EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE REPORT

supporting EAP professionals

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Meeting the Needs of Rural Businesses

By RaeAnn Thomas

We have all heard Realtors® stress the importance of location, location, and location! This is true for homes *and* businesses. Companies set up shop in particular areas for a variety of reasons. But it's not necessary to analyze *why* they locate where they do. The more important issue to consider is *how* we can serve clients wherever they are.

It was common sense marketing for external EAPs to sell their services to the largest organizations in small geographical areas. When larger communities were involved, we focused on territories and provided services conveniently located in the middle of busy urban areas. One EAP office located in a highly accessible place could serve the greatest number of EAP clients for the businesses we served.

We offered sub-contracted services for contracts outside our immediate service area. Utilizing the direct services of other EAPs in desirable locations is an effective way to meet the needs of people we are not close enough to serve directly. As an industry, we've covered those areas quite well.

Rural Companies are a Bit Different

But what about rural companies? Coming to an EAP office isn't convenient for these organizations. And providing on-site EAP service to those businesses is not only expensive, but it's a scheduling nightmare if you must limit available hours, and yet still deliver on the promise of quick response times.

Also, there are often no subcontractors in the area to provide direct services. Yet we still try to offer the same programs and services to these rural organizations that we provide to organizations located either close to our offices, or our subcontractor's offices.

It shouldn't be considered surprising then, when rural company clients become frustrated, charging that we are not providing the services we promised. But we cannot deliver the services they need unless we know what those needs are. As a result, we need to first discover exactly what types of services rural businesses need. Only then can we decide *how* to provide them.

Getting Started

Assessing the needs of the organizations we serve should be the first service we provide. However, many of the EAP services we provide have become standardized. We look at other providers and territories and try to offer comparable services to be competitive in the market. But these standardized services may NOT be what rural companies need!

As a result, we should conduct a needs assessment to better understand what makes the rural company different from other customers. Such an assessment may yield results quite different from the programs we offer to the masses. This means that we will need to invest time and effort upfront — BEFORE we get the contract, so that we CAN make promises we can deliver!

Clearly, no two organizations are alike. It cannot be assumed that one rural organization is just like another — every organization has subtly different needs. We can, however, gain some understanding by looking at the rural environment in general.

- **Location** — Offering easily accessible, convenient, and

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FEATURED INSIDE

confidential services can be a challenge. Will you provide on-site services? This can be costly and time consuming. Off-site services may be more economical, but driving 40 miles to an EAP office may not be viewed as responsive. Certainly telephone services and immediate referral is a possibility, but it just doesn't seem as responsive as the eight-session models that the EAP that I'm in charge of, offers in larger communities.

- **Ownership** — Rural companies are often family businesses that have grown to employ individuals outside of the family. Financial decisions, such purchasing services, may be in the hands of an individual who has direct financial interest in the investment. The business may be small enough to require the EAP to charge a minimum annual rate for available services. Owners and stakeholders may need additional information and education about the financial benefits of an EAP. As a result, the EAP may have to pay close attention to utilization in order to be seen as useful and necessary. Small, rural businesses often operate very "lean." This means there is no room for waste. Every dollar must be well spent.

- **Size** — Because rural companies need to be efficient, it is a real challenge for them to not overhire and yet still complete all necessary tasks. This means that cross training is often necessary. A Human Resource director might double as a safety director and shift supervisor. This overlap means that we may need to provide more than basic EAP services. Consultation for Human Resource issues, conflict management services, supervisor coaching and training, and safety issues become part of the service package. This means the EAP will need to provide specialized direct services, and help the organization access other resources when it's not feasible for the EAP to provide them.

- **Lack of resources** — Assessment, brief counseling, and referral are at the heart of EAP services, but a rural environment can even impact basic services. Because there is a lack of resources in rural areas, the EAP may be the only feasible resource. Therefore, solution-focused services that address needs and provide plans that meet those needs must become part of the EAP's services. Scarce resources and lack of employee benefits may make referrals a moot point. This means that EAP counselors must help employees meet their needs in creative ways when our usual toolbox of referrals and resources is just not available.

- **Employee groups** — Specific employee groups may present additional challenges for the EAP. For instance, language barriers among migrant workers, limited financial resources or benefits for seasonal workers, and cultural issues, may translate into significantly more effort on the part of the EAP to meet employee/employer needs in rural areas. The stigma of utilizing mental health services alone can be an enormous barrier for an EAP. These challenges will require ongoing education, accommodation, and support in order to deliver effective services.

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Regardless of their size or geographic location, many organizations use the slogan, *"Our*

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employees are our greatest asset." In order to help them preserve that asset, we need to honestly examine the differences in organizational needs between city and rural clients and address them appropriately.

Until we begin to assess the personalized needs of rural organizations, we will continue to offer pre-packaged services that will likely miss the mark in delivering the customized EAP services that all of our customers deserve. ■

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Workplace Survey

Commuting is no Small Deal!

What's on the minds of the employees of your business clients these days? The high cost of gas and commuting is likely among their key concerns.

The majority of employees, whether management or blue collar, would rather telecommute (e.g. work from home), carpool or take public transportation in lieu of rising gas prices, according to a recent survey by ComPsych Corporation.

An estimated 16% of respondents to the ComPsych survey said they would change the way they commute if gas prices continued to rise, while 44% said they would prefer to, but can't.

According to a separate survey conducted by TheLadders.com, the average commute among executives surveyed was 42.3 minutes, compared with a national average of 24.3 minutes.

Twenty-five percent of respondents to the Ladders survey said they put in 30-minute commutes, while 19% log 45-minute commutes. When asked: *"What is the longest commute you could live with?"* the average response was 57 minutes.

The workday commute is a serious issue for many employers. In fact, 78% of respondents said they would make a career decision based on commute time.

"When weighing a great job offer against a potentially grueling commute, you have to ask yourself what kind of work you'll produce after battling traffic for two hours," said Marc Cenedella, president and CEO of TheLadders.com.

Richard Chaifetz, chairman and CEO of ComPsych, concurred that gas and commuting is a major issue for management and employees alike.

"The cost of living is a real concern for employees," Chaifetz said. "We've seen a noticeable uptick in our FinancialConnect calls for help in budgeting and managing expenses. The amount of money a two-car family spends on gas can cut into spending in other areas, and employees are troubled about that." ■

Sources: TheLadders.com, www.compsych.com.

a look ahead

UPCOMING EAR FEATURES...

- Promoting Diversity
- Embracing the Competition
- Interpreting Background Checks

Editor's Notebook

Remember the adage of the futility in trying "to fit a round peg in a square hole"?

This month, former *EAR* contributing editor RaeAnn Thomas examines the difference in marketing your services to rural businesses versus large, urban firms. In a day and age in which it's become increasingly important for EA professionals to market their services as cost-effective solutions for business clients, I believe RaeAnn offers some sound advice to ensure that EAPs aren't trying to fit "round services" into companies with "square" needs.

With the high price of gas, commuting is an increasing concern of many people (see article on this page). As this trend evolves, it seems likely that helping employees and management address concerns that arise from coordinating work-life schedules will become a new EAP niche (if it isn't already).

Finally, I thank *EAR* readers who have taken the time to send in a reader survey — and I encourge more of you to take a few minutes to fill one out. A larger sampling helps us tremendously in making editorial decisions based on the results. Until next month. ■

Mike Jacquart

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Avoid the Fatal Presentation Trap

By Jeff Thull

If you're a salesperson, you can probably relate to the following scenario. You spend days putting togehter a razzle-dazzle presentation. During the big event, you expound on the greatness of your company. You paint a rosy picture of the future the prospect will have if he buys your product or services.

What happens after you wrap up the presentation is anyone's guess. But two things are certain: you've spent valuable time and resources on your presentation, and you're left with the unsettling knowledge that the decision to buy from you (or not) is completely out of your hands.

Sound familiar? Probably. You may be thinking, *"That's just the nature of the beast. Presentations are no fun, but they're part and parcel of selling. Right?"* Actually that's a myth, not a fact.

Salespeople think that they are educating the prospect, but a presentation is a lecture. It's been proven again and again that a lecture is the least effective way to educate. Why? Because chances are we are answering unasked questions!

You're probably spending 80% of your time talking about your solution, while the prospect may not even understand his problem. So no matter how impressive your product sounds, he's not going to grasp how it applies to his situation.

The prospect probably has several other presentations lined up. In his mind you are a commodity, and the only way you're going to "win" is if you're the lowest bidder. Even that doesn't guarantee success. Another tragedy is the high number of sales pitches that end in no decisions at all. So what can you do? Consider the following areas:

- **Relevancy.** It's possible that your "solution" isn't what the prospect needs at all. It's arrogant to assume that you do. Your prospect may feel bullied and/or manipulated and go on the defensive. Preaching is the worst of all presentation tactics.
- **Comprehension.** While you are bombarding the prospect with painstakingly prepared presentation, the fact remains that he/she will comprehend only one-quarter of it. You can't fully convey complex ideas in an hour-long "lecture." And if a prospect doesn't understand, he isn't going to buy.

So what would work better?

1) **Identify and recruit staff from the customer's organization who can help provide the type of two-way information that'll help everybody.** If the prospect balks, explain that you would be very uncomfortable doing a presentation without the preparation and focus the interviewees would provide. If he/she still declines, politely withdraw from the sales presentation. There is no point in wasting your time with an organization that doesn't allow you to diagnose the situation so that you can help resolve their problem.

2) **Show the prospect the cost of the solution.** Sellers are usually happy to discuss the price of a solution, but few are nearly so forthcoming about the actual cost. Your solution may require that the prospect change his manufacturing process, add staff, train employees, and so forth.Walking decision makers through this process quantifies the cost of change and gives the prospect all he needs to make a confident, informed decision. ■

Jeff Thull goes into greater detail on this topic in his book, "The Prime Solution: Close the Value Gap, Increase Margins, and Win the Complex Sale," $25; Dearborn Trade Publishing; 2005; ISBN: 0-7931-9522-5.

Five Habits of Highly Effective Conflict Resolvers

By Dina Beach Lynch

Stephen Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, had the right idea about how people can transform themselves.

Similarly, there are a number of habits that can change someone from being "pretty good" at resolving conflicts into someone *highly effective at it*. By that I mean someone who facilitates productive, meaningful discussion between others that results in deeper self-awareness, mutual understanding, and workable solutions.

Conflict management techniques are skills that are useful in any setting. With these skills, you can create environments that are respectful, collaborative, and conducive to problem solving. Modeling successful conflict management behaviors will help your clients, too. The following are some habits of highly effective conflict resolvers:

1. UNDERSTAND THE CLIENT'S NEEDS

When a client visits you to discuss a conflict, you assess a situation, determine the next steps, and proceed until the problem is solved. But is that always helpful?

When you take charge, the client is relieved of his or her responsibility to find a solution. That leaves you to find alternatives. And while you want to do what's best for this person (and the organization), it's important to ask what the client wants first — whether it's to vent, brainstorm solutions or be coached.

"...there are a number of habits that can change someone from being 'pretty good' at resolving conflicts into someone highly effective at it."

Understand what the person wants by asking questions:

- How can I be most helpful to you?
- What are you hoping I will do?
- What do you see as my role in this matter?

2. ENGAGE IN COLLABORATIVE LISTENING

Many people have taken at least one active listening course so I won't address the basic skills. Collaborative listening, however, takes these skills one step further. In collaborative listening, each person has a job that supports the work of the other. The speaker's job is to clearly express his or her thoughts, feelings, and goals. The listener's job is facilitating clarity; understanding and making the client feel heard.

What's the difference? The distinction is acknowledgement. Your role is to help the client gain a deeper understanding of her own interests and needs; to define concepts and words in a way that expresses her values; and to make her feel acknowledged, someone sees things from her point of view.

Acknowledgements can be tricky in corporate settings because while you want to help the person, you also need to be mindful of corporate liability. But you can acknowledge the individual client while still safeguarding the company. This is because acknowledgement does not equal agreement. Rather, it means letting the client know that you can see how he got to the truth.

It also doesn't mean taking sides with the client or abandoning corporate responsibilities. Acknowledgement can be the bridge across misperceptions. Engage in collaborative listening:

- Help the client explore and be clear about interests and goals.
- Acknowledge the individual's perspective.
- Ask questions that probe for deeper understanding on both your parts: 1) When you said x, what did you mean? 2) If y happens, what's significant about that for you? 3) What am I not understanding from your perspective?

The remainder of these points will be covered in the next issue.

NEXT MONTH: Advice on how to be optimistic and resilient, and more. ■

Dina Beach Lynch was formerly the Ombudsman for Fleet Bank and is currently CEO of workwelltogether.com, an online conflict management toolkit. Dina can be reached at Dina@workwelltogether.com.

The Offshoring Debate

By Thomas Kochan, Diane Burton & Matthew Bidwell

The future of offshoring and its implications for management, the workforce, and the economy is generating lots of questions but few answers.

Some participants argue that we are at the lower elbow of a standard "S" curve in the innovation cycle, which is poised to accelerate past the 3.3 million I.T. and other knowledge-intensive jobs that some estimates indicate will move offshore in the next decade.

Others, however, are less convinced and foresee some limits on how much "knowledge work" will actually be sent abroad after firms evaluate the costs and benefits of offshoring. Both sides agree on two points:

1. The outcomes are crucial to the future of the economy, the workforce, educators, and management alike.

2. The questions that need to be asked in shaping the future are not yet on the table neither in organizations nor in society.

Experts further agree that unless we address these issues and broaden the voices engaged in this debate, the long-term results will at best be sub-optimal for the economy, and at worst, lead to a strong political backlash. Let's raise some of these questions and invite those with a stake in offshoring to engage in a constructive and open dialogue so that the ultimate outcome is one that works best for businesses, the economy, and the workforce.

To Focus on the Debate, Be Inclusive.

Managers will tell you that they can hire three or four engineers in Bangladesh for the price of one in the United States. These visible short-term savings are the dominant factor driving offshoring decisions. Critics argue, however, that neither the full costs of managing offshore labor nor the loss of knowledge or future capabilities are taken into account. In other words, companies may be saving dollars today but frittering away the knowledge needed to be competitive in the future.

This is not surprising. It is difficult, given the pressure managers are under to cut costs, to consider whether the organization is protecting and developing its knowledge base for the future. After all, from the point of view of any one manager, "the future is someone else's problem — my budget constraints hit me today."

But several voices are missing from these debates. One is the voice of professional knowledge workers themselves. Obviously, they have a critical stake in these decisions. They invest and risk their human capital when joining an organization, just as shareholders and venture capitalists risk their financial capital. It is a quirk of American corporations that financial investors have more rights to information and influence over how their capital is used than workers have over the use of their human capital.

If professionals had the same access to information and influence needed to assess whether to continue to invest their capital in an organization as financial investors, we could expect a broader set of questions to be asked about offshoring strategies and decisions. These might include:

- **What's being counted?** Are the total costs being considered or just hourly labor rates or annual salaries? Or worse, is some headcount reduction or algorithm driving the decision?

- **What's being captured?** Is the knowledge embedded in the work moving abroad strategic to the firm today or in the future? What is the firm's plan to maintain this knowledge base and capability?

- **What's in it for me?** Am I being given the projects and continuing education opportunities to keep my skills marketable, either within this organization or in the job market?

Because these decisions are made separately, one organization, or even one project at a time, no one is voicing concerns about their cumulative industry, occupational, regional or national impact. If someone were, they would consider:

- Is this work strategic to the industry and nation's ability to maintain a lead in technology innovation and to invent and deliver the next generation of products, services, and technologies?

- Are universities, professional associations, and other learning centers educating current and next-generation knowledge workers in what they need to know to for the technologies and jobs of the future?

To Start the Debate, Speak Up. These questions will only get asked — and answered — if leaders from academia, government, industry, and the professional workforce come together to discuss and to develop strategies that address these issues. Doing so can bridge the gap between the interests of individual firms and the macro economy as well as concerns over short-term labor costs versus long-term knowledge.

These ideas are designed to stimulate a discussion among industry and professional leaders. We invite your comments and ideas about how to best engage these issues and work together to manage them. Only by doing so will we gain control over the ultimate effects of offshoring and make sure this trend serves the needs of all who havea stake in it. Share your thoughts by emailing us at workplacecenter@mit.edu. ■

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Workplace Survey

Procrastinators Beware!

A recent study confirms what our bodies have been telling us all along — we run out of steam as the day wears on.

Thirty-three percent of executives surveyed by Accountemps said that 4 p.m.-6 p.m. is the least productive time of day for employees. Lunchtime, or noon to 2 p.m., came in a close second, cited by 29% of respondents. Only 2% said 10 a.m. — noon is not a productive time of day for workers.

"During a typical workday, employees must juggle meetings, deadlines, phone calls, email, questions from colleagues and unforeseen interruptions," according to Max Messmer, chairman of Accountemps and author of *Managing Your Career for Dummies*® (John Wiley & Sons). "Individuals who are well attuned to their work habits and routine obligations can better schedule their time and avoid suffering productivity slowdowns later in the day."

Messmer offers the following tips to avoid the afternoon lull:

- **Planning makes perfect.** Don't delay difficult activities until the end of the day, when your energy and enthusiasm may wane. Use this time to catch up on basic tasks such as filing, responding to routine emails, and organizing files.
- **Get a breath of fresh air.** Periodically stretch or take a short walk to refuel your energy. Enjoy your lunch outside. Even a few minures away from your desk can help you recharge and be more productive.
- **Food for thought.** Missing meals is a recipe for malaise. No matter how busy you are, remember to take time for a complete meal midway through the day and nutritious snacks inbetween. ■

Resources

🕮 ***Light Their Fire: Using Internal Marketing to Ignite Employee Performance and WOW Your Customers,*** by Susan Drake, Sara Roberts and Michelle J. Gulman, Dearborn Trade Publishing, $23, ISBN: 1-4195-0252-2. This book explains that "firing up" employees is the first step toward firing up profits. The authors add that effective internal marketing needs to be way more than an "HR thing."

🕮 ***Power Selling: Seven Strategies for Cracking the Sales Code***, by George Ludwig, Dearborn Trade Publishing, $19.95, ISBN: 0-7931-8571-8. According to the author, poor or lackluster sales performance boils down to one factor: you've programmed your mind with the wrong files. The author explains how to "reprogram" those files and vastly increase your income.

🕮 ***The Evidence-Based Practice: Methods, Models, and Tools for Mental Health Professionals,*** by Chris Stout and Randy Hayes, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., ISBN: 0-471-46742-2. This book presents a strong case for evidence-based practice. Clinicians and clients alike will benefit from the sample treatment plans and other helpful information. ■

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Do More in Less Time *and* with Less Stress: Part II

By Donald E. Wetmore

Last month, we covered five of the 10 techniques I share in time management seminars. This month, we'll go over the rest of them.

6. Run an Interruptions Log.

The average person gets 50 interruptions a day, and the average interruption takes five minutes. That means the typical person spends over four hours each day just dealing with interruptions!

Certainly some are imporant, but many have little or no value.Use a pad of paper and label it "Interruptions Log." Create six columns: Date, Time, Who, What, Length, Rating. After each interruption is dealt with, log in the date and time it occurred, who brought it to you, a word or two about what it related to, the length of time it took, and finally the rating of its importance: A=crucial, B=important, C=little value, and D=no value.

Do this for at least a week to get a good ideal what's going on. Then, evaluate the results and take action to eliminate some of the C and D interruptions that have little or no value.

7. Delegate It.

We all have the same amount of time each week, and when you subtract time for sleeping and personal care, that doesn't leave a whole lot of time to get done what needs to be done.

Delegation permits you to leverage your time through others and thereby increase your own results. The hardest part of delegation though, involves "letting go." Look at all the jobs you want to do the next day and with each item ask yourself, *"Is this the best use of my time?"* If it is, then do it. If it isn't, delegate it to someone else. There is a difference between "I do it" and "It gets done".

8. Manage Meeting Time.

Meetings can be one of the biggest time wasters we must endure. Before a meeting ask, *"Is it necessary?"* and *"Is it necessary that I attend?"* If the answer to either question is "no", consider not having the meeting or excusing yourself from attending. When a meeting is necessary, prepare a written agenda with times assigned for each item.

Circulate the written agenda among those who will be attending. There is no sense in holding a meeting by ambush. Let people know in advance what is to be discussed.

9. Handle Paper.

It's easy to get buried in a blizzard of paperwork. The average person receives around 150 communications each day via email, telephone, hard mail, memos, faxes, etc. A lot of time is wasted going through the same pile of paper day after day, and correcting mistakes when things slip through the cracks.

Try to handle the paper once and be done with it. If it is something that can be done in a minute or two, do it and get it over with. If it is not the best use of your time, delegate it. If it is going to take some time to complete, schedule ahead in your calendar on the day you think you might get to it, and then put it away.

10. Run a Time Log.

If you want to manage it, you have to measure it. A Time Log is a simple yet powerful tool to create an overview of how your time is actually being spent during the day. Simply make an ongoing record of your time. Record the activity, the time spent on it, and then the rating using A, B, C, and D described earlier.

Here are a few examples: Made telephone calls, 35 minutes, A; Attended meeting, 55 minutes, C: Telephone call from Janis, D. Compile a log like this for a few days to get a better idea how your time is being spent.

Then, analyze the information. Add up all the A, B, C, and D time. Most people discover that a lot of their time is being spent on items that have little or no value.

Finally, take action steps to reduce the C and D items to give you more time for the really important things in your life. ■

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