

The Glass is filling: an examination of employee assistance program evaluations in the first  
decade of the new millennium

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ABSTRACT

Five electronic databases were searched using the key words "Employee Assistance", "research" and "evaluation" for articles published from 2000 to 2009 along with a manual search of the two prominent journals in the Employee Assistance field. Forty-two evaluations were found which were categorized using Macdonald's structure into four groups: needs assessments (n=2), program development (case study) (n=21), outcome (n=10) and process (n=9). While the majority of evaluations were conducted in the United States (n=29) there was a distinct international component with studies from Australia (n=1), Canada (n=5), Israel (n=1), Japan (n=1), South Africa (n=2), South Korea (n=1) and the United Kingdom (n=2) also being published during the first ten years of the new millennium. Evaluations were conducted upon programs delivered across the entire helping continuum: by peers, professionals working for the organization and external providers as well as joint internal-external service delivery models. A broad range of methodologies were employed that demonstrated in general that the EAPs that were reviewed produced positive outcomes including both saving organizations money as well as in producing positive change in those who sought counseling through their auspices. However, as well as describing new initiatives, program evolution and offering insights into how specific programs could be further enhanced broader themes were also examined such as who is and is not availing themselves of EAP services and the stigma that some still feel in seeking help through Employee Assistance Programs.

Keywords: needs assessment, program development, case study, outcome evaluation, cost-benefit, process evaluation

## INTRODUCTION

A review of published individual Employee Assistance Program (EAP) organization evaluations conducted between 1990 and 1999 found four needs assessments, twelve case studies, nine cost-benefit reports, five client satisfaction reviews and nine process evaluations. Of the 39 studies published over ten years, 29 examined organizations from the United States, six were Canadian while two each discussed EAP programs in the United Kingdom and Australia (Csiernik, 2004). The article concluded with a lament of how little we still empirically knew about Employee Assistance Programming despite the global proliferation of programs. In this vein, Carl Tisone, Founder and Chairman of PPC Worldwide, a global EAP provider, called for and then substantially financially supported the development of the Employee Assistance Research Foundation to provide grants for empirically rigorous EAP research (Tisone, 2008). However, the difficulties in conducting research in the workplace context has been expressed continually and by many (Alker & Cooper, 2007; Courtois, Hajek, Kennish, Paul, Seward et al, 2004; Masi, 1997; McLeod & McLeod, 2001; Pompe & Sharar 2008). Despite these concerns and barriers the first decade of the 21st century did witness more quality, quantity and diversity in terms of conducted and published Employee Assistance Program evaluations.

## METHODOLOGY

Five electronic databases, Google Scholar, Psych Info, Pub Med, Scholars Portal and Social Work Abstracts, were all searched using the key words "Employee Assistance", "research" and "evaluation" for articles published from 2000 to 2009. As well, manual searches of the two prominent publications in the Employee Assistance field, *Employee Assistance Quarterly* /*Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health* and *Employee Assistance* were conducted. A total of

42 different publications were found that were classified using Macdonald's (1986) five steps in a comprehensive evaluation:

1. Needs Assessment: to determine the overall program goals and direction
2. Program Development (case studies): to describe the program, its rationale and objectives
3. Input Evaluation: to determine if the program components have been correctly implemented
4. Outcome Evaluation including cost-benefit analysis: to determine if the program objectives have been achieved
5. Process Evaluation: to determine what the program is actually doing and how well.

## RESULTS

### NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Two needs assessments were published between 2000 and 2009 compared to four between 1990 and 1999. Lawrence, Boxer and Tarkesshear (2002) conducted a self-administered survey of a rural Midwestern government with an existing EAP. Of the 264 employees, 92 (34.8%) responded indicating what additional services they needed from their existing program. Leading responses were work/career seminars (51.7%), stress management workshops (42.7%), mental health counseling (40.4%), crisis counseling (40.4%), on-site support (self-help) groups (36.4%). This information was used to modify and enhance the established program.

Choi (2005) did not conduct a traditional EAP needs assessment of a specific organization in South Korea, rather he randomly selected 400 employees from the manufacturing sector and inquired what types of problems they encountered in the workplace and what types of

helping services they would expect an employer to provide. Choi's 331 respondents (82.8%) placed job stress as their most serious concern followed by vocational issues, retirement concerns, mental health problems and physical health concerns. Addiction was not one of the specific responses though smoking did rank tenth, just after lack of vacation time and information on travel options. This information was shared with organizations to assist in and guide future EAP program development.

#### PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT (Case Studies)

Twenty-one case studies were published between 2000 and 2009 compared to only twelve in the previous decade. Historically one of the major issues in the EAP evaluation literature has been the lack of study of programs provided by external third parties. This is due in part to the competitive capitalistic nature of that component of the field and also due to the time and expense of conducting evaluation research that is typically not accounted for as part of service contracts. While the majority of case studies were of programs using internal EAP providers to offer counseling services there was a greater range of EAP service delivery models found in this review (Table 1). Twelve of the case studies used exclusively internal professionals to provide services to employees, one was a peer model (Golan & Bamberger, 2004), one case study examined a peer/internal professional service provision model (Krause, 2009) while three discussed internal/external hybrid counseling models (Birkland & Birkland, 2005; Kant & Kingkade, 2004; Macdonald & Davidson, 2000). The remaining three case studies discussed EAPs using external service providers (Muto, Fujimori & Suzuki, 2004; Sodenm, Carlton Kane,

Stiemke, Willing & Wolfson, 2006; Stephenson & Delowery, 2005) while one discussed an EAP consortium (Huguley, 2000).

Insights into a vast range of organizations were offered by these 21 case studies for while the majority did discuss programs in the United States (n=17), there were individual case studies from Canada (Macdonald & Davidson, 2000), England (Whelan, Robson & Cooke, 2002), Israel (Golan & Bamberger, 2004) and Japan (Muto, Fujimori & Suzuki, 2004). Workforce size was reported in 12 of the case studies, ranging from 350 to 1.5 million employees. Of the 21 programs discussed, four had been initiated in the 1970s, two in the 1980s, five in the 1990s and six in the last ten years with five not reporting when the EAP had begun serving employees. This highlights the fact that both more established and newer programs have information of value to share.

The sectors examined by case studies included education (n=7), government (n=4), health (n=4), financial (n=2), manufacturing (n=2), and one each on programs serving lawyers and police. The themes discussed in the studies included traditional program descriptions (n=11), discussion of integrating EAPs with other programs such as occupational health or work/life programs (n=4) and the addition of specialized components to existing programs focusing upon issues such as bereavement (n=1), grief and crisis (n=1), mediation (n=1), coaching (n=1) and trauma (n=1) as well as one description of a program component developed specifically for married physicians (Kendall & Brady, 2009).

## INPUT EVALUATION

As with the previous review (Csiernik, 2004), there were no input evaluations found in this review of the literature. This is not surprising as input evaluations are rudimentary evaluations tasks to ensure that what the program is doing is what it was intended to do. Input evaluations are primary internal mechanisms that consist of check offs of specific items and typically do not entail any type of in depth analysis (Macdonald, 1986). However, while they do not offer sufficient information to warrant a formal academic review this does not discount the utility of the use of this type of evaluation by organizations to ensure that their EAP is doing what is was intended to do and is believed to be doing.

## OUTCOME EVALUATION

Pompe & Sharar (2008) pointedly asked why an area of practice such as EAP is continually being asked to defend its utility. The origins of workplace counseling pre-date the formal organization of most helping professions and EAPs have been recognized entities though with somewhat nebulous goals and objectives since the 1970s (Csiernik, 2005) yet return on investment and cost-benefit analysis seems to be still critical in justifying a fundamental employee benefit and counseling resource. Regardless of where one stands on this philosophical question, empirically more knowledge is always of value to better understand any domain. Historically, evaluations classified as outcome studies were either cost-benefit reports or simpler client satisfaction studies. However, while financial outcomes were the primary focus of the studies published in the first decade of the 21st century, there was also an examination of employee changes and enhanced program usage within these evaluations.

Ten outcome studies were published in the literature between 2000 and 2009, seven of which examined organizations from the United States, two from South Africa and one from

Canada (Table 2). Four reviewed internal organizations, one an internal/external hybrid and surprisingly, half provided insights into cost-benefits of organizations using external providers. Individual workplace sizes ranged from 2,000 to 40,000. The average length of time of data collection was three years with a mode of one year and a range from one to ten years. As with the vast majority of past studies (Csiernik, 1995; 2004) each of the ten indicated there were positive benefits to implementing an Employee Assistance Program both financially and in regards to employee and program outcomes. Seven different methodological approaches were used ranging from self-report telephone surveys (Masi & Jacobson, 2003), to purposive samples of supervisors who had mandated clients to attend counseling (Naicker & Fouche, 20003; Orren & Terblanche, 2009) to matched cohort studies (Hughes, Elkin & Epstein, 2004; Thompson, Keyes, Cheadle, Bombardier, Jacobsen, et al, 2005). In total 18 different variables were used in the ten studies with the most common being absenteeism (n=5), medical costs (n=3) and workers compensation claims (n=3). Naicker and Fouche (2003) discussed a specific return on investment equation they developed which entailed: clients times success rate times average salary times productivity loss plus compensation savings minus cost of the EAP to determine the financial benefit of the program they reviewed. However, standardized instruments such as the BASIS-32 (Greenwood, DeWesse & Inscoc, 2005) and the Global Assessment of Functioning scale (Selvik, Stephenson, Plaza & Sugden, 2004) were also used to demonstrate positive program outcomes.

In terms of financial benefits Eishen, Grossmeier and Gold (2005) using a four year quasi-experimental design of the Fairview Health Services in Minneapolis and St. Paul Minnesota reported that the EAP saved on average \$230 in lost work days, \$340 in medical costs and \$188 in workers compensation claims for a combined cost savings of \$758 per employee

accessing EAP. Ozminkoski, Ling, Goetzl, Bruno, Rutter, et al (2002) conducted a ten year study of employees and their use of emergency department visits, physician visits, mental health care visits and inpatient hospitals stays. They reported an average savings of \$224.66 per employee using the company's EAP leading to a total cost savings along these four variables of 4.1 million dollars of which nearly one third related directly to mental health costs. In Thompson, Keyes, Cheadle, Bombardier, Jacobsen, et al (2005) prospective cohort study examining a peer support EAP model decreases were found with the use of substance abuse treatment costs, workers compensation claims, short term disability and absenteeism. In Naicker and Fouche's (2003) one year examination of a South African transportation company with 34,000 employees they too found decreases in absenteeism and accidents among both those being mandated to use the EAP (n=392) and those using it voluntarily (n=1400). Their return on investment calculation indicated that the EAP saved the company in one year between 12 and 25 million Rand which at the July 2011 rate of exchange would be between 1.8 to 3.7 million USD.

However, as mentioned above there is more to outcome studies than merely cost savings. Greenwood, DeWeese and Inscoc's (2005) 18 month study of 20 workplaces in Louisville, Kentucky using an external EAP provider found significant improvement among program users between intake and follow-up on their relations to themselves and others, depression, anxiety, impulsive behavior and daily living. Masi and Jacobson (2003) in a follow-up of 201 program participants who had used an external EAP provider had a response rate of 82.1% (n=165). Nearly 80% of respondents indicated that their use of the EAP had been helpful in resolving their initial concerns while over 90% indicated not only would they use the service again if needed but that they would likewise refer others to use the EAP. Selvik, Stephenson, Plaza & Sugden's (2004) pre-post study of 59,685 United States federal government employees found statistically

significant improvements among program participants in work and social relations (74%), emotional problems (73%), physical problems (66%), absenteeism and lateness (62%), and overall Global Assessment of Functioning (10%).

However, perhaps the most interesting outcome study in terms of programming was Hughes, Elkins and Epstein's (2004) examination of the effect of enhanced counseling services upon employee retention. They used a matched cohort sample of identified high risk EAP clients and followed them over two years. They found that the greater the number of contacts the employee had with the EAP the more likely they were to remain employed and that too brief intervention is not cost effective.

## PROCESS EVALUATION

Nine process evaluations were found in the literature between 2000 and 2009, four from the United States, three from Canada and one each from Northern Ireland and Australia. Four were based upon EAPs using an internal model, four on EAPs using a combined internal/external approach and one using an exclusively external EAP service provision. As would be expected process evaluations used multiple and varied sources of data with a mean of four, a mode of six and a range of one to six for the nine studies. In total 13 different types of data collection mechanisms were used. Four of the evaluations each used focus groups, key informant interviews, client satisfaction and program utilization data. Other data collection mechanisms included surveys of program users, surveys of a sample of the entire workforce, comparative analysis of equivalent programs, document reviews, literature reviews and examination of work performance and absenteeism data (Table 3).

Three of the studies (Csiernik, Atkinson, Cooper, Devereux & Young, 2001; Csiernik, Hannah & Pender, 2007; Revenue Canada Evaluation Division & Csiernik, 2008) examined an existing EAP, discussed the evaluation process implemented and then concluded by discussing how the EAP was modified through the use of the evaluation process. Among Mains, Farichild and Rene's (2006) evaluation findings were that using EAP seminars led to an increased knowledge of pertinent social issues by attendees. Elliott and Williams' (2002) evaluation of a Fire Brigade in Northern Ireland demonstrated how a process evaluation could highlight both areas where an EAP is functioning (improved functioning, decreased absenteeism) while also illustrating areas requiring improvement (counselor not obtaining feedback from the organization regarding his role, 40% of employees not knowing what an EAP was or did). Likewise, Shakespeare-Finch and Scully's (2004) two year formative evaluation found high levels of satisfaction with the program among users and support for the helping structure being used (combined internal/external) while also indicating that having more peers as contact points and having more debriefing sessions made available after a critical incident would further strengthen the program. Finally, Stephenson, Bingaman, Plaza, Selvik, Sudgen, and Ross' (2003) evaluation found that telephone counseling could be as effective as in person counseling for appropriately matched individuals and that there was no difference in client satisfaction among study participants. As well, among properly matched telephone counseling clients, Global Assessment of Functioning scores improved more than those receiving face-to-face counseling over the three years of the study.

Goldstein(2005) study was one of two process evaluations with a distinct focus from traditional EAP process evaluations. Goldstein found that stigma remained an issue with voluntary use of EAPs among one America state police force and that the level of stigma was

greater among non-users than program users. Poverny and Dodd's (2000) nine year process evaluation was focused upon a comparative evaluation of utilization patterns. They found that female faculty and staff within an urban American university remained overrepresented in terms of EAP use as were persons of color. A greater proportion of staff than faculty had utilized the EAP over the course of the evaluation and the more vulnerable a person was in terms of their feelings of employment security the greater their of using the EAP. These latter two evaluations highlight the potential range of issues that remains for formal study in the future.

## DISCUSSION

To state it as simply as possible Employee Assistance Programs are effective. They save organizations money. EAPs also increase the well being of the majority of employees who actively participate in counseling offered through the auspices of the programs and as a result enhance the wellness of our communities. However, this does not mean that there is no need to continue to study individual EAPs and to do so in an even more thorough and rigorous manner for we are far from having a sound database of knowledge and much more remains unknown than known. While certainly worthwhile in terms of sharing knowledge, half of the 42 evaluations published between 2000 and 2009 were more rudimentary case studies. Program development evaluation offers both those in the field and those outside a flavor for what other organizations are doing and how the field is evolving thus addressing comparative need. However, this most fundamental and easiest to complete method of evaluations is also the least rigorous form of evaluation and thus what we have the most of tells us the least in terms of outcomes and knowledge. Nevertheless, there remains a need for even more of these types of studies and a continued need for organizations to write in an objective manner about their EAPs creation, development and evolution, Still, there remains an even greater need to do conduct

more in depth evaluation using both quantitative and qualitative approaches to answer both basic and more subtle questions pertaining to the field.

Among the 42 evaluations there were examples from eight different countries on four continents. Both internal and external programs were evaluated as were hybrid and peer counselor programs. Multiple evaluative criteria were used and studies ranged from one to ten years in length demonstrating a robustness of data and a sophistication among those conducting evaluation in this field of practice. With the advent of the Employee Assistance Research Foundation providing a stream of financial support for future EAP research there is certainly the opportunity to see the evaluation glass fill even further over the course of the next decade and to offer a far better empirical understanding of this long established field of practice.

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