

Data Game Changer

Current Utilization Figures Inaccurate

By Dale A. Masi, PhD, Jodi J. Frey, PhD, LCSW-C, CEAP; James Harting, LCSW, CEAP;
& Michelle Spearing, LPC, CEAP

In late 2020, Dr. Dale Masi wrote a letter to the editor that was published in the *Journal of Employee Assistance* titled “EAP Utilization: EAP Field Doesn’t Do Itself Justice.” In the letter, Dr. Masi brought attention to the EAP field citing a 5% employee utilization in *one* given year as the goal of EAPs. For example, 50 employees using an EAP in a company with a total of 1,000 employees would have 5% utilization.

Using this method resulted in a great deal of criticism, as seen in two recent articles – the first published in the *Wall Street Journal* article (Feintzeig, 2020) while the second was an article in the *Society for Human Resource Management* (Agovino, 2019). Dr. Masi went on to explain how EAPs responded by using various methods to raise the utilization count using their services.

These included counting the employees’ family members, employees who used Work/Life services, and even individuals who didn’t show up for counseling. These figures were added into the numerator of employees using programs without changing the denominator of the number of employees. EAPs calculated these as part of their annual utilization count.

New Utilization Data is Revealing

What Masi’s findings revealed was that the original method of assessing EAP utilization was not ideal given that EAPs were reporting their data based on a one-year span. Dr. Masi worked with a Fortune-50 premier corporation, IBM, which had two EAP vendors with a robust program. IBM raised concerns about the 5% utilization rate and Dr. Masi suggested that they instead review the number of employees who used the program for a five-year span, instead of only analyzing one year of utilization.

The difference in results went from 5% utilization to almost **25%** utilization, reflecting a greater number of employees served by the EAP over a five-year

period. This cumulative approach to the data count over that timespan where the numerator, being the number of employees using EAP services, divided by the total number of employees in the company, the denominator, resulted in a far higher representation of utilization. *The lesson – not all employees with an issue will seek help in any one year.*

Where the counting has gone askew, in Dr. Masi’s perspective, is that EAPs have used the *single* year as the total utilization regardless of number of years they are providing services. In reality the number is much different when you look at the number of unique employees who are using EAP services over the course of several years.

After the Masi letter was published in *JEA*, she was approached by Dr. Jodi Frey, Professor at University of Maryland, asking if she would be interested in her working with a co-researcher to test Masi’s methodology on an additional company.

Testing ‘Masi Hypothesis’

Dr. Frey then consulted with James Harting, founder of Harting EAP, who agreed to seek the authorization of another large EAP to utilize their unidentified data, collaborate with the team and test the “Masi hypothesis.”

The idea of cumulative utilization, or the “Masi Hypothesis,” was intriguing to both Frey and Harting.

To begin, Frey and Harting reviewed Harting EAP’s Customer List and identified several companies that might collaborate on the project.

After several conversations explaining the project and requesting their approval to utilize their aggregate, non-identified data, it was decided that the best match to test this new utilization method was *to partner with the Halliburton EAP*. Halliburton has had supporting services to employees provided by its embedded EAP since 1980.

The EAP provides comprehensive assessments, referrals, and follow-up for all employees and family

members, in addition to being a resource to managers for workplace and employee management. Employees come to the EAP in one of three general ways; self-referral, supervisor referral, or referred by HSE via the drug and alcohol department.

The Halliburton EAP's core functions include comprehensive assessment and referral; critical incident response and grief support for co-workers and family members; crisis intervention and assistance during crisis situations including disaster response and threat assessment; workplace consultation on identification prevention, and resolution of behavioral risk factors and safety concerns in the workplace; training and presentations; and managing the relationship of the MH/SUD partner.

Working with Halliburton

Michelle Spearing, Manager of Halliburton's EAP, welcomed the opportunity to share aggregate data that contributes to improving the EAP field. Her first reaction was to recall that her mentors taught her to be an advocate for the field through supporting good research and she understood the critical need for EAPs to demonstrate value for their services. As manager of Halliburton's EAP, Spearing realizes that utilization is an important value to present to help track program outcomes.

Halliburton's EAP data is internally housed on protected servers, so the researchers worked to create a data mining script that would gather unidentified pertinent data elements from Halliburton's EAP database. They specifically looked at the count of unique employees that used the EAP (not including no-shows) and the total count for individuals employed by the company over time.

Going into the project, the researchers hypothesized that the cumulative utilization counts would be significantly higher than traditional annual reported utilization of around 5% and would better represent the impact of EAPs on a workplace given a more reasonable period of time. To better evaluate if the EAP was reaching employees in the workplace, they agreed with Dr. Masi to review EAP utilization over a 5-year period.

They looked at the number of active employees in the company and took the average for each of the five years, identified only unique (or new to EAP) employees seen during the 5-year period and limited this analysis to employees – they did not include family members. If a person had come in twice, they were counted *once*.

Next, they took the average number of employees from the 5-year period (2016 through 2020) or 21,232 and divided the number of employees that had an Open Case (4,677). **The answer indicates that the EAP saw 22% of the workforce in this 5-year period.** (See the Table 1 graphic, which shows utilization calculations for each year and the average 5-year period.)

Interesting Utilization Trend

Spearing noted that, year over year, there tends to be an interesting trend in EAP utilization that is unique to the industry and dependent upon certain market conditions. If the market is up and employees are being hired, there tends to be an increase in EAP utilization, however, if the market is down and downsizing is taking place, EAP utilization is lower.

This is a very typical pattern within the industry. There are several potential reasons as to why EAP utilization would be affected by industry market conditions. In a hiring year with many new employees, the EAP information is given to them at several touchpoints during their onboarding process.



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Additionally, in the hiring year, the company has more resources and individuals feel more comfortable coming forward to deal with personal concerns.

During a downturn, with layoffs, many employees are pressed for time and as a result they tend to not deal with issues until they become critical. (The Table 1 graphic shows the number of unique employees that have used EAP in the last 5 years.)

hypothesis is valid and further testing of this concept is advocated.

New Steps and Conclusion

In the future, the research team plans to further refine methodology and compare data with employees only, with employees and covered family members, and then expanding the concept to understand cumulative

Table 1: Research Study for Cumulative Utilization in EAPs – July 29, 2021

	Number of New Cases distinct individual in 5-year period	Number of total employees	Percentage
2016	929	18,728	5.0%
2017	1,141	22,378	5.1%
2018	1,066	26,068	4.1%
2019	991	24,261	4.1%
2020	565	14,225	4.0%
5-year total	4,692	21,132	22.2%

Sharing Study Results

When the researchers shared results of the study with Spearing, she reported feeling supported and not surprised, but very pleased. When she shared results with her management, they responded, “Wow! Great job” and commented on how valued the EAP was and that they wanted to share these numbers with more senior and key Halliburton leadership. The Halliburton team plans to share the new methodology and reporting in their annual report.

Since Masi, Frey, and Harting hypothesized the cumulative utilization to be much higher than the typically reported EAP utilization of 5%, they were pleased to see the average over time was actually **22%**. They all agreed that having this data to share with a Vice-President of a company and informing them that an EAP saw 22% of the company’s workforce who had personal issues that affected their work performance, is a more illustrative example of the services that an EAP provides than a one-year snapshot.

It is the authors’ conclusion that an effective EAP that provides the five core-technologies that EAPA states are essential components of an EAP, will deliver a similar result. This would indicate that Dr. Masi’s

utilization for EAP-services that fall within the EAP Core Technology and value-added services, such as work-life and management consultation.

As a team, they recognize the need for EAPs to demonstrate value and impact on various levels, and to multiple customers. They also understand that the quality of EAP and the services they provide impact utilization as a reflection of trust, perception of confidentiality, and confidence. Cumulative utilization helps tell the story and fill in some of the gaps created by only providing annual utilization for so long.

From this study, and Dr. Masi’s prior work, there are now two major Fortune 500 companies whose data defies the usual way of counting utilization. *Why has the EAP field not questioned this before?*

The implications are enormous. Instead of turning to solid researchers such as Frey and Harting, the field has relied on rationalizations and excuses that did not change the bottom line of usage of 5% utilization per year.

The authors strongly urge other researchers and EAP managers and providers to test the new utilization count methodology. More evidence is needed to support these initial findings and to share the true impact of the field’s services with workplace leaders and professional stakeholders.

To its credit, the *Journal of Employee Assistance* has supported this initial work.

Additional research is warranted to better understand how employee utilization of EAPs over time, in addition to related EAP core services, meets the needs of employees and employers.

Providers should fund researchers to study their numbers over consecutive years rather than a single year among their clients. Researchers should apply for funding from federal and private sources to fund major research in using large samples of various EAPs.

The industry's future could depend on it. Streaming and smartphone apps competing for programs are posing an additional major threat to the existence of EAPs. Hopefully the EAP field will realize the importance of supporting further research in this area. ❖

Dr. Dale Masi, PhD, is a Professor Emeritus at the University of Maryland and is President/CEO of MASI Research Consultants, Inc. Dr. Jodi Frey, PhD, LCSW-C, CEAP, is a Professor of Social

Work at the University of Maryland and the Chair of Social Work in the Workplace & Employee Assistance Sub-specialization.

Jim Harting, LCSW, CEAP, is the founder of Harting EAP. Michelle Spearing, LPC, CEAP, is Manager of Halliburton's EAP.

The researchers greatly thank Halliburton and Spearing for their partnership in this project and contribution to research and the EAP field.

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earoundup

Tech is Great, but Something is Missing

Many employees might be starting the new year the same way they ended the old one – communicating via Zoom, Google Chat, email, text messages or a similar venue. It's true these tools offer back and forth communication, but not in the same way as an in-person conversation. Neither does remote work offer breakroom chats where team members build relationships and rapport. Courtesy of Clint Padgett, author of *How Teams Triumph: Managing by Commitment*, here are some tips and cautionary advice:

Work to overcome technology's communications limits. Be honest, how many times have you misinterpreted the tone of an email or a static document? Skip the emojis and strive to make communications as clear as possible.

Put yourself in the other person's place. If you received this text or email, would you understand the context without more explanation?

Set up clear, two-way communications. One-way communications should only be used for simple, clear questions that have yes/no answers or are used to piggyback on conversations. In other words, it's okay to text or email questions before a conversation takes place or for follow-up responses afterward.

Conversations need not be the only form of communication, but they are the most important. When in-person isn't possible, video chats like Zoom at least provide an opportunity to engage in needed dialogue.

Appreciate technology, value people. Software is not an answer, it is a *tool*. If you choose technology over people, your project won't be successful. While communications will be fast, you'll sacrifice quality, clarity, accountability, and, ultimately, success."

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