

# EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE REPORT

supporting EAP professionals

## Religion in the Workplace:

### More Diversity Programs Needed

By John Rossheim

EAP professionals are aware of their role in helping diverse populations adjust in the workplace. This includes consulting with management to support them in providing a respectful and responsive workplace — AND helping employees who feel they are not being treated well because of a diversity issue.

In fact, EA and HR professionals are confronting new challenges as Americans become increasingly diverse in ways that go beyond color, gender, and disability. Recent immigrants and many-generation Americans, observant in their non-Judeo-Christian faith or proud of their foreign cultural heritage, are entering the workplace in greater numbers.

Religion is an area in which diversity can become an issue at work. First, the religious makeup of the United States is changing. In 1980, only 2% of Americans expressed a religious preference other than Christian or Jewish; by 1999, the proportion outside the mainstream had tripled, to 6%, according to the 2000 Statistical Abstract of the United States. By 2010, the State Department estimates that Islam will have displaced Judaism as the second-largest religion practiced in America after Christianity.

Employers who ignore these trends or mishandle their implications leave themselves vulnerable to risks including legal exposure, the breakdown of employee morale, and problems with retention.

“More and more companies are coming out of denial and realizing that these are issues that need to be addressed,” says Georgette Bennett, president of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding in New York City.

#### Religious Rights

Each year, more workers are asserting their religious rights. Religion-based complaints to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission have risen 75% over the past decade, from 1,449 in 1993 to 2,532 in 2003. Many of these claims are based on Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which requires employers to offer reasonable accommodations to workers whose sincerely held religious beliefs conflict with existing work arrangements and workplace customs.

“It’s not enough for employers to avoid discrimination,” says Lewis Maltby, an attorney and president of the National Workrights Institute in Princeton, New Jersey. “The employer must also reasonably accommodate the practice of religious faith by employees.”

Title VII also requires employers to maintain a workplace free of harassment based on religion. Many states have their own laws lending additional protection to workers who choose to observe their religion at work or demand freedom from co-workers’ unwelcome religious overtures.

#### Prayer Can Divide Workers

Paramount among issues of religion in the workplace is the devout worker’s obligation to pray during the workday — whether she is a first-generation American Muslim or a fifth-generation American Christian fundamentalist. It makes sense for employers to offer simple accommodations — for example, to grant an employee’s request to pray in private while peers are on a scheduled break.

But employers can and sometimes must draw a line. “It’s not a reasonable accommodation for a Muslim working on an assembly line to stop

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five times a day to pray,” says Maltby. Title VII allows employees to deny a worker an accommodation that would cause an undue hardship for the business, such as a substantial loss of productivity.

Another common complaint regarding religion in the workplace is disregard for the right to be left alone.

“We often hear about employees who are blessing everybody and praying for everybody,” says Myrna Marofsky, president of ProGroup, a diversity consultant in Minneapolis. Outright proselytizing can also be a problem, and employers may be obligated to step in when proselytizers ignore co-workers’ requests to stop.

### Questions, Creativity, and Education Are Key

Time off for religious observance — especially of non-Christian holidays — is a major issue for many employees who practice Judaism, Islam or another minority religion. Some employers bar the swapping of shifts for this purpose; others ask employees or their supervisors to rearrange work schedules. Employers who deny scheduling requests that could be accommodated without undue hardship run the risk of legal challenges and morale problems.

Creative approaches are available to employers willing to take a risk. “Some employers poll employees each year before determining company holidays, so that the employer covers more holidays than just the Christian ones,” says Bennett.

But such employers are rare: 99% of companies officially recognize only Christian holidays, according to a 2001 survey by the Tanenbaum Center and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM).

Many other accommodations for religious practice are simple and inexpensive. Some Minneapolis employers have engendered loyalty among the Muslim Somali immigrants in their workforce by identifying appropriate gathering places for communal Friday prayers and keeping the company cafeteria open late during Ramadan, when the faithful must fast during the day, Marofsky says.

“The only way employers are going to know how to accommodate employees is to ask them,” says Marofsky. But some employers are uncomfortable with asking because they’re unsure of what they are legally permitted to ask. This is where Marofsky says that education comes in.

Most companies, however, don’t specifically train their employees in religious diversity, and some experts question whether it’s a good idea.

“I’m very leery of diversity training,” says Amy DelPo, an attorney and editor at legal publisher Nolo.com Inc. in Berkeley, California. “If training is not done well, it can become a place where a lot of hostilities get aired.”

But it is important for managers throughout a company to gain a basic understanding of relevant law and how it’s generally applied, DelPo says. Managers should focus on becoming familiar with the concepts of reasonable accommodation, undue hardship, and religious harassment.

### Accommodation Helps Retention

“If you don’t respect employees for their religion, you’re going to lose them,” says DelPo. That hypothesis is backed up by the Tanenbaum/SHRM study. Of employees who perceived religious bias in the workplace, 45% said that such prejudice caused them to consider leaving their jobs, the study says. And half of those said that reli-

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gious prejudice affected their productivity.

Ultimately, to create a culture of tolerance that helps attract and retain employees, top executives need to set a tone that accommodates diverse religious beliefs and practices.

“There’s no point to diversity programs if management doesn’t get it,” Maltby says. And, there’s no point to not addressing religious diversity now. The demographic diversification of the American

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workforce is well underway and will become only more challenging in the future. ■

John Rossheim, a journalist in Providence, R.I., writes about workplace issues, employ-

ment trends, and changing relationships between employers and workers. John regularly contributes to *Workforce Insights*, an online resource about emerging labor trends and issues produced by Veritude, a provider of strategic human resources and a subsidiary of Fidelity Investments. ©2004, 2005 Veritude, LLC. Reprinted with permission.

## Workplace Survey

# ✉ E-nough Already!

Less is more when it comes to office email, a new survey suggests. Twenty-nine percent of executives polled said that receiving large, unsolicited files is the most annoying aspect of communicating with business contacts online.

“As professionals increasingly rely on email to communicate, it becomes more time-consuming and cumbersome to manage messages,” said Tracey Fuller, executive director of The Creative Group. “When composing email, it’s best to be brief and identify what action is needed at the beginning of the message.”

Fuller’s other suggestions include:

- **Keep it mega-lyte.** Provide links to photos, PowerPoint presentations, and other large files, or offer to send them on request. Many people have limited in-box capacity, and bulky attachments can be difficult to open or consume needed space.
- **Don’t be too quick with your “trigger finger.”** Before replying to all, consider whether each person on the list will benefit from your response and remove those who will not. Conversely, if someone is copied on a mes-



sage that you receive, be sure to include the person on your response if he/she needs the information.

- **Be specific.** An informative subject line lets the recipient understand the topic and whether action is needed. For example, instead of saying “meeting” or “today’s meeting,” try “review of today’s branding strategy agenda.”
- **Unravel the mystery.** Rather than forwarding a lengthy email to colleagues as an “FYI,” forcing them to scroll down to understand why they’re being copied, give a brief review. This allows them to decide if they want to read the details.
- **Avoid “crying wolf.”** Mark messages high priority only if they are truly urgent. ■

Source: *The Creative Group* ([www.creativegroup.com](http://www.creativegroup.com)).

## Editor’s Notebook

Religion in the workplace is a touchy issue, but the topic seemed a perfect followup to last month’s cover article on diversity by David Worster. With holidays like Christmas and Hanukkah rapidly approaching, it is certainly a timely subject as well.



The key appears to lie in respecting everyone’s right to pray, or not pray, in their own way, and in a way that isn’t “pushy.” One thing’s for sure, it’s a topic that isn’t going to go away.

This month’s “One-On-One” article will be Ray Mickevicius’ last in *EAR*, so I’d be remiss if I didn’t take a moment to thank him for his time.

The idea of Ray’s column has been to provide a forum for EA professionals to address career concerns as they affect both the *individual* practitioner and the *EAP profession*. If a “one-on-one” feature is something you’d like to see periodically in this newsletter, give me a call or email. You’d only be asked to do some writing from time to time.

Finally, we inadvertently omitted some hurricane relief initiatives that EAPA is involved in, in the November *EAR*. If you’re not familiar with EAPA’s efforts, check out “Responding Together in the wake of Katrina and Rita” at [www.eapassn.org](http://www.eapassn.org). EAPA has also partnered with the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) to form the SHRM/EAPA Joining Hands Project, which will assist HR professionals affected by the hurricanes. Go to the same website to find out more.

We complain about cold and snow here in the Midwest, but few of us have ever lost our homes. We are most fortunate! Talk to you next year.

*Mike Jacquart*

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# Give Feedback When it's Needed, not Later On

By Jim Dawson

As a manager or coach, it's your job to help people reach higher levels of performance. To do it well, you must have genuine respect for employees and a sincere desire to contribute to their growth. Your intent determines whether what you say or do is discouraging or affirming.

Successful feedback validates what others have done well and guides them in the direction they need to go. It's not a once-a-year conversation, it's an ongoing dialogue that motivates behavior and inspires excellence.

So why do most managers wait until the end of the year to give feedback to their employees? What is it about the business culture that inhibits immediate conversations about what's going on and what can be done better?

## Why Wait?

Part of the problem is that today's jobs are increasingly knowledge-based, technology-oriented, and isolating. Most of us aren't used to having straightforward conversations about disagreements and performance challenges. As a result, managers need, more than ever, to have the ability to influence others and create cohesive teams. To be successful managers and coaches, we need to give and receive feedback at the time it is warranted. Giving and receiving feedback needs to include:

**1) Engaging Conversations** — Engaging conversations improves understanding. If an employee is often late getting to work, help the employee understand why his or her

behavior has to change. Be clear about what will happen if the agreement is violated and be prepared to enforce the consequences. Let the employee come up with the answers. The point is to examine the facts — not to make the other person wrong.

**2) Communicating Expectations** — When employees fail, it's usually because they don't understand what is expected of them. Clear expectations should be set. Expectations can be increased over time. At all levels, expectations should be identified and agreed to by both parties.

**3) Suspending Judgment** — Before you make a decision, ask questions to help you understand the situation and be open to other points of view. Accept that people may do the wrong things for all the right reasons. Sometimes mistakes happen because someone is trying to improve the process — it just didn't work out.

**4) Handling Conflict** — Conflict is inevitable. If handled appropriately, conflict can lead to new ideas and greater understanding. Let those involved speak their minds, and never invalidate their opinions or emotions. When the problem is defined you can lead the conversation toward a resolution.

Most importantly, feedback should be:

- *Specific*: Base your conversation on the behavior you are addressing, what took place, and what is expected. It should be about identifying and correcting the problem, not about liking or disliking the person, or finding fault or blame.
- *Immediate*: Give your feedback as soon as possible, and gauge

understanding by asking the person to summarize the key points.

- *A two-way conversation*: One of the best ways to gain trust and develop your own effectiveness is to ask for feedback and accept it graciously. If the feedback is sincere, find the truth within it and change your behavior accordingly.

If you are not used to giving immediate feedback it may seem awkward at first. The key is to be respectful of the other person and use direct but affirmative language. Here are a few tips:

- Use "and" instead of "but." People get defensive when you say "You are doing a good job, but..." Use "and" to transition to comments on what the employee can do better.
- Talk about "what went well" and what you "want done differently," instead of using judgmental terms such as "what went right" or "what went wrong."
- Be aware of the non-verbal messages you send including eye contact, gestures, and tone of voice.
- Avoid using absolute terms such as always, never, or all the time. They are rarely true and can make people defensive.

If you keep an open dialogue going with those you supervise, there should be few surprises. As someone in authority, it's your job is to lead others by example, conviction, and effective, straightforward feedback. In time, people will welcome your interactions and you will make valuable contributions to their success. ■

*James Dawson is a managing partner of ADI Performance, a developer of programs that result in improved practices and efficiencies. He can be reached at 770-640-0840 or [jrdawson@adiperformance.com](mailto:jrdawson@adiperformance.com).*

# Identity Theft Services Emerging as New Benefit

By Kathy Gurchiek

The commercial depicting a hair stylist whose stolen credit card was used to pay for body wax and a singles weekend may seem humorous, but identity theft takes a toll on victims' time, peace of mind, and finances.

Some businesses are starting to take note, offering their employees a relatively new benefit — identity theft services. SRP in Arizona, the nation's third-largest public power and water utility, started this benefit for its 4,500 employees after noticing that a number of workers were contacting its security services for help dealing with stolen credit cards and lost wallets.

SRP had also been the victim of security breaches that Leo Elias, manager of benefits and help services, characterized as "minor" — a file stolen from a truck and the theft of a contractor's computer containing sensitive information such as Social Security numbers.

"Does [providing the benefit]

help in lost time and productivity? Absolutely," Elias said. "But it really just provides the security that someone is there to help."

Mark Pribish is senior vice president at Aon Risk Services Inc., an insurance brokerage that has researched this benefit for clients. He says that some businesses offer identity theft services as a 100% company-paid benefit; while others provide it as a paid company benefit and offer other elements, such as education and insurance, as discounted benefits.

SRP pays about \$50 per year per employee for the benefit. According to Pribish, the price for employers can be as low as 75 cents per employee per year, depending on how the benefit is configured.

### What to Look For

HR and EAP professionals can begin the search for a identity theft provider by contacting existing vendors and benefits consultants.

Pribish said they should consider questions such as:

- How long has the company been in business? The answer should be at least two years. Otherwise it has not been around long enough to have experience working through a complex resolution case.
- Is the service managed or assisted?
- Does it operate a hotline that takes calls 24 hours a day, 365 days a year?
- Does it have attorneys and investigators on staff or on retainer to assist with complex cases of identity theft?
- What is covered? It's important to know whether the program covers cases of identity theft not related to credit cards, loans and bank activity.
- Does it include family benefits? If children are covered, what is the age cutoff and what exclusions are there? For example, are they covered if they live away from home? ■

Source: Society for Human Resource Management ([www.shrm.org](http://www.shrm.org)), the world's largest association devoted to human resource management. Kathy Gurchiek is an associate editor at HR News. She can be reached at [kgurchiek@shrm.org](mailto:kgurchiek@shrm.org).

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# Talk the Talk This Holiday Season!

By Debra Fine

You've been invited to yet another holiday open house, office party, or other social get-together and find yourself standing in a room full of strangers. What do you do?

- A) Stock up on food and find someplace comfortable to hide.
- B) Hang out by the bar and wait for someone to approach you.
- C) Escape when you see an opportunity.

*Answer:* None of the above. Learn to be a skilled small talker!

Many people are nervous or apprehensive when meeting new people. Meeting and talking to new people can be overwhelming. It doesn't have to be this way. Skilled small talkers turn holiday gatherings into opportunities for success. In fact, they realize that holiday functions can become great networking opportunities.

Try one of these icebreakers:

- 1) "How do you know the host/hostess?"
- 2) "What are some of your family holiday traditions?"
- 3) "Bring me up to date about your family/work."
- 4) "Tell me about your plans for this holiday season..."
- 5) "What do you enjoy most about the holiday season? Why?"
- 6) "What special gifts do you plan to give this year?"

Once you have broken the ice, follow these important tips to ensure small talk success:

- **Don't rush through conversations.** Take your time, and be sure to remember names and use them frequently during conversations.
- **Show an interest in every person you meet.** You will create a favorable impression of yourself. People, even shy ones, like to talk about themselves, so let them.
- **Maintain eye contact.** This is an easy way to make others feel comfortable, and important.
- **Act confidently through your body language,** even if you're not. Nervous body language (slouching shoulders, constant hand rubbing, etc.) can make others uncomfortable. Be aware of your body language when talking with others.
- **Be a careful listener.** By listening intently to what others are saying, you are not only making them feel important, but you can gather the cues you need to keep the conversation going and bridge to new topics.
- **Don't steal the show,** and don't let others steal the show either. If someone is monopolizing a conversation, wait for a pause or until that person takes a breath, and then make a comment that can steer the conversation in a new direction. Or include someone who has not been heard from by asking, "What has been going on in your department?"



- **Be appropriate.** Some topics may not be suitable. Be careful when asking about spouses and romantic relationships, because you might regret it. Instead ask: "What's been going on with the family?" or "Give me an update on your life since our last visit." Do not ask about the job at Boeing unless you are sure he or she still works for Boeing.
- **Don't interrogate.** Questions like: "Where are you from?" "Are you married?" "What do you do for a living?" can stop a conversation before it ever really starts.

This holiday season turn every conversation into an opportunity for success! ■

Debra Fine is the author of "The Fine Art of Small Talk" (Hyperion, October 2005) and a nationally recognized speaker. Go to [www.DebraFine.com](http://www.DebraFine.com) for more holiday party conversation tips.

## Resources

☎ **Operation Comfort** (veterans assistance) (866) 632-7868.

☎ **Gamblers Anonymous**, (213) 386-8789.

☎ **Crisis Prevention Institute**, (800) 558-8976.

☎ **National Resource Center on Domestic Violence hotline**, (800) 799-7233.

☎ **National Directory of Drug and Alcohol Abuse Treatment Programs 2005**, (800) 729-6686.

☎ **Missing Children**, (800) 843-5678.

📺 **The Center for Divorce Education and Parenting Wisely** offer award-winning videos designed to help parents and children through the divorce process. Go to [www.divorce-education.com](http://www.divorce-education.com) or [www.parentingwisely.com](http://www.parentingwisely.com).

📖 **The Positive Power of NO**, by Kim DeMotte, \$17.95, Facts on Demand Press, (800) 929-3811, ISBN: 1-889150-40-1. Transform your business by figuring out with crystal clear certainty whom your ideal customers should be, and then send everyone else packing.

📖 **Expert Résumés for Career Changers**, by Wendy Enelow and Louise Kursmark, \$16.95, JIST Publishing, 1-800-648-JIST; [www.jist.com](http://www.jist.com). The authors discuss how to write a résumé that works for a career changer.

📖 **The 7 Systems of Balance: A Natural Prescription For Healthy Living in a Hectic World**, by Paul J. Sorgi, M.D., \$12.95, Health Communications, [www.hci-online.com](http://www.hci-online.com)). Do you feel like your

life is out of balance? Work too much or just can't catch up? The secret, according to the author, is learning how to align your activities with how your brain works.

📖 **Super Networking**, by Michael Salmon, \$15.99, Career Press, ISBN: 1-56414-700-2. Take the concept of networking from a vague theory into a step-by-step system that's swift and effective.

📖 **Presentation S.O.S., From Perspiration to Persuasion in 9 Easy Steps**, by Mark Wiskup, \$13.95, Warner Business Books, [www.twbookmark.com](http://www.twbookmark.com), ISBN: 0-446-69554-8. Do you dread the thought of approaching a podium? The author presents a quick, concise, and fun way to confidently sell your ideas to any audience. ■

### Workplace Survey

## Online Time Adds Up

Checking sports scores or sending instant messages to friends may seem inconsequential, but time spent online on personal activities adds up.

Executives polled said they believe that employees, on average, spend 56 minutes each day on non-business-related email, instant messaging, and Internet use at work. And while surfing the Web may seem like a guilty pleasure, it's not a secret one. Nearly two-thirds of those surveyed (64%) said their organizations monitor employee Internet activity at least somewhat closely.

"Many people are unaware that a permanent record exists of their Internet and email use at work,"

said Max Messmer, chairman of Accountemps and author of *Managing Your Career For Dummies*® (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.) "Most organizations actively monitor Web use by employees to ensure it complies with established corporate policy."

Messmer added, "Staff members should familiarize themselves with company guidelines for Internet and email use. Employees are representatives of their firms and all communication, including email and instant messaging, should be professional. This also applies to the use of company resources to visit websites." ■

Source: *Accountemps*.

### Workplace Trends

## Bankruptcy Emerging as Worry

Tighter restrictions on declaring bankruptcy, which went into effect Oct. 17, have debtors investigating filings.

In fact, ComPsych Corp. has seen a 29% increase in bankruptcy calls, immediately after the Bankruptcy Abuse Protection and Consumer Protection Act of 2005 was signed.

"Our legal experts have been helping callers objectively assess whether they are a candidate for bankruptcy, while our financial counselors have been helping callers reduce debt, successfully budget, and develop a plan to manage their spending in the future," said Richard Chaifetz, chairman and CEO of ComPsych. Source: *ComPsych*. ■

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# Are You Ready for the Future?

By Ray Mickevicius

As I see it, the employee assistance field is still in its relative youth. While it's been around for what feels like a long time — a quarter-century or so, give or take — this isn't really very long at all. Compared to many other fields, we're still a new kid on the block.

As we consider the future of our profession, we need to pay close attention to questions such as:

- What commitments do employee assistance professionals stand for?
- Are we clear about what these commitments are supposed to look like in real life?
- If our behavior consistently matched our commitments, what kinds of things could we accomplish?
- What are the ways we can creatively bring these commitments to life?
- What would I have to do to make sure I'm ready to be successful in the future?

## Consider the Future?

Leaders in the field would like employee assistance professionals to become THE resource to their clients on a variety of issues related to interpersonal conflict, health, personal mental health, substance abuse, and work environment health. As a professional, are YOU ready to be successful in this type of future?

*“...I believe we need to become increasingly focused on a greater depth of learning and understanding in specific areas of interest.”*

Let me put this another way. Are you ready to think about the people you serve like a medical practitioner, an individual, family, and group psychotherapist or counselor, an alcohol and drug abuse specialist, and a management consultant? If you are, that's great. If you're not, are you willing to take a close look at yourself and your current level of professional development in a clear light? Are you willing to prepare yourself for the future?

## Specialization vs. Generalization

Specialization is a trend that's taking place in nearly every profession, and it's a trend that will continue to evolve in the employee assistance field. Specialization is a way of focusing one's practice. It means becoming an expert at something. It is the opposite of being a generalist.

It's no longer enough to be a psychologist, nurse, social worker, or a counselor. Those are “generalist” titles or categories. It's becoming increasingly important to develop yourself into a specific subset. What special kind of psychologist are you? What area of nursing do you practice in? What primary populations do you work

with as a social worker? What type of counseling do you do?

A generalist's skills will always be valuable, but it's the specific skills of a specialist that are often the most appropriate in a given situation. While we should all focus on being knowledgeable and valuable to our clients based on a generalist's *breadth* of knowledge, I believe we need to become increasingly focused on a greater *depth* of learning and understanding in specific areas of interest.

## What is Your Niche?

Which specific area within employee assistance will you choose to develop and be recognized as an expert, as THE person to see when a particular type of problem arises? Which clients and commitments will you best serve?

Have you staked out a specific role that will meet your clients' needs in the future? Are you ready for a future that's right around the corner? Are you willing to make the appropriate choices now so you're ready when the future arrives? It seems to me that it's time to get to work. ■

*Ray Mickevicius is a management consultant, executive coach, and facilitator. Most of Ray's work focuses on helping people and organizations achieve long-term personal, professional, and organizational success. For more on Ray or his company, “Dynamic Foundations, LLC” go to [www.dynamicfoundations.com](http://www.dynamicfoundations.com). He can be reached at [rjm@dynamicfoundations.com](mailto:rjm@dynamicfoundations.com) or phone (715) 842-8125.*

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