Attracting New EAP Users Through Online Text-based Chat Services

Barb Veder, MSW RSW; Stephanie Torino, MA; Kelly Beaudoin, BA; Mark Zhao, BA
Shepell·fgi
www.shepellfgi.com

ABSTRACT. *With individuals' increasing comfort with technology, and demand to access services when and how they choose, many services including clinical ones are moving online. As individuals adapt to an ever-changing world, they expect their service providers to also keep pace with these changes. This report examines the impact of First Chat, a secure, synchronous, live counselling chat tool used to provide clients with immediate clinical support in an EAP setting. First Chat is a solution-focused, clinical consultation that helps a client address issues of immediate concern under the guidance of a trained clinical counsellor. Our staff collected data from a sample of 407 chats taken from the period of December 5, 2011 to January 31, 2012. We also measured the level of client satisfaction on post-chat surveys collected from 95 randomly-selected chats. In addition, client age and sex were then compared against normative utilization data from the suite of Shepell·fgi EAP support services for 2011.*

Introduction

Technology plays a vital role in how people manage their lives. Services such as shopping, banking, or booking a vacation once required a person to visit a physical location often at a pre-determined time, and to interact with another person face-to-face. Individuals now expect to be able to do all of these activities online, 24/7. People with an increased understanding and comfort of technology have created a demand for additional methods of accessing mental health support. One such service to recently enter the digital space includes counselling.[1] For the purposes of this report, online counselling is defined as:

> all clinical consultations and services that are done via various Internet-assisted modalities (text, email, chat, and video conferencing), although some studies refer to the modality as 'e-therapy,' 'telepsychiatry,' 'telemental health,' and the like.[2]

An alternative to in-person counselling, online counselling is an appealing option for individuals who historically would not seek professional mental health services due to stigma, privacy and confidentiality concerns, access issues due to lack of mobility or transportation, verbal communication challenges, and social phobias. Coupled with individual's requests to be able to choose and manage how they receive support, the demand for online counselling has increased at an overwhelming rate. As individuals adapt to an ever-changing world, they expect their service providers to also keep pace with these changes.

Clinical Support Through Online Text-based Communication

So, what can employee assistance program (EAP) providers do to satisfy client's demands for new forms of digital clinical support? We explored the impact of synchronous text-based counselling in

the study *First Chat: Examining clinical support through text-based, synchronous communication.*[3]

First Chat takes online services one step further by providing individuals with professional counselling delivered in real-time through chat services. Individuals correspond via text with a qualified counsellor for private, immediate clinical support regarding their work, health, or life issue, 24 hours a day.

More specifically, First Chat provides users with:

- A clinical assessment of their issue (including risk assessment);

- An engaging and positive clinical experience that draws upon the individual's strengths and focuses on issue-containment and solution-focused intervention; and

- An exploration of options and recommendations for moving forward (including short-term counseling and referrals to work/life services).

This form of clinical communication is an ideal option for those individuals who:

- Prefer real-time communication;

- Find it easier to express themselves in writing;

- Have access to a computer or tablet device (with high speed Internet); and

- Are comfortable with technology.

Study Methodology

Our staff collected and analyzed data from a sample of 407 chats, taken from December 5, 2011 to January 31, 2012. The study measured the following:

- Demographic profile by user age and gender;

- The ratio of clinical chat interventions vs. triage to other services and administration support;

- The effectiveness of First Chat as reported through post-chat survey measures; and

- The number of new clients accessing EAP services for the first time through First Chat.

These outcomes were then compared against utilization data from the suite of Shepell·fgi EAP support services for 2011. Post-chat surveys were also conducted with a group of 95 randomly selected respondents to determine levels of satisfaction with the service.

Research Findings

The study results are presented for the areas of user demographic profiles, first-time or prior use of the EAP, types of consultations provided, and level of user satisfaction with the service.

*Usage demographic*s: Individuals must be 18 years of age or older to use First Chat. Although the participants were from all adult age groups, the 30- to 39-year-old age group was the largest percentage of First Chat users (41%). In fact, the number of users under the age of 39 represented 57% of all users, compared to 45% of users under the age of 40 accessing all other forms of EAP delivery. These outcomes were then compared against utilization data from the suite of Shepell·fgi EAP support services for 2011. Male users represented only 35% of users and females represented 65%, which is in line with the 33% male and 66% female breakdown of users across all other forms of EAP delivery.
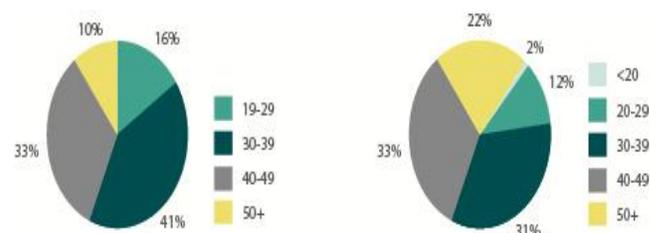
Audience reach: Almost two-thirds (65%) of First Chat users were new clients who had never accessed any EAP services before. This result showed that text-based communication is an appealing access point for first time users of EAP clinical support services.

Type of consultation: The objective of First Chat is to provide clinical consultations for clients in need of clinical support (i.e., to connect with a counsellor via chat for immediate help to resolve an issue). The data revealed that 45% of First Chat consultations addressed clinical support concerns with clients. Conversely, 55% were not for clinical issues but rather as a way to connect with (non-clinical) intake services (i.e., to book an appointment with an in-person counsellor or other service, to check an appointment time, etc.). These sorts of requests were also completed end-to-end with the client through chat. Interestingly, First Chat also yielded a higher percentage of clinical consultations than did telephonic requests for services [9% telephonic vs. 45% First Chat], possibly due to the additional level of privacy, form of communication, and social issues previously discussed.

Level of satisfaction: Post-chat satisfaction survey results were overwhelmingly positive with 94% of clients saying that they felt comfortable using chat as a clinical counselling service and 84% stating that they were provided with relevant information that assisted them in addressing their problems. The overall consensus was that users felt First Chat had met their needs and in addition 87% would recommend the service to others. For example, participants gave the following feedback:

> *With today's office environment moving towards cubicles without any privacy, the Internet chat is great for being able to discuss things and get info without the whole floor knowing.*

> *It is very good way to communicate, especially for those whose English is second language, who is shy, or nervous, is more comfortable this way to start conversation. Thank you.*

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are offered for potential purchasers of EAP services.

1) Look for EAP providers that satisfy client's demands for new forms of digital clinical support. Make sure they offer a form of written clinical communication. Writing therapy has long been considered a powerful medium for self-help.[4] The act of writing provides an individual with the physical means of expressing their private thoughts and feelings and of being actively involved in their own therapeutic process without being in a face-to-face encounter.[5] Research suggests that the written word is more than capable of communicating emotion, especially if the clinician is well-versed in the use of creative text-based communication.[5] An added benefit to written communication is the disinhibition effect that individuals feel from the sense of anonymity that online counselling provides.[5] Clients generally feel more comfortable self-disclosing and self-reflecting and less fearful of being judged in this setting.[6] This directness also allows the client to get to the heart of the matter faster and perhaps with less hesitation. Both client and counsellor still have time to reflect, to privately process their reactions, and to give thought to their responses.

2) EAPs should offer multiple digital means to meet users' needs and preferences. With society's growing inclination toward instant gratification offered by the Internet, emailing, texting, and instant messaging, new life has been given to writing as a primary form of communication, which has paved the way for First Chat. Although First Chat will not eclipse the demand for online counselling - which can provide short or long-term counselling depending on the needs of the client - it does provide a valuable medium and immediate access to a professional counsellor.

3) Develop counsellors' skill set for online delivery. Online counsellors have a different skill set than those that offer traditional forms of counselling. In addition to developing trust and mutual respect between themselves and the client, online counsellors need to be able to use the written

word and netiquette (a way of talking in shorthand and using symbols to indicate emotion) to communicate warmth, openness, genuineness, and to deliver a clinically-appropriate message.[7] Furthermore, they need to be able to accurately interpret the client's tone, mindset, and mental constructs, and respond accordingly. In order to ensure their skill set is complementary to the role of being a First Chat counsellor, the staff undergo training on topics including etiquette, tone, and understanding gender and cultural issues in the context of chat.

4) Insist that they follow EAP service best practices. First Chat's foundation for success is built on three components: best-in-class clinical practices, a user-friendly platform which allows the client to use the service easily (i.e., no software downloads are required), and a secure platform which assures client confidentiality and privacy. Best practices for First Chat include having clear protocols and procedures for managing high-risk chat clients, developing a chat flow that allows the counsellor to verify the parameters of the service with the client, and procedures for seamlessly transitioning clients to other services should the need arise. An important consideration with online clinical services is how to prepare for crisis events. Immediate crisis situations include suicidal ideation, homicidal ideation, intoxication, or experiencing violence in the home or elsewhere.[8] First Chat clients who are in immediate crisis are triaged to our Care Access Centre where they will speak with a counsellor over the phone who will further assess the situation and provide appropriate support.

Conclusions

Analysis indicates that use by gender is consistent with other counselling and support modalities. Age is not a barrier in accessing First Chat though trending indicates a younger audience is drawn to First Chat over other ways to access EAP services. The study also indicates that through First Chat new clients are reaching out for support, and that a notable percentage of the clients using First Chat (45%) are using the service to connect with a counsellor immediately via chat, with the

remaining 55% employing the chat function as a means to connect with the Intake department to book in-person appointments, access different EAP services, and so forth. Post-chat satisfaction survey results were overwhelmingly positive with an overall client satisfaction level of 87%— evidence that First Chat consultations offer users a positive, effective, and efficient way of receiving support and meeting their needs.

Based on the growing presence of technology in our lives and the positive client satisfaction results received so far with First Chat, we expect this service to continue to grow in popularity and that the potential exists to engage even more clients in a previously-unreached demographic, those who may not seek professional mental health support through other forms of communication.

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