (OAPs), to become more broad-brush EAPs. Internal OAPs and early EAPs that were often staffed using a peer support model were replaced with external programs that employed more formally trained mental health professionals. This shift in operation, since the 1980s, occurred during a time when EAPs expanded the scope of their services to include a larger range of work/life-related, job performance, and behavioral health concerns. A new marketplace emerged delivering a new form of EAP that was capable of comprehensive service across time and geography (Jacobson & Attridge, 2010; Collins, 2000; Employee Assistance Professionals Association [EAPA], 2010; EASNA, 2009).

**EAP framework and growth**

The framework that has most dominated EAP practice over the past three decades is the EAP core technology (EAPA, 2010; Roman & Blum, 1988). Yet through organizational evolution and the growth of consumer EAP products, the scope of EAP services has grown to include crisis management, threat assessment, work/life and variations of wellness, organizational development, and safety programs (Attridge, Herlihy, & Maiden, 2005; Attridge & VandePol, 2010; Jacobson & Attridge, 2010; Beidel & Brennan, 2005; Bennett & Beaudin, 2000; Drennan, Ramsay, & Richey, 2006; Googins & Davidson, 1993; Kulper, 2007; Paul & Thompson, 2006). Past research has elaborated on the importance of EAP consulting and collaborating with a variety of workplace functions including human resources, occupational medicine, organizational development, work/life, legal, security, and safety. To provide such services nationally, and more recently, internationally, external EAP vendors operate centralized call centers for the purpose of 24-hour access and intake, and contracted with decentralized, community-based clinicians, or affiliates, hired through contracts to deliver EAP short-term problem solving or counseling services, usually in an off-site, private counseling office location (Maiden, 2001; Tisone, 2008).

**EAP models of service delivery**

Many employers embraced the external EAP as an efficient low-cost alternative to the highly integrated internal model. Internal EAPs employ full- or part-time counselors who are regular-status employees of the work organization and usually provide on-site counselor and management consultation services. Straussner (1988) reported that internal EAPs may be less expensive than external programs, a suggestion not supported a decade later (Csiernik, 1999). However, downward pricing in the commercial EAP market, coupled with the increase in employment costs, most likely leaves internal EAPs more expensive and requiring an employee infrastructure that many smaller employers find unjustifiable. Over the past several decades, many larger employers, with more complex needs, deployed the hybrid model of EAP management. In this hybrid or internal/external mixed model, employers have a blend of internal and external programs with the perceived value of an internal EAP manager who can serve as an immediate resource for clinical and consultative services, plus the external EAP or vendor's added value of diverse clinical care, 24-hour response, and the ability to deliver services across vast geography (Collins, 2000). In addition to offering direct and oftentimes, on-site services, internal/hybrid EAP managers also engage in overseeing or managing the external EAP vendor relationship.

Although much has been written about the various delivery models of EAP (Attridge et al., 2009b; Cagney, 1999; Collins, 2000; Csiernik, 1999; Sharar et al., 2013), best practice and evidence-based outcomes remain largely elusive. Several authors have examined models of EAP; however, the evidence for which model best serves different types of work organizations remains anecdotal. Straussner (1988) found the various EAP models to be "remarkably" similar in the services they provide, with internal being favored by managers because of the level of adaptability. Internal EAPs are generally thought to offer value due to their (1) customizability; (2) higher utilization; (3) insider knowledge of the organization; (4) better communication; (5) increased number of supervisory referrals, substance abuse case finding and medical referrals; (6) prompt response to critical incidents; (7) more consultation; and (8) tendency to do more assertive case management (Csiernik, Atkinson, Cooper, Devereux, & Young, 2001; Collins, 2000; French, Zarkin, Bray, & Hartwell, 1999; Potterton, 2013; Sharar et al., 2013). However, one study using the Workplace Outcome Suite found no differences between on-site and off-site EAP services in terms of workplace outcomes, suggesting that once an employee or client is engaged in a clinical encounter, the location of that service does not affect outcome (Sharar et al., 2013). Internal programs are also thought to have some disadvantages, including (1) the perception of being linked to the company; (2) concerns about confidentiality; (3) less diversity in staff and scheduling; (4) harder to serve dependents or domestic partners; and (5) cost and complexity.

What was once a grassroots effort by employers to help their employees and mitigate the risks associated with alcohol abuse has transformed into a complex employee benefit and a global industry (Pompe, 2011). Today's internal and internal/hybrid model EAPs most closely reflect that heritage, yet fewer employers provide internal EAPs that are traditionally staffed with employees and are offered onsite (Rothermel, Slavit, Finch, et al., 2008). Learning about the experiences of internal and internal/external EAP managers, from their perspective, is a primer for understanding work organizational and managerial factors influencing the stability of such problems and the sustainability of these programs in the future of the EAP industry.

**Method**

***Research design***

The current study used data from semi-structured interviews with EAP internal and hybrid managers to better understand their experiences in current or prior internal EAPs and the factors that led to their success or elimination. Using qualitative research methods, specifically grounded theory, five researchers analyzed data in-depth to identify themes emerging from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The research team also used the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research [COREQ], a 32-item checklist to document steps taken during and after the research study (Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007). Information included in the checklist is documented throughout the article. Prior to engaging in interviews, the study was approved by two Institutional Review Boards.

***Sample***

Two of the five members of the research team reached out to EA professionals asking them to participate in the study. These two researchers have each been in the EA field for more than 20 years and have worked in internal and external programs. They used snowball sampling to identify and invite participants to the study. Beginning with key informants and "leaders" in the internal and hybrid EA field who were known professionally to the two researchers through EAP conferences and events, the researchers expanded the sample based on the recommendations of participants who had already been interviewed. Some of these other leaders and key informants were not previously known to the two researchers who conducted the interviews. This type of purposive sampling is useful to gain information-rich examples from small segments of the population, and also helps in building trust and rapport which were critical factors for getting participants' acceptance (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Potential participants were sent an e-mail from the principal investigator (PI) and after agreeing to learn about the study, they were instructed to review, sign, and return the informed consent letter. The three researchers who completed the initial phase of data analysis were part of the research team working at the University of Maryland. Dr. Jodi Jacobson Frey led the research team at the University and is experienced with qualitative and quantitative research. No identifying information about the participants was shared with these three researchers.

A total of 34 invitations to participate were e-mailed; 24 (71%) agreed to participate. Refusal to participate was driven by factors such as a lack of avail­ able time, concerns about confidentiality, or concerns about potential negative impact to participants' employer reputation. Each interview took 60 to 90 minutes. Due to technical failure and one participant declining to be recorded, six (25%) interviews were not transcribed and therefore, the notes memoed by the interviewer were used to check final themes for consistency and accuracy, rather than for primary data analysis.

At the time of the interview, 16 (67%) participants were employed in internal/hybrid EAPs still in existence, and eight (33%) were former EAP managers where either the program or the manager position had been downsized or eliminated. In terms of program model and staffing, six (25%) of the sample represented an internal-only program, four (17%) were primarily external programs with internal program management, and 14 (58%) were hybrid programs with internal and external service availability. Nine (38%) reported to a medical or other health-related clinical director; five (21%), five (21%) reported to benefits; and five (21%) reported to another executive level position.

The participants represented diverse industry sectors, the largest representation being finance and insurance (25%, *n* = 6), followed by scientific and technical services (17%, *n* = 4), manufacturing (13%, *n* = 3), transportation and warehouse (13%, *n* = 3), professional, and public administration (13%, *n* = 3). The participants reported an average of 35 years of experience in the EAP field; with an average of 16 years in the role of internal EAP manager.

***Measure***

Prior to completing the telephonic interview, the participants were asked to complete a brief online survey that included a series of demographic and context questions about the participant and the employer. Following consent and completion of the pre-interview survey, the researchers used a semi-structured interview guide to conduct the interviews. The questions focused on: history and background of the participants and the program organizational factors related to program success and challenges leadership characteristics of those directing the subjects leadership characteristics of the subjects themselves retrospective analysis of the subjects' decisions and actions.

Questions were open ended in an effort to gently but quickly move from the general to the specific and to allow the researchers to probe easily, ask for more detail, and talk about related topics. Each participant was interviewed once and the conversation was generally limited to 60 to 90 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with the participants' permission.

***Data analysis***

All data was de-identified by the co-Pis before sharing with other research members who assisted with coding. All names of interviewees and their companies were removed from the final transcripts. The flexible semi-structured interview guide allowed significant opportunity for the EAP professionals (i.e., respondents) to "tell their story," while also maintaining structure for primary questions that were asked of all participants. Five research team members independently coded the data to look for patterns and categories using a method of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). After independently coding each interview, the researchers met as a group to review patterns and identify themes that emerged from the data. Names and definitions of themes were developed using an iterative process until the researchers all agreed to the final themes and supportive quotes. The researchers also met several times to identify key quotes that best described the essence of the themes.

**Results**

Five primary themes emerged from the data and each primary theme included one or more subthemes. A list of the final primary and subthemes can be viewed in Table 1. Each theme is briefly described in this section and quotes are used from participants to support and further define and exemplify each theme.

**Table 1.** Primary themes and subthemes.

Primary Theme Name

1. Understanding organizational culture
2. Organizational structure and change
3. Leadership support
4. Demonstrating value
5. Employee Assistance Program model

Subtheme Name

Business acumen and knowledge Leader changes

Organizational placement Organizational integration Cost-cutting and downsizing Succession planning

"You need a champion" Always building awareness

Need to sell Employee Assistance Program (EAP) Data versus anecdote

Impact of critical incident response

Hard coded into the workplace EAP customization

Relationship with vendors

Autonomy and EAP purchasing influence

***Theme 1: Understanding organizational culture***

The importance of developing and implementing the EAP in the broader context of knowledge about the work culture and organizational functioning was frequently noted. Respondents placed a strong emphasis on the need to understand how the EAP fit within the unique culture of the company as well as within the larger culture of business. This need for EAPs and individual professionals to understand the importance of organizational culture and offering programs that were culturally relevant to the workplace cut across all five of the primary themes. For example, one respondent noted:

I think that recognizing the realities of the culture and the organization, I think that's something that is very important as a leader, and especially in our field. The last thing we want is for people to see the EAP leader as being just one of those warm, fuzzy HR people. That's all good. We can be empathic, we can be understanding, but we also need to be able to present in a way that people get we understand, "This is a business." We have shareholders.

Another respondent emphasized the need to have staff who were well versed in workplace organizational culture, "You need people on the ground who understand the company, understand the process, and understand its culture."

As EAPs broadened their services over the past few decades, researchers often point out the push-and-pull nature on EAPs to constantly work toward program expansion or to stick with traditional EAP offerings and things they know they can do well. This sentiment was noted by one of the respondents who stated a need to develop services that were relevant to the specific work organization in which they function:

Historically, EAP has gone out on a limb by trying new things. We want to be special. We want to try. But that places us at risk. EAP needs to read the tea leaves. Swim lanes are important. We now don't go ambitiously looking for things to do. We stay aligned to the mission.

Within the primary theme of understanding organizational culture was a subtheme named "business acumen and knowledge." This subtheme focused even more on the importance of the EAP professional's ability to understand business models and ways of thinking, including business theories and strategies, more broadly than just the individual or specific workplace culture. For example, one respondent interviewed stressed that EAP managers need to "speak the language of business" when providing individual and organizational services to the workplace. Another respondent talked about the importance of having business skills and a business mindset to complement the EAP professional's clinical work and preparation:

[If the] person in charge of the internal model wants to be a clinician, not a manager, the program is going to fail. Your role now is not to fix critical issues, I know you trained for it, you love that, now you're in charge because there's more money in your check, but you better love business. You better love negotiating and politics and going up the ladder and pushing your program and dealing with the budgets.

A third respondent talked about merging clinical and business models:

It's really about trying to stay in that space where you're in your mental health professional state and you're trying to be as helpful as possible, but you're also managing a business within a business. I think around here it's really good to approach people with your knowledge and training. But a whole lot of the way I've had to manage problems or issues is through using a business model.

Included within this theme was the notion of EAPs being customer service driven. One respondent noted that their program had to be:

. . . absolutely 100% responsive to the needs of the folks in the field when they call. And then there's a need and there's a phone call. Then it's quick. It's accurate. It's to the point. It's that relationship. That's where the value comes from.

Another respondent talked about being known for their ability to provide a quick response, "People call us, we call them right back," and how this was essential to providing valued workplace services.

# ***Theme 2: Organizational structure and change***

The second primary theme that emerged from the data was organizational structure and change. This theme focused on EAP leadership, organizational placement, and overall changes to programs. Five subthemes were identified that revolved around changes to the internal and hybrid EAPs, including leader changes, organizational placement, organizational integration, cost­ cutting and downsizing, and succession planning.

The first subtheme, leader changes, focused on observations respondents made regarding the status or viability of the EAP after the loss of a leader who had historically supported the program. One respondent noted how delicate programs can be based on leadership stating, 'Tm one leader change away from being eliminated." The risk to programs might come from a mandate or desire to cut costs, simplify administrative burdens, or a new leader's critical evaluation of his/her new responsibilities. In the face of such changes, respondents described a perceived inability to alter the outcome:

when there's a change in the guard ... sometimes there's nothing you can do, absolutely nothing, no data, no anecdote, no relationships, connection, champions or anything like that. Sometimes they do what they want to do.

Also included in this subtheme was the impact of U.S.-based EAPs being led by non-U.S. leaders, especially following mergers and acquisitions. In particular, European perspectives on an employer's role in employee health programs and work/life benefits may differ from that in the United States leading to program elimination or downsizing as they view U.S. benefits and workplace services as expensive, not core to the company, and a risk to privacy, "Because of their [European] roots, they really had greatly different ideas about EAP. In [European country] they had socialized medicine, so they really didn't understand."

The second subtheme within organizational structure and change was organizational placement. This subtheme focused on how the role of the EAP was affected by its location within the larger organizational structure. For this sample, most of the EAPs were positioned within the benefits, medical, or human resources department. Although EAPs sometimes view placement within benefits as a potential negative factor, one respondent noted the financial advantages of placement within the benefits department, "The biggest pro is that there are the resources there. We're a tiny blip." However, though being a small cost within a resource-rich department may be viewed as a strength, challenges to being so small also included limited visibility and a service that was poorly understood. For example, one respondent stated, "They don't care, they just don't care. From that perspective, I don't think that it's not looked at heavily because it's just not a player." And though a majority of EAPs throughout the world are housed within benefits, it is not a given that the benefits manager fully understands the potential for the EAP as noted by another respondent:

In theory, a benefits manager understands EAP; they know what it is. They don't understand all the details and the nuances that go into creating a robust, well-recognized, really helpful EAP. They end up just managing the program from a distance. They don't know what to do to make it enhanced or to make it really worthwhile for employees, or for the company. They don't have the knowledge and they don't have the time.

The third subtheme within organizational structure and change was organizational integration. To illustrate this subtheme, one respondent noted the importance of having relationships with everyone and being fully integrated into the fabric of the organizational system and culture:

I'm such a believer [that] we need support from everywhere we can get it. I really did consider that to be a big part of my job. I need to have relationships with the benefits people, the health people, the wellness people. We need to be well integrated.

A common refrain was the value of having an EAP that was tightly aligned with other programs and processes within the organization, regardless of official position within the organizational structure. In fact, one interviewee viewed integration as key to their program's longevity noting, "I think we've integrated the program in such a way that it will survive and it will probably continue to function the way it is functioning." In addition to the benefits of program stability, another respondent described integration as a method of demonstrating the value of EAP for all employees:

You're not going to see any utilization that's going to justify your existence. So we've got to study how to become integrated into the organization. And here's the fundamental question; even if you do a 9% utilization, isn't it fair to ask what you are doing for the other 91%?

A fourth subtheme within organizational structure and change was cost-cutting and downsizing. Cost-cutting and organizational downsizing were frequently noted as major risk factors for internal and hybrid EAPs. Respondents consistently noted the presence of budget-conscious upper management as well as the seemingly unavoidable downward pressure on the cost of employee benefits. One interviewee noted, "We had a new CEO. Her crown was, 'How much can I cut and how quickly can I cut it?'." Another observed, "I was employed by a manager who was a cost control expert. He was a medical doctor second. I saw the guy's resume and that was on the top of it, 'cost control'." This focus on the financial bottom line is captured in the following statements, "If you're too high cost, you're always going to have a target on your back," and another respondent said, "It was never an easy battle. There's constant pressure on cost." A third respondent reflected on the pressure of costs to impact the EAP, "If there's an age of cost-cutting, [EAP] is an easy thing to trim." Although interviewees did not report the complete elimination of internal EAPs due to cost-cutting, the transition of the program to lower cost options or move to a more vendor driven model was frequently described.

The fifth and final theme within the broader theme of organizational structure and change was succession planning or the lack of succession planning as illustrated by this quote, "If I got hit by a beer truck this afternoon, will they replace me? I don't know. Will they?" Respondents expressed limited knowledge regarding long-term planning for their position, particularly because attrition may be viewed as an opportunity to reduce expenditures or critically evaluate the function of the EAP and make cost-cutting change. Further, respondents described the challenge of filling highly personalized positions:

I think all of us have, for lack of a better way to put it, created a program that is dependent on our own style and force of personality. I don't think we created a program that is something that is easy to replicate with a new manager.

Another respondent commented about how the EAP's success was in large part due to "intrinsic skills and personality characteristics" and that bringing in another person to replace retiring EAP managers would be challenging as it was the personality of the manager that helped to "create a position for ourselves and for our programs that became accepted because of who we are."

***Theme 3: Leadership support***

The third broad theme that emerged was leadership support, which focused on the types of leaders within the work organization and within the EAP to support the success and sustainability of a program. Three subthemes comprised leadership support, including "you need a champion", always building awareness, and need to sell EAP.

The subtheme named "you need a champion" was defined by respondents consistently noting the critical need to have support from a key leader within the work organization. Champions were not EAP managers, but workplace executives, supervisors, and other leaders who understood the role and value of EAPs within the work organization. One respondent reflected on a champion describing how he intricately understood the value of the EAP so when he became CEO he was one of our strongest advocates. "He did us a lot of good in terms of imparting his knowledge and endorsement of the program to leadership". Another respondent described a champion who had been with the work organization a long time and learned to value EAP over time:

She's kind of grown into the career, and now is one of those big VP people. She's seen what I do. She knows what I do. She knows or gets what happens. She was at the table too and she's got a big voice there. She has a global responsibility in her HR roles, so she was just a strong advocate.

Finally, a third respondent talked about the ability for EAP champions to not only passively support the program, but actively support program expansion:

When you have someone who is an ally for lack of a better term, someone who believes in you as an individual and a professional and believes in the work that you do and they're in the right place at the right time, it's amazing the doors that get kicked open for you.

Respondents also talked about the difficulty their programs had thriving in environments that lacked unique connections with leadership. As one respon­ dent noted:

When you don't have that admitted liaison who is really passionate about EAP, then all the goodness that really comes from EAP is lost because it's not recognized or even.... No one knows what can be.... They don't understand what's available.

The need for a champion also linked back to the subtheme of leader changes under organizational structure and change as respondents mentioned that sometimes when leaders left or retired from the workplace, programs also lost their "champions."

The second subtheme within leadership support was always building awareness. Respondents described a lack of knowledge among organizational leaders and employees about the importance of EAP services. This lack of knowledge was sometimes pervasive within organizations, even ones that had long-standing EAPs and therefore, respondents talked about their need to constantly educate employees about the program. One respondent stated:

If you ask 10 people on the street, "What is EAP?," they have no idea. You ask them what a CEAP is, they have no idea. The credential, the organization, there's no value in it that people understood. We do, as practitioners, but organizations don't.

And further:

It's almost like there's advocates around that are underground or above ground, but I agree with you, from an overall leadership, it's very far and few between, where the CEO can say, "We've got an EAP. This is what it does. This is why I see it's intrinsic to our business."

Concern was also expressed that the profession has not communicated effectively with others, as one respondent noted, "EAP has failed to educate our constituency, our customer base, on what we do and the value we present." In response, interviewees noted specialized efforts to reach executive management:

One of the things that I've really pushed, that I think has changed a little since I've been here is that, I do a lot more manager training and leadership development. That's what really helped with our visibility with our executive C-suite folks.

Additionally, respondents noted the unique role that EAPs can play in reaching and supporting all management levels:

That's the part that sets us apart from a mental health clinic or any other kind of supportive services. That's the value that we bring to an organization. We know the role that supervisors play in retention. We know the role that supervisors play in job satisfaction and everything. EAP's can have that connection with supervisors and managers in a way that other supportive services don't.

The third subtheme within leadership support was need to sell EAP. This subtheme was defined by respondents' statements regarding the importance of continually selling the program to the highest levels of leadership within the company. One respondent, when asked specifically to reflect on what he or she might do differently to prevent his or her program from being eliminated noted, "Probably spend a little bit more energy on people above me. Sell myself, talk a little bit more about what goes on behind the scenes." Several respondents noted similar sentiments, discussing the value of regularly communicating with upper level management and connecting the EAP to organizational functioning:

To be honest, one of the things I figured out early is that I had to be able to find a reason my CEO would want to sit down and talk to me. Because as long as I had something to tell him, and even later it was a her, if he was interested, then everybody below him would be interested.

Another respondent talked about his or her goal to meet with, "every single department and their high-level folks, whatever they were called, and let them know that we existed and why they needed us. Without failure that led to a call or two or three or four and that was a good thing. It's a balance of who needs to know and why do they need to know and what version of our story would be most important to them?"

A third respondent talked about the need to always be ready to talk about EAP and sell its potential:

You have to be able to create that argument based on your own instinct and observations and be ready to present it every time you get a chance. You've got to demonstrate it. You better get someone who's got power and remind them about why they want to keep you.

***Theme 4: Demonstrating value***

The fourth primary theme that emerged from the data was demonstrating value. This theme focused on the need for EAP managers to determine how and when to show work leaders outcomes from the EAP, which was labeled subtheme one: "data versus anecdote" and subtheme two: "importance of critical incident response."

Within the first subtheme, data versus anecdote, respondents highlighted the interplay of data and anecdote as methods for demonstrating EAP value. Data was described as necessary, but not sufficient, "Outcomes are important as a piece of the strategy. But they shouldn't be the strategy." Respondents noted the importance of backing up anecdote or a story with data. As one respondent noted:

I think the stories are good. However, you should always do the factual research. Whatever you can measure you should try to get your hands and arms around and keep getting it. A lot of [data] you're going to say is crap, I don't need it.

Further, the importance of connecting outcomes to the nitty gritty of business operations was emphasized:

"To go in with my metrics and not explain what they mean in the larger context is meaningless to them. They might be polite and all. But they don't give a shit."

Although translating EAP outcome data into the business environment was described as critical, it presented significant challenges, "You can be the best corporate leader. You can be an actuary. But if you're managing an EAP, your product is going to be loose relative to some others." Respondents noted the importance of avoiding complacency and discussed using both data and anecdote on an ongoing basis. "If someone is really good at what they do and proves their worth, then you're golden. But that has to be proven almost every day."

Over the past few decades and perhaps since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, U.S.-based EAPs have become valued by work organizations for their role in critical incident response. Highlighting the EAPs role and work regarding workplace critical incidents was evident in the interviews and thus became a subtheme within the broader demonstrating value primary theme. EAP response to critical events was described as a key function that could secure continued support from management and executives. Response to these events raised the visibility of EAP within the company via memorable stories as well through timely and proactive intervention. One respondent noted that,

"I honestly think that one of the things that validates us more than anything else is the incident oversight team ... we manage things that people are just totally freaked out by."

Another respondent talked about how a response to a crisis can improve the program's outlook and overall success as viewed by the workplace,

"In order to make the program successful, sustainable, unfortunately, you need a tragic or a big event. That's what we get paid to do."

Although in the past, critical incident response services by EAPs may have been considered a value-added service, it was clear in this study that work­ places valued critical incident response and EAPs needed to be ready to respond at any time:

They knew if they had a problem they could call us, and we'd be good at crisis management. And we'd be Johnny-on-the-spot, because we figured out the faster we got there, the better off, they took if off their plate onto our plate, and they could go on with other things; they appreciated our response.

# ***Theme 5: Employee assistance program model***

The last primary theme that emerged from the data was EA program model and comprised four subthemes. Each of the subthemes described ways in which the EAP was developed and implemented within the work organization.

The first subtheme was hard coded into the workplace and focused on whether the EAP was viewed as a benefit that could be easily expended or was a core function that was written into workplace policy. One respondent noted, "We're embedded enough in the culture that we are part of how HR functions." Another respondent, when discussing his or her conversation with a consultant, reported being told, "You are not going to see any utilization that's going to justify your existence. So we've got to study how you become integrated into the organization."

The second subtheme was EAP customization and focused on flexibility of the EAP structure and individual EAP managerial approach. This theme was particularly salient as respondents noted occupying varying managerial levels and being housed within differing departments (e.g., medical, benefits, human resources, etc.). As one respondent noted:

what I figured out in the organizational client work was that you had all these levels of the organization that you had to work with. And you obviously have to hook into the top, but you also had to work into the bottom.

Therefore, EAPs might be expected to deliver clinical services, to provide consultation and training to employees and management, as well as to be integrated into strategic planning related to employee health and wellness:

That's where I think internals are at risk. They are just doing clinical work and not providing manager consultation. If the internals are not being the source for managers on human behavior in the workplace, then I think they are in great jeopardy. Because why not outsource.

Similarly, another respondent stated, "[Our company] doesn't outsource strategic planning. They don't outsource strategy."

In some cases, being flexible with EAP managerial roles appeared to push the boundaries of what would be considered traditional EAP services, "We're filling gaps that really the business should be filling." However, EAP managers recog­ nized that the field was evolving and that they needed to be prepared to adapt:

Knowing that things have changed, those were the people that trained me and they were very old school. When I got there, though, I realized we can't do it the way they were doing it, I've got to make an adjustment.

Ultimately, respondents acknowledged wanting to provide EAP services that were consistent with both the needs of the organization and the mission of the profession:

I'm not trying to change the field. What I need is ... I need an environment to succeed in because the stuff I do, the stuff we do, it's not as scientific as you might want to believe. It's really about the right work, the right way, with the right results.

For hybrid model EAPs, an important subtheme that emerged was relationship with vendors. Many of the EAP managers interviewed oversaw vendors that provided direct services to employees as contractors to the work organization and external EAPs. Respondents spoke about the importance of mutually beneficial relationships between vendors and managers as they were working on the same team, "We consider [the vendor] to be part of our staff." In one instance, the EAP manger described a symbiotic relationship, "[I] am that vendor. They are an extension of [me]. The vendor is an extension of my professional service." Another respondent noted that quality vendors are a positive reflection on the EAP as a whole:

I think it was very critical that my vendor be perceived as very good and very effective. The positive word now added to my own credibility. Even though I wasn't really doing anything as it was [name of EAP vendor] that was running it. But it was because of their success that I got positive word of mouth.

Further, the vendor's role in supporting the existence and value of an internal manager was acknowledged,

"If vendors ... are smart and want to keep the business ... they have to help coach the internal manager or have to help convince the company that having an internal person is really [valuable]."

The final subtheme, which was not mentioned by many of the respondents interviewed, but was important to respondents who mentioned this in their interview, was autonomy and EAP purchasing influence. One respondent who felt strongly that when the programs were fully embedded into the workplace and allowed to function with high levels of autonomy, and when faced with a threat of being outsourced, work leaders would be more likely to consult the EAP than to make a decision about the program absent of their input. This respondent said, "Somebody can come in from the outside and say, 'You should use a different model.' It's never come up... but I try to be savvy enough to keep my eye on that kind of thing."

**Discussion**

This study is the first of its kind in that it was designed to describe the experiences of internal and internal/hybrid EAP managers, from their perspective, in an effort to add to the limited research about such programs and to explore ideas for future research, program design, and management consideration.

Through semi-structured interviews with current and former internal and internal/hybrid EAP managers, the current study identified a set of themes that describe the role and function of EAP internal or hybrid managers, while also highlighting possible keys to success of their programs or risks to their viability or sustainability. In the analysis of the data it became apparent that these themes were related to factors associated with the EAP itself and/or the employer organization and factors more specific to the internal EAP manager. The themes were not purely a success or a risk factor but rather a comingling of factors that need to be taken in the context of a given work organization, its norms and culture.

Some of the subthemes, such as cost-cutting and downsizing, and data versus anecdote, which include challenges to any employee benefit or program during difficult economic conditions are often unavoidable. This is particularly the situation when certain benefits and services such as EAP may be viewed as expendable (Sharar & Burke, 2009). Perhaps some of these risks can be mitigated with increased awareness and execution of different strategies as suggested within the themes of leadership support and employee assistance program model. However, risk mitigation in an effort to build or save a program requires a deep understanding of how to demonstrate a value proposition within a given work organization, and an understanding of the organization's business priorities and values (Bhagat, Steverson, & Segovis, 2007). Results from the interviews suggests that data, and particularly results-oriented data, is essential to demonstrate value but insufficient by itself. EAP managers told us that quantitative or outcomes data must be supplemented with other strategies that can be observed such as high levels of timely responsiveness following workplace critical incidents and successful integration of EAP into human resource (HR) policies. Having anecdotal success stories of EAP intervention become a part of the organization's narrative and culture and can help to promote and sustain a program throughout the years (Brandon & Fukunaga, 2013; Defraia, 2013).

Some of the potential best practices emerging in the results of this study support the importance of EAP managers working to demonstrate their clear understanding of the expectations of the work organization and their ability to deliver some combination of these three elements: (1) acceptable utilization data, (2) results-oriented outcome data, and (3) collecting and sharing anecdotes where EAP successfully executed a response or intervention during highly visible, high-impact events or incidents. Underlying these three best practice elements, developing broad organizational support and securing a positive, responsive reputation are foundational.

It would appear from this study that no single EAP design fits all organizations, which though not a new concept to the EAP field, may not be as well understood by the work organization leaders that EAPs are designed to support. Key to building an effective EAP, internal, external, hybrid, or otherwise, is understanding the needs of the organization and exercising a combination of autonomy and flexibility when implementing programs (Bhagat et al., 2007). Successful managers and sustainable EAPs, in this study, adapt EAP products and services to meet the needs of the organization, often sacrificing personal ideology or preference about EAPs, and narrow beliefs about what EAPs should be. To remain viable, EAPs need to quickly adapt and change, as does the organization, while retaining some fidelity to what it means to be an "EAP." This is a difficult position to adapt to change while holding tight to the traditional mission of EAP. It could mean, for example, changing the way in which EAP services are accessed and delivered, or finding new ways to combine or integrate EAP with a specific disease management or wellness program. The ability to adapt is a key strength of EAPs as we pride ourselves in being leaders for change in the workplace; however, we still struggle with change just like everyone else and when change takes place prior to our awareness, EAPs can find themselves in the midst of complacency and then being "too late in the game" to change or successfully adapt. In this study, it appeared that some of the most stable and successful EAPs were those that were fully integrated, or "hard coded" into organizational policies, procedures, and benefits. When EAP becomes an integral part of ancillary organizational processes and challenges, it is more sustainable over time and has broader organizational support from entities such as HR, Security, Legal, and Benefits. Examples revealed in the interviews include EAP, playing a key role in work organization policies or initiatives dealing with harassment, substance abuse, workplace violence, workers' compensation claims reduction, wage garnishment, wellness and prevention activities, psychiatric disability, expatriate assignments, conflict resolution, work engagement, family medical leave, and child or elder care, to name a few. This is how the program would appear to have worked to increase their influence on policy, benefit design, and over-all decision making. This type of integration is far more challenging for an external EAP vendor who does not report to an internal EAP manager representing the interests of the EAP, and penetrates the work organization culture in a way that advances this type of integration.

Leadership support and having existing EAP champions is critically important but not sufficient by itself. Many EAPs in this study were placed at risk, even eliminated, when a long-time EAP champion left the workplace. New leaders who replace old champions, particularly those who do not understand or support a robust internal EAP, constitute a major threat. Most of the work organizations in this study that downsized or eliminated their internal EAP function and manager replaced the program with an external or hybrid model EAP that was cheaper and potentially easier to manage. Similarly, some of the individual characteristics of the EAP internal and hybrid managers were so tightly identified with the program that a robust internal EAP was at risk when they departed. For both these risks, succession planning and developing deep, diverse organizational support is required. Deep and diverse support means finding a group of champions, and constantly working to add to these champions, rather than relying on a single individual who is always at risk for leaving. This study found successful EAP managers to be relatively free of EAP dogma and idealism but at the same time appreciated the purpose and mission of an EAP. They recognized the need to intimately observe and understand their organization's culture and take a flexible "yes we can" approach over the long term. Simply put, their job is less about EAP than it is the needs of their employer. This is where internal EAPs are at an advantage. They may have a better understanding of the organization than an external vendor by virtue of their placement and location inside an organization.

This flexibility occasionally meant changing the program in ways that were not preferred or risk being marginalized or eliminated. These managers were willing to do whatever was needed to maintain some level of internal service and recognition. Commonly, to sustain their position and the internal program, managers were required to balance their role as organizational leader with the need to deliver direct clinical services for even the most mundane cases. They were also commonly required to expand their role beyond EAP, taking on such things as wellness, benefits, training, and disability management.

Many internal managers appeared to be deep experts. They kept abreast of creative programming and were ambitious to offer the best; they wanted to innovate and positively affect their organizations. However, there was a common theme that being overly ambitious at the expense of humility and an internal customer focus placed an internal EAP at risk. Pushing an agenda can be perceived as disruptive, calling unwanted attention and driving up costs. EAP managers are wise to proceed with caution and drive innovation only when it is clearly welcomed or in response to a specific organizational challenge.

Finally, successful EAP managers are able to find a careful balance between playing the role of EAP expert versus nurturing their recognition as a good overall leader and communicator. Particularly in large organizations, those who are successful at managing anything over the long term possess a basic set of leadership competencies that align with that organization. Unique expertise and program management can be easily outsourced, but strategy, dedication, and broad organizational leadership cannot.

# ***Strengths and limitations***

This study contributes to a limited area of research examining the role of EAP managers, and decision makers, and how their managerial attitudes and behaviors might affect the viability of the EAP. Internal/hybrid EAP managers are on the front lines of EAP and benefit management inside an organization. The authors' status in the field was a strength of this study as EAP internal/ hybrid managers are not typically open to being interviewed about their jobs. Interviewers and three of the five researchers hold doctoral degrees, have previous experience in qualitative research, and each have at least 20 years of experience supporting EAPs in various capacities. Evaluating the characteristics of the managers interviewed was a sensitive process and it was critical that the participants trusted the research team members.

All research has limitations, and this study was no exception. Due to a lack of funding and time limitations of participants, the researchers could only conduct one interview per subject; however, all participants indicated that they could be contacted in the future for clarification of anything said during the interview or for short additional questions. Further, it is possible that data saturation was not achieved. Additional interviews may yield new information that could lead to the revision of primary and secondary themes.

The researcher also relied on self-report without direct observation of the managers in their work environments and jobs. The data collected was from the perspective of the respondent and likely contained some level of error or perception bias. Environmental stressors and disruptions can inflate perceptions of problems or solutions that may not be directly related to actual incidence, particularly for a field like this one in the midst of flux, competition, commodification, and change.

Another major limitation with this interview approach is that self-report can be associated with a type of strategic bias, meaning participants have an incentive to shape their responses when they think those responses may influence purchaser or stakeholder perception in a way that affects them. Methodological rigor was primarily implemented by using a number of techniques to establish confirmability. Confirmability (results are linked to data) was checked by (1) debriefing with participants, right after the interview, to verify that the interviewers had successfully captured their constructions; (2) using independent researchers to categorize data into themes and review areas of disagreement until a mutual consensus was attained; and (3) using reflective analysis to document the researchers' personal biases, thoughts, and preconceived assumptions that may have interfered in data analysis. Additionally, there were six interviews that could not be transcribed due to technical failures during the recording and one participant declining to be recorded; therefore, this data was not available to the researchers to use for direct quotes. Rather, we used the detailed notes taken by the interviewers during these interviews to confirm emerging themes that were identified from the interviews that were transcribed.

**Conclusions**

Modern EAPs continue to evolve as ubiquitous employer benefits with an emerging body of evidence demonstrating their positive impact to the workplace. What hasn't been as well studied is the question of what EAP delivery model fits best under which workplace conditions. As the EAP field and commercial EAP products continue to evolve, this question becomes increasingly relevant to ensure EAPs are delivering on the promises of the outcome data.

Those making decisions about their EAP investment and delivery model have several choices, from the traditional to the modern; from the complex to the simple; from the expensive to the low cost. The once-standard internal model appears to be less common, in spite of equivalent outcomes compared to other models and their unique benefits to the workplace. Through the experiences of current and past internal EAP managers, the current study advances our understanding of how workplace and managerial variables may relate to the success of internal and hybrid EAP models. There appear to be circumstances where these EAPs thrive and may be considered a viable alternative to the external commercial EAP products.

Beyond informing EAP, HR and benefit managers on the conditions where some EAP models may thrive and struggle, findings from this study may be a valuable proxy for the EAP industry to help identify circumstances where a purchaser may readily invest more in an EAP. Additionally, future research should examine whether the themes or factors identified in the present study are observed in other internal and internal/hybrid EAPs. If data could be collected from the workplace manager's perspective, this would further inform the EAP field and the broader world of work about which factors for successful EA programming are most critical to consider when determining the structure (internal, external, or hybrid) for a program, and sustaining the success of such a program.

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