



# A New Business Environment for EAPs in China after COVID-19

| By Peizhong Li

Employers and employees in China are grappling with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the workplace. The good news for EAPs is that the pandemic has enhanced employees' awareness of mental health needs as well as increasing business opportunities as more people seek professional help for personal problems.

This article discusses changes that EAPs in China are rushing to make in order to take advantage of those opportunities. These adaptations include developing multiple approaches for the needs of different employee groups and families, going beyond the clinical mindset, and being more accessible and responsive in general.

## Background

The information in this article is based on interviews with Dr. Jie Zhang, CEO of the Shengxin Group, one of the largest EAPs in China, and speeches from corporate representatives at the 15<sup>th</sup> International Conference on EAP Workplace Wellness in China. The Shengxin Group provides EA services for more than 700,000 Chinese employees, including over 20,000 expatriates on assignments worldwide.

The Shengxin Group has a branch dedicated to training and development of EA professionals and managers, i.e., the Shengxin International EAP Institute. Since the pandemic started, the institute has developed and launched two successful training programs. In collaboration with the Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA), the Shengxin Institute started the *Emotional First Support* (EFS) Training Program to help individuals and groups affected by unexpected incidents find resources and strengths to cope with the given situation and improve resilience.

The training has completed two sessions, with over 200 students total. Most of the trainees are managers

and HR professionals working at large organizations. *Mental Health Peer Advisors* is another successful new program. Managers at large companies develop systematic knowledge and skill for conducting screening and friendly referrals to EAP.

This program has been particularly well-received among Chinese expatriates working in various parts of the world. More than two 300 expatriates in 33 different countries participated in the online training, crossing a dozen time zones.

Speed and efficiency were crucial for the success of both programs since EAPs must rush to meet the needs created by disruptive events like COVID. As a result, decisions were made in early 2020 to launch classes in the middle of the past year. *The following are some lessons we have learned in China from experiences during the coronavirus pandemic.*

## 1. COVID-19 disruptions have created new business opportunities for EAP.

Much has been said, and written, about the need for EAPs to enhance awareness of their wide-ranging services, and the pandemic has clearly assisted in this goal. Compared with the numerous hotlines set up in China during the COVID-19 pandemic by volunteers, social-workers, nonprofit organizations, and state agencies across the country, *EA hotlines enjoy clear advantages.*

As a dedicated service with adequate funding and contracting from employers, EAP is much more user-friendly than public service programs in China. EAPs are better staffed, and have more effective referral, follow-up, and consistent quality services. Distressed employees do not need to wait in a long queue to speak to a professional.

The pandemic increased both EAP's visibility and its workload in China. During the acute phase of COVID-19, EA hotlines saw escalated numbers of calls from employees and their families seeking

help with symptoms of hypochondria, mood swings, parenting issues, and other distresses. The increased awareness and use of professional services such as EA counseling for managing stress and interpersonal conflict will likely remain after the pandemic. *The market for workplace mental health is becoming entrenched.*

According to human resources managers who spoke at the 15th International Conference on EAP in China, the pandemic increased the exposure of their work to their colleagues. Before the pandemic, managers had paid only sporadic attention to the health initiatives in general and EA in particular, treating those programs as a sidekick to the day-to-day operation of their business.

During the pandemic, health and wellness became the most important issue that determines either continuity – or disruption – of production and business. *The pandemic led employers to appreciate the important role played by EAP*, as employee distress increased with the level of uncertainty.

Having professional help available provides employers with a sense of reassurance during times of constant change and threat. In the larger context of increased government initiatives to improve mental health services, which focuses on setting up psychiatric facilities at public hospitals, EAP offers employers and employees unique resources.

## 2. EAP's rush to provide necessary inclusive, accessible, and timely services has meant transcending the traditional, clinical mindset.

When EA professionals think within a clinical mindset, they face concerns over liability issues, thus limiting the manner in which they reach out to people in need. A clinical approach also tends to emphasize proper settings and protocols for their work, as well as data security and privacy concerns.

Those issues create unnecessary barriers to using new technologies such as video conferencing and social media. The types of assistance most needed in the Chinese workplace are mostly non-clinical in nature so that they cover a large swath of the working population, thus keeping the services accessible, timely, and culturally relevant.

A non-clinical approach tends to be more inclusive. During the pandemic and other disruptive events, some people need no assistance from others, some only need a little outside assistance to recover their

functions, whereas others require immediate and substantial professional assistance.

Some employees may calmly deal with the incident when it first happened but will show delayed reactions, even need long-term psychological treatment. *The Emotional First Support program developed by EAPA and Shengxin Institute captures the needs of various individuals.* It features a five-step structure consisting of:

- Understanding;
- Evaluating;
- Learning;
- Connecting; and
- Supporting.

The method follows a client-centered approach, recognizing and respecting individuals' natural ability to recover from a traumatic event, while providing personalized and targeted assistance.

The pandemic has highlighted the need for fast reaction to a fluid and constantly evolving situation.



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In addition to assisting employees who take the initiative to call the hotline to seek help, the Shengxin EAP shortlisted client employees who had been screened out as high-risk for anxiety and depression, especially those who had received counseling during the last six months for need assessment.

Mental health experts make outreach calls to those employees to check in and offer help. Many of those employees are in fact in need. *This practice highlights the role of work organizations in making the link between individual employees and vital resources, as well as EAPs' need to reach out.*

### 3. The pandemic has fostered increased manager consultation and training.

At the Shengxin Group, EA experts set up joint teams with their corporate clients to monitor mental health issues on a constant basis, thus integrating EA consultation into day-to-day operations and management. Understanding workplace issues and communicating with managers become important for

EAPs. *These new developments pave the way for more employers to look into EA as one way to provide solutions in crisis intervention, business continuity, occupational health, and productivity management.*

The Mental Health Peer Advisor program was created in response to managers who notice employees facing emotional challenge but are not able to gauge the seriousness of the issue or determine how to respond. Not surprisingly, these situations increased due to the uncertainty created by the pandemic.

As a result, having a mental health resource readily available and knowing how to utilize it, has helped managers gain confidence in their day-to-day interactions with employees. *After the pandemic is over, this connection to managers may increase EAP utilization among employees and have a trickle-down effect.*

### 4. EAPs have learned to pay particular attention to groups in need.

For those employees who are still working, adapting to the new working environments and conditions presents complex challenges, as some groups are more affected than others by the disruption of the pandemic – in particular, Chinese expatriate employees working overseas and international employees of multi-national companies working in China. Some of the Chinese expatriates served by Shengxin have been separated from their homes and families for more than a year.

Flight cancellations, travel restrictions, and mandatory quarantine requirements make shift rotation and repatriation difficult, adding to stress of the pandemic. Employers with employees across national borders need to think deeply about global vs. country-specific health and wellness policies and providers.

Employees with school-aged children face special challenges. The children have had their studies interrupted, changed to online classes and lacked peer interaction for a long time. A series of suicides among middle school students after the lifting of lockdown and resumption of classes sounded an alarm.

Another group that needs special attention includes children of employees who study overseas. *Student Assistance Program embedded in EAP is an under-developed area with strong potential for growth.* Many Chinese students have prepared for years in

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high school and middle school in order to study at colleges and universities abroad, but their plans have been in limbo because of the pandemic. Even students already attending schools overseas are faced with multiple issues that might cause psychological pressure. *International EAPs should reach out to these groups and offer them appropriate assistance.*

### Summary

Even before the pandemic, many Chinese employers had to face the challenge of striking a balance between increasing productivity and protecting employees' physical and mental health. As one manager states, "The workplace does not have to be a jun-

gle or battleground, but we do not want to make it a kindergarten either." Employee Assistance Programs provide tools to helping employees adapt to the high work demand and balance their work and life. In order to take advantage of those opportunities, EAPs need to adapt their services to workplace developments and do so in a high-speed fashion. ❖

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## earoundup

### Highlights of the WOS 2021 Annual Report

*The following are highlights from the forthcoming Workplace Outcome Suite® (WOS) 2021 Annual Report by LifeWorks and endorsed by EAPA.*

#### What is the WOS?

Created in 2010, the WOS examines four key aspects of workplace functioning and overall life satisfaction. Originally 25 items, the brief version has one item per each outcome. It is a measure of change that requires collecting self-report data at before and after the use of counseling services.

The WOS is the only publicly available, free instrument that has been psychometrically validated and tested for use in employee assistance program (EAP) settings. See the LifeWorks website: <https://wellbeing.lifeworks.com/resources/wos/>.

#### WOS is Most Used Measure in EAP Industry

Earlier this year, **Mark Attridge**, president, Attridge Consulting; and **Barb Veder** and **Ivan Steenstra**, both with LifeWorks, surveyed the EAP

industry about trends in utilization and outcomes during the COVID-19 period. Only roughly one-third of the EAPs surveyed were actively measuring work outcomes.

These 62 EAPs were then asked about their experience with the WOS and with four other validated measures that are widely used in peer-reviewed research on employee health and work outcomes over the past 25 years (i.e., Health and Productivity Questionnaire, Stanford Presenteeism Scale, Utrecht Work Engagement Scale; Work Limitations Questionnaire).

Our results found that almost 3 in 4 of these EAPs were familiar with the WOS. *This was dramatically higher than the familiarity rate of 1 in 4 of these same EAPs who had experience with any of the other measures* (ranging 16% to 31%). More importantly, 36% of them were using the WOS now compared to just 1% who used one of the alternative measures. These findings document how the WOS is the most widely known and used tool among available research-based measures for those EAPs who collect their own data on work-related outcomes.

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