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## Does Your EAP Make the Grade?

EAPs offer desirable benefits to employees, yet utilization remains low.

How can you reverse the trend?

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Employee assistance programs (EAPs) have a long history. The first EAPs were conceived in the 1930s as a way to help employees recovering from alcoholism by providing them with confidential resources. Over the years, EAPs have evolved to offer many more employee services, including help for mental health concerns; minor physical illnesses; and legal, financial, addiction, and child and elder care issues. They have been proven to enhance employee productivity and decrease turnover, making them a valuable offering for both employees and employers.

But despite their longevity, today's EAPs are an underutilized benefit.

That isn't good for employees or their employers. Employees who don't tap into their EAPs for the purposes their employers purchase them for miss the opportunity to get the help they need for a variety of issues, while employers pay for a benefit that their workers don't use. And that's not the only downside of a neglected EAP. When workers have unresolved personal issues, their productivity can be impacted, causing a ripple effect across a company.

According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data from 2021, 51% of private-sector employers offer EAPs to their workers, giving more than 67 million workers access to their services. Taking into account workers employed in the public sector, nearly 71 million U.S. workers have access to an EAP.

The size of an employee's company can significantly impact whether they have access to EAP services. In the private sector, while 89% of workers at large companies (500+ employees) have

EAPs, only 69% of workers at midsize companies (100-499 employees), 68% of workers at small companies (50-99 employees), and 60% of workers at very small companies (1-50 employees) have the benefit. Given that 52% of U.S. workers are employed by private-sector companies with fewer than 100 workers, not everyone has equal access to the services EAPs provide.

EAP costs vary widely, according to consulting firm WTW. Some EAPs are embedded in other products that employers purchase, such as disability insurance. When EAPs are purchased separately, the cost depends on the type and quantity of the services offered by the EAP provider. Employer costs can range from \$1 to \$12 per employee per month, according to WTW.

If you are the solo HR professional in your company and are considering offering an EAP or determining whether the one you already pay for is cost-effective, there are some key questions you should ask yourself before making a decision.

### Do Your Employees Use the EAP You Have?

Sharon DeLay, SHRM-SCP, is president and owner of BoldlyGO Career and HR Management LLC, an HR and small business consultancy in Powell, Ohio. She provides an EAP for her eight employees but says its utilization is low. “I think ... people just forget it’s there,” DeLay says. “I try to regularly remind them it’s there. [I send them] email reminders ... but now I’m thinking I need to do more.” She says she keeps her EAP because “it’s like a spare tire. You don’t know you need it until you need it.”

Rachel Ego, SHRM-SCP, owner and HR director of human resources provider Big Time HR in Denver, says that for many of her clients, she is their only HR support. Her company offers its own employees EAPs through its disability insurance. She says employees are using them. “Several [employees] have come from larger companies with more benefits,” Ego explains. “The EAP is filling the gap for some of the benefits they miss.”

**I think of an EAP like medical insurance: It just takes one incident to make it invaluable.**

Sharon DeLay, SHRM-SCP

To encourage wider usage of the EAPs that her employer offers, Ego promotes them in the companies' Slack channels and ensures managers talk to their employees about the available programs. "We keep it in the conversations to ensure any stigma is reduced—hopefully removed—and employees know that it is part of their benefits," she says.

Ego also surveys employees to determine any roadblocks to EAP usage. "There should be an analysis about why it's not being used," she says. "Do the employees know about it? Have they tried it and found it difficult to use, unhelpful, or some other problem? There should be education from the offer through onboarding and then reminders of the resources available."

Linda VanBrackle, director of talent and operations at Full Tilt Consulting, a recruiting consultancy in Roswell, Ga., recently introduced the company's first-ever EAP to its employees and says she hopes for widespread usage. "My entire HR philosophy, including how I approach an EAP, boils down to this: Educate, reinforce, and repeat," VanBrackle says. "Clear and consistent communication across multiple channels like team meetings, internal emails, one-on-one meetings, etc., goes a long way to keeping these benefits at the top of our staff's minds."

### Can You Afford It?

An EAP must make financial sense for your company, especially if you're on the smaller side. Ego at Big Time HR selected a bundled EAP to keep her costs down. "Typically, I find these to be bundled with long-term disability insurance, so it's rarely an additional expense," she says. "If it were purchased as a standalone product, I have seen prices around \$13-\$30 per employee. The more employees, typically, the lower the cost."

In the past, DeLay went with an EAP provider that gave her a flat rate. But she says that provider didn't offer enough services, so she switched to a new plan. pay higher costs upfront, DeLay says.

“I think of an EAP like medical insurance: It just takes one incident to make it invaluable,” she explains. “EAPs cover mental health and other life things that medical insurance may not cover. It’s a very low-cost benefit that could have incredibly high value.”

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Mark Attridge, president and owner of Attridge Consulting Inc. in Minneapolis—a firm that conducts research for workplace health services, including return on investment analyses of EAPs—says a full-service EAP provider should also provide company leaders, managers, and employees with training to respond to workplace crises and critical incidents such as violent acts, accidents, death, natural disasters, and other unanticipated, traumatic events.

“EAPs are experts in handling these kinds of special problems that, when mishandled, can end careers and result in turnover, workers’ compensation mental injury claims, and sometimes lawsuits against the company,” Attridge says. “The best practice is for the EAP to become integrated into many parts of the work organization.”

### [Does It Offer More Than Mental Health and Addiction Support?](#)

EAPs should also go beyond their traditional offerings to reflect a full range of employee needs.

As a small company, BoldlyGO offers its employees a qualified small employer health reimbursement arrangement in lieu of an insurance plan, along with an EAP. “This helps me feel like I am offering a package of more robust benefits to my employees,” DeLay says. “It also has legal consultation, financial consultation, identity theft, web-based will creations, and recovery help, with assistance and an action plan. The service from our provider has been amazing.”

Carolyn Linck, director of PR and external marketing at ComPsych, an EAP mental health services provider in Chicago, says her company's clients typically opt for integrated programs that address the whole person through services that identify and address overlapping emotional, legal, financial, physical, and life balance issues. "Employees do not view their lives in compartments," Linck says, "and mental health, work/life challenges, and physical issues often intertwine."

While she finds that virtual counseling and digital access tools continue to be heavily marketed as EAP offerings, Linck says there is a strong preference for programs that give employees an in-person counseling option.

"We have seen a heightened demand for more robust mental health counseling session models since the pandemic and greater interest in digital access such as online scheduling; computerized cognitive behavioral health; well-being coaching to address lower-acuity socio-emotional issues such as burnout, stress, and resiliency; and help with physical issues like exercise, nutrition, and sleep," Linck says.

VanBrackle says the investment she's made in her company's EAP has been very good for business. "I understand that some organizations can't offer an EAP due to cost constraints, but these types of programs are one of the easiest ways to invest in your employees as a whole person," she says. "Countless polls and studies have shown that employees prioritize robust benefits packages and work/life balance. Our EAP is a way to meet the needs of our employees in the areas most important to them."

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