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Employee Assistance Programs

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EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are employer-sponsored services designed for assisting employees with personal, family or work problems. Most workplaces today have an EAP, as over 80% of medium and large size employers in the United States provide EAP benefits to their workforce. EAPs play an important role in helping troubled employees to balance the demands of work and personal life, while also supporting the employer's goals for improved or sustained levels of workplace productivity. Common areas of need include stress, mental health disorders, substance abuse, other behavioral addictions, parenting issues, emotional problems, problems at work, and personal financial and legal concerns. EAPs they also support individual managers and the organization as a whole. This later kind of support includes efforts at prevention, training, management consultation, organizational development and crisis preparedness and response services. To accomplish these goals, EAPs often partner with other employee benefit programs including work/life, occupational health and wellness and disability claim management.

Key Words: Addictions, Employee Assistance Program (EAP), Mental Health, Work/Life, Counseling

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Employee Assistance Programs

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are an employer-sponsored service designed for supporting employees with a range of personal, family and work problems. These programs play an important role in helping employees to balance the demands of work and personal life, while also supporting the employer's goals for maintaining or restoring worker productivity. Although EAP services focus mostly on supporting the needs of the individual employee and their family members, some programs also provide services that support individual managers and the organization as a whole. Most EAPs collaborate with other benefit programs at the same work organization. Work/life programs, occupational health and wellness programs, and disability claim and return-to-work programs are the most common partners.

OVERVIEW OF EAP

Prevalence of EAPs. In the last 25 years the number of organizations in the United States with an EAP has more than doubled, increasing from 31% in 1985 to 75% in 2011. In addition, over 75% of employees in state and local government in the United States also have access to EAP services. However, EAP is less common among smaller size employers. According to a survey by Mercer consulting conducted in 2011, 27% of small employers in the United States (1-499 staff) offered an EAP to their organization, compared to 81% of medium size employers (500-999 staff) and 93% for large size employers (1,000+ staff). Most large employers and governmental organizations in Canada also offer EAP services. EAPs are now available in many parts of Asia, Europe and Latin America. Large global EAP provider companies and smaller entrepreneurial firms are creating culturally relevant versions of EAP core services in over 50 countries worldwide.

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CORE SERVICES OFFERED BY EAPS

EAPs began almost 75 years ago in the United States to support employees with drug and alcohol problems. Most EAPs today are considered “broad-brush” programs that are designed to support a wide range of employee, family and workforce performance issues. The kinds of services offered from most EAPs are described below.

Assessment and Brief Counseling. EAPs offer direct, confidential, short-term problem assessment and resolution to individual employees and often their family members. This is the core service element that defines the EAP industry. This care involves providing an initial clinical assessment, brief counseling (often between 1 and 6 sessions with a licensed clinician) and an advocacy role to help employees determine the appropriate level of care needed and to understand the treatment options for accessing behavioral health benefits. The range of problems commonly addressed by EAPs includes work issues, personal relationships, child/parenting concerns, stress and emotional problems, mental health issues (depression and anxiety), and substance abuse and other addiction problems.

Referral and Follow-up for Severe Cases. Individuals who self-refer to the EAP often do so for mild to moderate problems that cause acute stress rather than seeking help from the EAP for more serious mental health disorders and substance abuse. Employees with more serious clinical problems who are assessed at the EAP are then usually referred to other benefit providers to receive longer-term mental health treatment, substance abuse specialty support and/or psychiatric medications. Some EAPs also support employees on disability claims to return to work more effectively.

Employee Legal and Financial Issues. Employees also come to the EAP for help with issues related to - or exacerbated by - personal legal and financial problems. Lawsuits, divorce,

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custody issues, debt, credit management, budgeting, home foreclosure and bankruptcy are examples of these kinds of issues facing many employees. EAPs provide consultative and educational services for these embarrassing and important personal issues. Staff at the EAP can help find local resources and affiliated experts for the employee to talk to about their options to respond to legal and financial problems.

Management Services. EAPs also support individual supervisors and managers in making referrals to the EAP for their employees who have been observed as having work performance and/or personal problems. EAP services for managers includes confidential consultation regarding how to support troubled employees, work group issues, and awareness of new policies related to behavioral health and much more. EAP orientation meetings and trainings are often provided on an ongoing basis to educate both newly hired and seasoned managers and supervisors on the proper role of the EAP service.

Organizational Services. EAP services are also provided at the organizational level, either to the entire company or to smaller business units within the organization. EAPs can support problems that may result from organizational change or workforce development issues such as company mergers, departmental re-organizations, or planned layoffs/downsizings. Other organizational roles for EAPs involve interacting with unions and other benefit programs and services, such as work/life, health and wellness, drug-free workplace training and mandatory referrals, and employee outplacement support after layoffs.

Prevention and Healthy Work Culture. EAPs also provide onsite or web-based educational trainings for employees, group-level interventions for work teams, and problem-specific coaching for individual supervisors and managers. The EAP can work with company leadership, human resources staff, and partners at work/life and health and wellness programs to

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raise awareness of mental health issues and to help identify unhealthy workplace practices.

EAPs can also make referrals directly into other relevant programs at the same organization.

Crisis Services. EAPs also help organizations to prepare for - and respond to - traumatic workplace incidents, such as manufacturing accidents, workplace or domestic violence, crimes, employee deaths, and natural disasters. Modern crisis incident management models include preventative training and risk assessment as well as immediate response to support individual victims and work teams. Research at retail banks and convenience stores shows that timely and appropriate trauma response in the workplace can reduce the incidence of costly stress-related disability claims among affected workers.

EAP DELIVERY MODELS AND PROGRAM USE

Delivery Models. There are several kinds of operating models for how EAP services are funded and managed. The traditional model is referred to as an Internal EAP, in which the counselors and staff are employed by the organization offering the EAP services. In contrast, in the External model independent contractors are hired by the organization to provide all of the EAP services. The Hybrid model combines aspects of both of these models. This is when the program has many of the clinical services provided by external partners who are managed by a smaller set of EAP staff at the organization. The Consortium model is when several companies in the same market or same industry share the cost of purchasing EAP services. Finally, the so-called Free EAP model introduced in the last decade is when a limited version of EAP services are offered to employees but the associated fees for the program are bundled into other more expensive group insurance or package of employee health benefits that are sold to the organization from brokers or insurance companies.

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Multiple Access Channels. Employees often have a choice for how to access EAP services. These options can include immediate contact over the telephone, arranging for in-person visits at a local counselor's office, or interaction via Internet-based and mobile phone technologies. For example, in addition to robust websites, some EAPs have developed e-counseling (therapy via secure e-mail exchanges), web chat interfaces, and other social media related tools to provide self-assessments, clinical support and educational services.

Utilization of EAP. EAP utilization varies from organization to organization and is highly dependent upon the type of program delivery model, extent of program promotion and the level of organizational and union support for the program. Utilization is typically measured for EAP counseling services (defined as the number of individual EAP counseling cases divided into the total number of all covered employees at the organization). This use rate typically is between 5% to 15% each year for Internal model programs and 3% to 7% for External model programs. By design, the 'Free EAP' models often have far lower use, as these programs are only minimally promoted. EAPs are used by employees of all ages, both genders, and from all levels of the organizational hierarchy. Typically, about 85% of cases are employees with the rest of the program users being family members of the employees. Overall program use is actually much higher when also considering all of the non-clinical services that are provided by the EAP, such as educational resources, workplace trainings, manager consultations, web-site visits, cases shared with other program partners and so on.

BUSINESS VALUE OF EAP

Purchasing organizations should understand the substantial differences that exist between various EAP offerings and provider models. A full-service EAP that provides multiple points of access to clinical support, customized resource and referral development, workplace onsite

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presence, integration with other programs, active and dedicated account management and promotional support can result in significant value to the organization. Whereas, much less value is provided by a “bare bones” EAP that has few features other than a 1-800 phone line access to offsite counselors and the option for crisis care response if needed. Other indicators of service quality to consider are that companies can become accredited as EAP provider organizations and individual EAP counselors and management staff can become a Certified Employee Assistance Professional (CEAP). For a more comprehensive understanding of these business value issues and how to best align the organizational goals for having an EAP with the chosen EAP delivery model, human resource and benefits managers are encouraged to read the industry white paper: *Selecting and Strengthening Employee Assistance Programs: A Purchaser’s Guide*, which is available as a no-cost download from the EASNA organization website (see bibliography).

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