

Guidelines for Increasing EAP Usage

EAPA – Saka (ed)

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For many years, employee assistance programmes (EAP) have recorded a trend of low utilisation within organisations across the world. This is a trend some industry professionals attribute to the stigma that surrounds mental health issues. However, with unprecedented demands being placed on workers and the resultant rise in stress and anxiety since COVID-19 struck, it is a very relevant time to reintroduce and promote your EAP to your employees.

A rise in EAP usage during the pandemic

An increase in the overall emphasis on mental, physical and financial wellness in the workplace could already be driving an increase in the usage of EAP, as well as other wellness programmes that are orientated toward work-life integration. But there could still be barriers to your employee's EAP usage.



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Possible barriers to EAP usage

Here are six common obstacles and what you should know about them:

- **Availability:** It is not uncommon to wait weeks, instead of days, for an initial counselling appointment with a service provider. EAPs who are not setting an appointment within 48 hours of the employee contacting them run the risk of the employee losing impetus in resolving their issue and not bothering to use the EAP in the future.
- **Inconvenience and poor user experience:** Getting help should be made as simple as possible. EAPs should provide easy access to employee counselling and other wellness resources. The benefit of an EAP with an online platform is that it allows employees to make appointments quickly and easily, without talking to an intermediary.
- **Working through an intermediary:** Some EAPs may require employees to talk to an intermediary such as HR before booking a counselling appointment. This discourages employees from seeking help due to concerns that bringing an issue into the open will impact on their job.
- **Confidentiality:** Many employees worry that EAPs will share personal information with their employers. To overcome this concern, it is important to communicate to employees that any communication with EAP will be kept confidential – except in the case of a clear and present threat to the safety of employees and the organisation.
- **Low EAP awareness:** Employees may not be aware their employer offers an EAP programme as a benefit. This is a common problem with large, national or multinational organisations.
- **The Mental Health Stigma:** Research shows that about two-thirds of employees who are suffering will not have spoken to anyone at work about their mental health issues. There are many reasons for this.
 - Employees may be afraid that they will be treated or evaluated differently.
 - Employees may assume their co-workers won't care or understand.
 - Others will downplay or deny how much their stress is affecting them.
- There is still a massive stigma around talking to a therapist. Many believe that talking to a therapist won't help or that their stress or anxiety will improve on its own.

Six steps to increasing EAP usage

The answer to increasing EAP usage lies in the employer's standpoint. Once employers start viewing EAPs as more than just another tack-on employee benefit and start to actively encourage EAP usage from the top down, EAP usage should increase. Here are six steps that will help to overcome barriers and increase employee use of an EAP:

A distinct brand

Make your EAP a part of your business plan. Create a distinct brand – including a logo – that easily identifies the EAP throughout the company and mount an internal marketing campaign aimed at attracting and educating your employees. This could include:

- providing your employees with an EAP wallet card that provides all relevant EAP contact information;
- posting educational articles on the organisation's intranet or via an email or brochure campaign;
- offering short, punchy wellness webinars that tackle pertinent health and wellness issues and advertising the webinar schedule and speakers.

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Programme education and reinforcement

Add EAP information into your company on-boarding programme, resources, and knowledge base.

- Talk about EAP in meetings, reminding employees about the resources that are available to them. Emphasise that accessing EAP resources is free of charge.
- Normalise mental health issues by talking openly and without bias, or putting any single employee on the spot, to remind employees that they can access counselling and other resources to help in coping with their issues.
- EAP counsellors will seem more approachable if you ask them to present short webinars or workshops for your employees on relevant topics, making future initial counselling sessions less intimidating.

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Train your managers on how to use the EAP

Make your managers advocates for mental health and teach them how to talk about mental health with their team. Training for managers could include:

- how to access EAP services through the formal and informal referral process;
- recognising signs that services are needed;
- educating them on how to start a dialogue with their direct reports;

- reinforcing the importance of a follow-up conversation with an employee the manager has guided to use the EAP service, to ensure they have followed through and are working toward the resolution of their problem.

Ensure confidentiality

It is critical to EAP usage that employees know that individual cases are never discussed within the company without their consent. It is important that on-site EAP offices are located in office areas that are not adjacent to Human Resources or management.

Guarantee availability of services

A rapid response, then setting up the first counselling appointment within 48 hours of an employee's approach is essential in maintaining good levels of EAP usage. In the wake of COVID-19 lockdowns and the rise in remote work, most EAPs provide a helpline number with 24-hour services. Providing telephonic counselling and 24-hour EAP website access from home or any digital device like a tablet or smartphone, will increase usage opportunities and provide a better opportunity for privacy for the user.

Staying up-to-date on employee needs

Hold a regular meeting with your EAP Account Managers and Human Resources to identify trends, monitor usage, and identify current programme needs. Check on the accuracy of your employee data on file with your provider as you do not want to have your employee or their family member be denied access to services due to omitted or incorrect information.

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