

# *The Journal of* **Employee Assistance**

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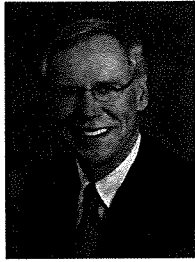
 **EAPA** International Employee Assistance Professionals Association

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## South Korea – *Hot Style, Hot Food, Hot EAP Market*

| By John Maynard, PhD, CEAP

North Korea's belligerence and aggression periodically makes headlines in world news. But the real story on the Korean Peninsula comes from South Korea, which has increased its influence on the world scene to the point where it is now the 5<sup>th</sup>-largest exporter in the world, a trendsetter in fashion and popular music, and a leader in universal education and healthcare.

In April 2016, I attended the annual Asia Pacific Employee Assistance Roundtable (APEAR) Conference, which this year was held for the first time in South Korea. After the conference, I was able to spend several days meeting with EA providers in Korea and touring Seoul and the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), which separates North and South Korea. It was a remarkable experience.

### **Unique History Leads to Today's Powerhouse**

An independent kingdom for much of its long history, Korea was occupied and ruled by Japan for 40 years, from 1905 to 1945. With the surrender of Japan to end World War II, U.S. and Soviet troops were deployed to the south and north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, respectively, to disarm Japanese troops still on the Korean Peninsula. Under the influence of these two forces, both South Korea (officially the Republic of Korea) and North Korea (Democratic

People's Republic of Korea) were established as separate countries.

In 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea, igniting the Korean War. The war ended in a stalemate, and a 1953 armistice maintained the split between the countries along a "demilitarized zone" at about the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. That division remains the status quo today, more than 60 years later.

The war reduced the entire Korean Peninsula to rubble, and South Korea became perhaps the poorest country in the world. From that devastated beginning, South Korea in the 1960s began what has become known as the "Miracle on the Han River." Today, its economy ranks 13<sup>th</sup> in the world. With a total population of about 50 million, half live in the capital, Seoul, and its suburbs; overall, 82.5% of the total population lives and works in urban centers.

### **Two Sides of a Coin**

South Koreans pride themselves on their enthusiasm, "can-do" spirit, and history of overcoming obstacles. Human resources are regarded as the most important element of economic growth and a primary source of national competitiveness. The country is rapidly becoming a knowledge-based society with a huge emphasis on education.

However, these positive characteristics and rapid changes come with a cost in terms of high levels of psy-

chosocial distress and personal concerns. A 2014 study by Euromonitor International found that, of 44 countries surveyed, South Koreans had the highest level of alcohol consumption. Among the 34-member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), South Korea has had the highest rate of suicide for 12 consecutive years.

### **Emergence of EAP**

The first EA services in Korea were imported by a small number of large multinational companies in the mid-1990s. At roughly the same time, a few large Korean-based corporations also set up internal counseling services for their employees.

In the early 2000s, the first external EA firms appeared in Korea, among them the Korea EAP Association (KEAPA); Dain C&M; the Korean office of Hong Kong-based, Human Dynamic; and Adaptable Human Solutions, which has focused mostly on serving Western expats in Korea. Those few pioneering firms still provide the bulk of EA services in Korea, either directly to corporations or through subcontracts with other global external EAP firms.

In 2010, EAP was embedded in Korean law by the Framework Act on Labor Welfare. Article 83 of the act requires that "employers endeavor to implement employee

support programs that provide a range of services, including helping to address work-undermining factors such as stress and personal grievances that may arise at work or in daily life, and to provide expert counseling to improve productivity.” The act further requires that “employers and anyone involved in employee support programs shall guarantee the confidentiality of workers” while providing these services.

Today, EAP is widespread in South Korea, especially among larger companies. The Korean Ministry of Employment and Labor (MOEL) expects to publish more specific statistics by the end of this year.

### Innovation

KEAPA is a particularly interesting organization. Set up as a nonprofit organization by a group of psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers, KEAPA was established in 2000 to promote EAP in Korea. Along the way, it also began providing direct EA services, mostly to government entities, but also to private corporations. It has maintained its focus on innovation and expanding needed EAP support services to under-served populations.

For example, KEAPA recently conducted a research project assessing the value of a return-to-work support program for workers who have been out of work because of occupational injuries. Working directly with the Korea Workers Compensation & Welfare Service, KEAPA offered short-term group counseling with a positive psychology focus to occupationally injured workers. They found significant improvement in participants’ self-esteem and significant reductions in stress levels and duration of injury.

### Challenges & Opportunities

Until recently, perhaps the biggest challenge facing the EAP field in South Korea was the shortage of competent counselors. With the increasing demand in recent years, graduate schools have begun educating and training more counselors, so the shortage today is not nearly as acute. Nevertheless, there is still a great need for more education and exposure to short-term, solution-focused, and positive psychology approaches, which lend themselves better to EAP work.

Beyond clinical training for counselors, there is an even greater need for EAP-specific education and credentialing. There is very little training available for counselors to learn more workplace-specific skills, including critical incident preparation and response, aspects of workplace group dynamics, and the real world application of EAP core technology. EAPA could play a huge role in this area.

### Let’s Continue the Discussion

My thanks to Professor Jong-Min Woo, MD, of KEAPA; Mr. Tai Hyung Lee of Dain; and Ms. Noreen Jaden of Adaptable Human Solutions, for taking the time to talk with me as I was preparing this column. Let’s continue the discussion of EAP in South Korea! You’re welcome to contact me directly or to post your feedback, questions, or suggestions on EAPA’s LinkedIn group. ❖

*Dr. John Maynard served as CEO of EAPA from 2004 through 2015. Prior to that, he was President of SPIRE Health Consultants, Inc., a global consulting firm specializing in EA strategic planning, program design, and quality improvement. In both roles, he had the opportunity to observe, meet, and exchange ideas with EA professionals in countries around the world. He can be reached at johnmaynard@spirehealth.com.*

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