

THE FUTURE OF EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE: INTEGRATED OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH SYSTEMS

by Thomas M. Amaral, Ph.D., and Kirk Harlow, Dr.P.H.

As employee assistance researchers, we have conducted and reviewed numerous studies about the impact of EAPs on a wide variety of workplace cost and performance measures, including absenteeism, disability claims, healthcare expenditures, and accident rates. This research indicates that EAPs have a significant positive impact on these outcome indicators. Research on other organizational approaches to managing and assisting troubled employees, such as disciplinary processes, drug testing programs, and health promotion activities, have similarly shown that these approaches positively affect many of the same cost and performance indicators. Our experiences in the EAP and allied research areas have led us to two important observations that shape how we envision the future of the employee assistance field.

Observation I: Tangible Impact Has Shaped Value

Research has focused almost exclusively on the tangible workplace impact of EAPs and, in doing so, has shaped how management decision makers perceive the value of these programs. Research has been primarily concerned with the effects of EAPs on how much time employees take off, the health benefits they use, and other concrete measures. This focus is not surprising. These outcomes are easier to measure than less tangible outcomes such as employee well-being, job satisfaction, and company loyalty.

One unfortunate consequence of this focus, however, is that management now perceives their value in this limited way and wants continued proof that their EAPs produce a significant return on investment. Because of this perception, programs are continually being asked to justify themselves even though research has proven again and again that well-designed programs, based on core EA technologies, produce significant benefits.

The emphasis on demonstrating value has also slowed the employee assistance field's evolution toward quality improvement. Rather than continuing to spend time and money on studies that are no longer necessary, organizations would be better advised to direct resources toward program refinement and quality improvement.

Observation II: A Systems Approach Has Been Uncommon

From our observations of the various organizational approaches to managing troubled employees, we've learned that very few of them—including EAPs—deal with the entire picture. Historically, these programs, policies, and practices have operated in nearly complete isolation from each other. An integrated systems approach has been extremely uncommon.

One consequence of this non-integrated approach is the tendency toward cost shifting. For example, a lack of coordination between an EAP and a managed care organization may lead to mismatched or inappropriate levels of treatment. EAPs are often better positioned to identify the needs of the employee, and frequently have a better knowledge of local treatment providers. In the short run, the lack of cooperation between the two programs may actually show up as lower benefits costs. In the long run, the costs will show elsewhere, such as in an increase in workers' compensation or disability claims or, worse yet, large litigation costs associated with a catastrophic event caused by the employee.

Vision for the Future

These research observations shape our vision for the future of EAPs. Within ten years, we hope that employee assistance will be part of well-coordinated, organization-wide approaches that deal cost effectively and humanely with employees who have behavioral health issues. The mission of these integrated systems will be to promote the health and well-being of employees—and, by doing so effectively, will protect organizations against behavioral risks and unnecessary operational costs.

The organizational obstacles that must be overcome to achieve an integrated future are vast. Blurred lines of authority, long-standing turf issues, and the threat of outsourcing are just a few of the challenges. But, EA professional can lead the way. Since their inception, EAPs have been dynamic workplace functions that have continually evolved to meet the changing needs of organizations and their employees. To achieve the future we envision, the employee assistance field must continue to stimulate evolution in three areas: integration, communication, and specialization.

Integration

EAPs need to become closely integrated with other structured approaches assisting troubled employees, such as disciplinary processes, drug testing programs, health promotion activities, and fitness-for-duty policies. As mentioned previously, research has shown that these other approaches positively affect the same cost and performance indicators that are impacted by EAPs. Using an integrated approach, these historically independent programs and policies would likely achieve results that far exceed their individual impacts.

An integrated systems approach would also decrease the likelihood that some employees with problems might fall between the cracks. Research has found strong relationships between behavioral health problems and workplace behaviors such as absenteeism, disciplinary problems, and workers' compensation claims. A thorough understanding of these relationships by all members of an integrated team would likely increase early identification of troubled employees and decrease the possibility that these employees would shift around within the organization between one program and another—or between one cost center and another.

By seeking opportunities to work with other departments to achieve common goals, EA professionals can lead the way in facilitating integration. For example, many EAPs currently offer assistance to workers' compensation departments in cases that have a "psychological" component. Many other collaborative efforts are possible.

Communication

As part of an integrated team, EAPs will need to establish communication links with others within the organization who have an interest in the team's activities, such as those in human resources management, the legal department, security, risk management, occupational health and safety, upper management, and labor.

Part of the new communication process should also include educating top-level decision makers on the well-documented value of EAPs. As mentioned earlier, research has shown that well-designed EAPs, based on the core technology, produce a significant return on investment. By communicating these facts to top management, EAPs will be able to redirect the focus away from the present-day emphasis on demonstrating value and toward the more productive enterprise of continuous quality improvement.

In addition, EA professionals must make a commitment to continuous improvement. This begins with the development of a continuous improvement plan that clarifies the mission of the EAP, defines the scorecard by which the EAP will monitor its performance, and describes the actions that will be put in place to identify performance indicators.

Specialization

Differentiation and specialization are processes common to evolving systems. To accomplish their expanded role within an integrated team, EA professionals need to learn specialties beyond their routine EA practice skills. Valuable areas of specialization will include training, prevention, employee benefits, substance abuse, crisis intervention, risk management, program evaluation, and information systems. Many EA professionals, of course, already possess these areas of expertise.

EA professionals also will need to develop excellent management skills and a thorough understanding of how organizations operate. High on the list of these skills is strategic planning, quality management, organizational dynamics, workplace change processes, finance, reporting, and organizational development. With this broadened knowledge comes empowerment and with empowerment comes the opportunity to help guide an organization's future.

Challenges and Opportunities

The future of employee assistance offers continuing opportunities for great challenges, personal rewards, and tremendous organizational benefits. As EAPs evolve into tomorrow's integrated occupational health systems, they will impact workplace cost factors to an even greater extent than they do today. As researchers, we look forward to the challenge of creating new research and evaluation models that will continue to affirm the value of employee assistance while, at the same time, facilitating the profession's ability to engage in continuous quality improvement.

