



| By Sandra Caffo and Kathleen Greer

Improving Utilization Reports

“A subcommittee of the National Behavioral Consortium (NBC) was formed to examine current practices on utilization reporting. The goal of the group was to evaluate these practices and provide recommendations for consideration by EAP providers.”

Utilization reporting data has historically been the main form of measuring the effectiveness of an employee assistance program. Components beyond counseling have been offered since the beginning of EAPs. However, that did not change the emphasis on counseling as the central metric utilized to evaluate program effectiveness.

Moreover, there have been – and continue to be – wide variations throughout the EAP field regarding how utilization is defined and reported. Professional organizations such as EAPA have attempted to create a unified industry standard. But to date, each organization’s set of formulas remains different, and most EAPs have continued to compute utilization by their own methods.

Elements of Utilization Reports

Traditionally, utilization reports provide summary data regarding the use of purchased EAP services. Currently, this includes EAP coaching and counseling and work-life services utilized by employees and family members, with specific focus on types of problems, services utilized, performance-based referrals and demographic information. Employer

services often termed “organization services” such as manager consultation, training and critical incident support are also included in the report.

Outcome data is variably provided with no unified definition of criteria. Attention to effectiveness and return-on-investment are sporadically approached by EAPs, although there is a movement in the field to obtain more uniformity of outcome measurement.

Clients are trying to determine if they are getting their money’s worth and reports are a way of demonstrating value (Jorgensen et al, 2007). However, EA professionals can’t assume that HR clients are able to interpret data (Christie et al, 2007).

As mentioned, one problem is the EAP field’s lack of industry-wide standardization (Attridge et al, 2009). Another difficulty is that some utilization reports only cite clinical data, not preventive group activities (Csiernik, 2002).

Overall, EAPs need to do a better job of telling their value stories, including ways that the EAP can help to drive health and productivity objectives (Attridge, 2007). This is especially important since most users report positive personal outcomes and work improvements after using the EAP (Attridge et al, 2013).

Utilization Report Survey Design

A subcommittee of the National Behavioral Consortium (NBC) subcommittee was formed to examine current practices on utilization reporting. The goal of the group was to evaluate these practices and provide recommendations for consideration by EAP providers. (Editor’s note: This was not part of the recent EARF-funded external vendor study.)

The subcommittee’s first task was to understand current NBC EAP member reports. A pre-survey was developed to identify utilization tracking and reporting practices. What was learned created a structure for discussion with NBC EAP members and served as a basis for developing a utilization report survey to use with their HR and Benefits customers.

The subcommittee then addressed two central concerns in constructing the survey:

- The disparity in how utilization is reported; and
- How to ensure that utilization reports effectively demonstrate the value of EAP and Work Life programs to customers/employers in today’s workplace.

The survey was designed using a Likert scale ranging from one to seven with seven being a “must

have” in the report and one being “don’t include.” It incorporated EAP services offered by EAP member organizations as identified in the pre-survey. The survey included questions about the *value* of the utilization report that the customer was receiving as well as *rating* each item included.

Limitations

The survey had a small sample size of somewhat like-minded EAP companies. The return rate might have been higher if EAPs had been willing to urge HR and Benefits Managers to comply beyond the first request and two reminders. Many of the comments indicated that assistance

was needed in understanding the data. For example, greater transparency and the desire for additional data that identifies the total number of unique users, status of case closing/referral to benefits, and differentiation between online and face-to-face utilization were desired.

Sample

Fourteen NBC regional EAP providers were invited to participate in the survey. NBC collectively represents 21,705,715 covered lives within 35,879 client organizations. Ten EAP organizations agreed to deliver the survey to their client organizations.

The subcommittee provided sample introduction scripting, Q&A information, follow-up timeline, email reminder language, and customized summaries of survey results for each participating EAP. Surveys were administered from the ten EAP organizations to their 2,025 customer contacts, mostly within HR and Benefits. A total of 419 surveys were completed for a 21% return rate.


Findings

Respondents confirmed the value in receiving a rich utilization report. The overall positive response averaged 5.76 on a 7-point Likert scale. Much of the

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data was difficult to interpret for a variety of reasons, including that respondents took an “everything is important and valuable” approach to describing the report. In other words, the survey indicated that all of the elements of the utilization report given to customers were valued.

However, four preferences emerged:

- The statement, “*in-person counseling should be reported as part of utilization*” was the only one that generated 100% response from survey participants.

- Outcome data was highly valued.

- The reporting of manager consultations and performance-based referrals was highly valued.

- A high value was placed on listing presenting issues within the utilization report.

Additional Findings

- The value of the EAP is enhanced when an EAP reports *all* of the services that are provided to an organization (counseling, work life, wellness, crisis management and manager consultation).

- Increased use of technology to enable EAP service delivery and accessibility to users via mobile devices was identified as a quickly developing part of utilization reporting.

- At present, tracking online services is difficult and data means different things when working in different databases. Addressing these disparities is a necessary part of utilization reporting.

- Outcome data such as that gathered by the Workplace

Outcome Suite (WOS) is a highly desirable part of any utilization report.

- HR and Benefits customers greatly desire analysis of data in a utilization report in the form of a one-page executive summary. Specific preferences broke out as follows:

- *One-page executive summary*, 6.15;
- *Outcome data*, 6.13;
- *Historical trending data*, 5.99;
- *Graphic displays* (of data), 5.96;
- *Utilization rate comparison by industry*, 5.70; and
- *Narrative report*, 5.48.

Why do Organizations Offer EAP?

Finally, out of sheer curiosity we asked our customers why they offer EAP services to employees and family members. Responses were as follows:

- Offering a helping hand to employees, 6.73;
- Helping family members in need, 6.35;
- Crisis response, 6.19;
- Providing assistance to managers, 6.02; and
- Risk mitigation, 5.35.

Discussion

The EAP field in the 21st century is very different from EAP’s origins. Building on the “core technology” foundation of the profession has resulted in expanding service delivery to both employees/household members and employers.

The advancement of technology with a new emphasis on social media requires us as

behavioral health professionals to look at the multiple ways in which individuals obtain and learn information. This directly relates to the definition of utilization and ultimately to the value of the EAP to the organization.

The NBC subcommittee’s goal was to address the disparity in how utilization is reported and to ensure reports effectively demonstrate the value of the EAP

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and Work Life programs. Survey results shed some light on each of these goals.

There was complete agreement among customers that “in-person” counseling should be included in the report. *This is the definition of utilization the EAP field has trained our customers to use, and they’ve learned it well.*

Recommendations

Benefits managers desire integrated data in order to look at the health management of their work populations. But how to best share EAP data in an integrated approach needs to be explored. The survey did not attempt to address the disparity in how utilization is tracked. This remains a key area to tackle.

Respondents clearly value the services that EAPs provide. The profession has a responsibility to build on this awareness, defining value and providing clarity. Findings related to technology, outcome data, and integration efforts, for example, are directions for advancing both value and utilization reporting.

Summary

This survey serves as a reminder that HR and Benefits professionals value EAP utilization. All of the respondents agreed that face-to-face meetings should be reported on the utilization report, which remains at the core of EAP services. In addition, there were two other items that stood out to us:

- The continued value placed on manager consultation and performance-based referrals; and
- The value of outcome data and data analysis as presented in an executive summary.

Customers want to know more about what the data means and what they should be doing with it. As one HR customer said, "I always intend to call our account manager to review the report, but almost never do. I'd welcome a 15-minute call to review it."

Space precluded us from providing an example of the utilization report survey and executive summary we used in our findings. To see a copy, email either of us at the addresses provided below.

Finally, we hope this article will serve as a source of ongoing discussion and, ultimately, decision making within the EAP field. ❖

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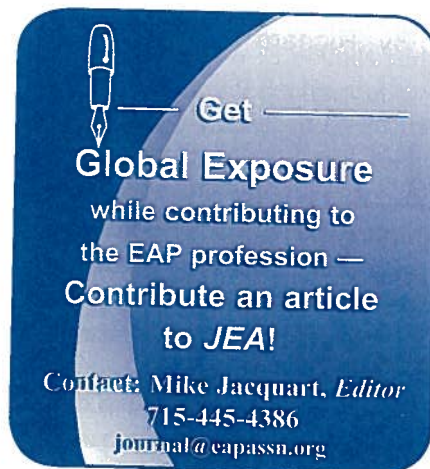
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