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## **Assisting Uninsured Workers and Their Dependents**



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# The Aging Workforce and EAPs

EAPs can and must do a better job of developing and implementing age-specific services for the growing population of older workers.

by Tony J. Krench, Psy.D.

**T**he Employee Assistance Professionals Association's *Standards and Professional Guidelines for Employee Assistance Programs* states that EAPs are "worksite-based programs designed to assist (1) work organizations in addressing productivity issues, and (2) 'employee clients' in identifying and resolving personal concerns, including, but not limited to, health, marital, family, financial, alcohol, drug, legal, emotional, stress or other personal issues that may affect job performance." The EAP Core Technology, meanwhile, emphasizes the need for EAPs to assist work organizations in a variety of contexts to enhance the overall health, well-being, and performance of the workforce.

Implicit in these definitions is the notion that effective EAPs are capable of adapting to the changing needs of an organization based on shifts in resource allocations, workforce demographics, and organizational goals. One emerging need relates to the "graying" of the workforce and specifically the imperative for work organizations to accommodate this change. Work organizations are being challenged to modify their traditional views of older workers and to re-examine long-held stereotypes and beliefs regarding older workers.

According to the National Council on Aging, the number of workers between the ages of 45 and 54 has

grown by more than 50 percent in recent years, while the number of workers between the ages of 25 and 34 has dropped by nearly 10 percent. In addition, workforce participation rates for both men and women aged 65 and older have increased significantly, as have rates for those over age 70.

These trends in the workforce mirror the overall aging of the population and are due to several factors, including the unusually large "baby boom" generation, lengthening life expectancies, and declining fertility rates. As a result of these developments, work organizations are undergoing a renaissance of sorts regarding their view of older workers and are attempting to grapple with issues such as changing negative stereotypes regarding older workers and determining how best to use the older worker as an effective resource.

## STEREOTYPES AND ADVANTAGES

Some of the more enduring stereotypes associated with the older worker include a reluctance to embrace technology, higher expenses for health care, a lack of flexibility, low levels of cooperation, and resistance to change (Hassell and Perrewé 1995). Many of these stereotypes stem from the view that "faster is always better," and there is some truth to them—older individuals often show a decline in so-called "fluid" cognitive abilities that influence skills such as rapid processing of information. But the decline is very much task-dependent, since so-called "crystallized" abilities associated with expanding the knowledge base have been shown to increase with age (Kanfer and Ackerman 2004).

Countering these stereotypes are

various positive perceptions of older workers: for example, that they are more reliable, possess a stronger work ethic, and (depending on the task) produce higher-quality work (Hassell and Perrewé 1995). According to these views, older workers can contribute much to an organization, especially when employed in capacities in which their years of experience, knowledge base, and dependability are invaluable.

A growing body of research reveals that companies that implement managerial strategies and practices that better address the needs of older workers and support their unique contributions can enhance and sustain work motivation among this growing population. However, work organizations must become increasingly cognizant of the need to change attitudes toward the hiring, retraining, motivating, and retaining of mid-life and older workers, who typically have needs that differ from those of younger workers.

## SURVEY FINDINGS

Interest in these issues led the staff of the EAP at Sandia National Laboratories to develop a benchmarking survey designed to assess how effectively EAPs in the United States are addressing the needs of the older worker. EAPs are ideally positioned to play a key role in supporting the needs of the older worker and assisting work organizations with making the necessary changes to enhance the work experience for both employees and employers.

The general question we wanted to answer was, "Are employee assistance programs providing unique, specific services to workers age 50 and older?"



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In particular, we wanted to find out whether and how EAPs are offering specific services that older workers might find appealing, such as eldercare support services, retirement planning, and counseling tailored to older individuals.

The survey was distributed to the EAPManager Professional Discussion Group (an Internet discussion and networking group sponsored by EAPManager.com and administered by the editorial staff of the *Employee Assistance Program Management Letter*) and to all employee assistance programs at U.S. Department of Energy contractor sites.

A total of 48 EAPs responded to the survey, with internal, external, and combination internal/external programs evenly represented among the respondents. Approximately half the work organizations served by these EAPs employ more than 5,000 workers, and about three-fifths have workforces in which at least 25 percent of the employees are age 50 or older (a statistic that is very much in line with national trends).

Overall, the survey results provide both encouraging signs and some areas for improvement. In general, EAPs appear to be doing very well in providing traditional counseling services for workers in need of eldercare services or preparing for retirement. Programs also appear to be addressing alcohol, substance abuse, and emotional issues with their older workers, although it appears that a more direct focus on these services for the older worker is warranted. Providing information about the potential for increases in alcohol consumption, episodes of depression, and life transitions as people age would be helpful, either via group discussions or in individualized formats.

**Wellness programs.** The survey included questions about wellness services because of the frequent collaboration between EAPs and wellness programs and the importance of these services for the overall health of an organization (Derr and Lindsay 1999). The survey found a lack of wellness services targeted toward older workers. For example, while nearly all of the EAPs that responded to the survey have well-

ness programs, fewer than one in five provide fitness, stress management, smoking cessation, and other services designed specifically for older workers.

Employees at one site commented that the wellness exercise programs available to them appear to be geared toward workers in their twenties and thirties and do not sufficiently address the needs of middle-aged workers. While EAPs typically are not directly involved in the planning of wellness programs, good EAPs collaborate with wellness programs (Derr and Lindsay 1999) and thus are well-positioned to have an impact on their design and implementation.

**Elder care.** While a majority of EAPs provide elder care support services (85 percent), the services are primarily traditional counseling activities such as caregiver support counseling and community referrals. Most programs do not provide services such as elder care medication or caregiver support groups.

**Retirement planning.** Half of the programs that responded to the survey offer retirement planning, and some also provide individualized retirement coaching and seminars on readying for retirement. Many EAPs offer referrals for legal services such as estate planning, and several work in conjunction with their benefits departments on retirement planning.

**Mental health and substance abuse services.** Roughly half of the EAPs surveyed provide mental health and substance abuse services targeted toward older workers. Several programs indicated that while they do not offer dedicated substance abuse or mental health services for older workers, they take age into account when working with their employee clients. Some programs offer onsite alcohol/substance abuse education and awareness training for seniors, and most make referrals that are need- and population-specific.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF THE SURVEY

The overall implication of the survey and main lesson learned is that EAPs in general need to improve services to the growing segment of older employees in the workforce. While many EAPs are doing a good job of providing mental

health and substance abuse services tailored to older workers, there is clearly room for improvement in areas such as wellness-EAP collaboration, elder care services, and retirement planning.

Improving the range and availability of services for the older worker will require EAPs to conduct a thorough needs assessment and self study regarding program offerings for these workers, partnering with other disciplines such as human resources and benefits, and reviewing and modifying the allocation of available resources. It is important for EAPs to gather company-specific benchmarking information, meet with key players in the organization to establish clearly defined goals and objectives, and implement programs for older workers based on need and available resources.

Making a business case for potential cost savings when such services are offered is another crucial aspect supporting the development of older worker programs. EAPs will also need to explore avenues to increase the accessibility of services to older workers and the visibility of the services through collaborative marketing efforts with other functions such as wellness and benefits.

The key to future EAP success with older workers lies in the extent to which programs can be flexible, adaptive, and innovative and provide much-needed services to this growing population. EAPs are well-positioned to have a major impact on the quantity and quality of services offered. ■

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