

A content analysis of print Canadian employee assistance program promotional material

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Abstract

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are services made available to employees and their family members for the purpose of assisting with both ordinary and extraordinary circumstances related to their work and personal lives. This includes issues of addiction, family problems, finances, grief and bereavement, mental health and concerns arising from the nature of work and the workplace, itself. A dominant method of program promotion to enhance service utilization, both historic and contemporary, has been and remains the rudimentary 8.5 x 11 inch three fold print brochure. The marketing of EAPs continues to rely upon information pamphlets that contain explanations of what the purpose of the EAP is, the types of issues it deals with, how to access the program and what services are provided. A content analysis was conducted on 54 brochures voluntarily provided by a range of Canadian organizations that were diverse in terms of their geographic location, sector and method of delivering EAP services. Each brochure was examined regarding problem focus, program access, counselling format, employee concern and graphics. A lack of consistency was found across all five units of analysis which speaks to the lack of a constant message being provided regarding EAP but also to a lack of best practice principles even in this fundamental domain of the field.

Keywords

Brochure, Canada, Content Analysis, Employee Assistance Program, Marketing, Print, Promotion

1. Introduction

Workplaces that actively promote their Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) have greater utilization rates (Azzone, McCann, Hiat, Hodgkin & Horgan, 2009; Lashley-Giancola, & Richardson, 1996). However, with the cost of provision of EAPs now so commonly determined through utilization rate is there always an impetus to maximize knowledge and use of the EAP less it increase the short term year to year contract cost? Thus it was not surprising to find that in a national study of 142 Canadian EAPs only slightly more than one half of the organizations included specific information about the EAP as part of new employee orientation with a similar number providing regular workplace educational events though one quarter did not have any type of specialized promotional material at all

pertaining to their EAP (Csiernik & Csiernik, 2012). Nor should it be surprising to discover given this context that when asked employees themselves stated that their EAP should be more widely publicized and marketed (Walton, 2006).

Educating employees and their family members about their EAP is a key aspect of program promotion and thus increased program utilization as potential users may not realize what the EAP actually does, its benefits, or how to access this resource. Negative perceptions and stigma still exist regarding any form of mental health counselling (Bathie & Pryor, 2011; Brown & Bradley, 2002; Livingston & Boyd, 2010) and with fears of negative job repercussions, particularly when the economy is poor, confidentiality when using EAP remains a paramount concern. Part of the concern regarding confidentiality is directly associated with a lack of knowledge regarding what EAP entails (Bennett & Lehman,

2001), but also with the stigma linked to what is still seen by many as the primary purpose of EAP, resolving alcohol and drug abuse (Buttersworth, 2001; Merrick, Hodgkin, Hiatt, Horgan, & McCann, 2011; Reynolds, Lehman, & Bennett, 2008).

Early studies investigating EAP programming and health promotion (Nay, 1985; Wilson, 1989) examined some very broad-based approaches to how promotion can benefit employees. However, EAP promotion historically involved only print materials such as posters hung throughout the workplace and brochures distributed when a new employee was hired as part of the orientation initiative with brochures remaining among the most prominent means of EAP promotional practice (Attridge, Cahill, Granberry & Herlihy, 2013). While some research regarding the impact of EAP promotion has been done (Bennett & Lehman, 2001; Mazloff, 1998; Takashi, Haruyama, & Higashi, 2012; Zoller, 2004) what has not been examined in any manner is the actual content of the message. While increased knowledge and participant satisfaction can be ascertained for the content of an information seminar how do we tell if the content of other forms of media are having any effect upon enhancing utilization? What message is being sent to employees, and hopefully family members as well, by the most fundamental form of EAP promotion; the EAP brochure?

2. Methodology

Content analysis is a research technique that involves making replicable and valid inferences based upon the actual content of the data. It is an attempt to understand information not as merely a collection of physical events but as a symbolic phenomenon and to approach the analysis in an unobtrusive manner. Content analysis is predictive of the material being examined and should aid in conceptualizing the message that gave rise to the text (Krippendorff, 2012).

Fifty-four EAP brochures were collected from Canadian organizations during the course of a national study (Csiernik & Csiernik, 2012). Eleven (20.3%) of the brochures came from national organizations, nine (16.7%) were located in Western Canada (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Yukon), 28 (51.9%) in Ontario and the remaining six (11.1%) were located in the Maritimes (New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland). Twenty-eight (5.19%) of the brochures came from public sector organizations (government, health care, post-secondary institutions, school boards, social service agencies) while 26 (48.1%) were from private sector companies (agriculture, forestry, insurance, manufacturing, transportation). Finally, half (n=27) of the organizations used private third party providers with the other half (n=27) using internal providers of services. What is also important to note was that four of the external EAP vendors were each using a generic brochure for their different contracts, only changing the name of the organization from brochure to brochure, and thus there were only 45 unique brochures examined.

The content analysis was conducted by two reviewers

independent of each other. They identified key concepts, words phrases and graphics within the brochures that were voluntarily provided by each of the 54 organizations. The analysis was conducted using a conventional frequency approach in understanding how many times a specific word, concept, phrase or graphic appeared. Five distinct units of analysis were developed through the process: problem focus, program access, counselling format, employee concerns, and graphics. For each of these units of analysis several sub-units were developed, each with distinct words, concepts, phrases and for the graphics, logos and pictures.

3. Findings

3.1. Problem Focus

The first variable examined was the specific problem areas for which the EAP was able to provide assistance (Figure 1). The initial observation is that there was no one problem area that appeared in every brochure. Given the historic origins of EAP and the concern in the literature that EAP was really only about treating drug abusers, it is also interesting to note that the most identified issue areas in the brochures was in fact addiction (86.6%) followed by family issues (71.7%), financial (64.4%), marital (53.3%) and stress (46.6%).

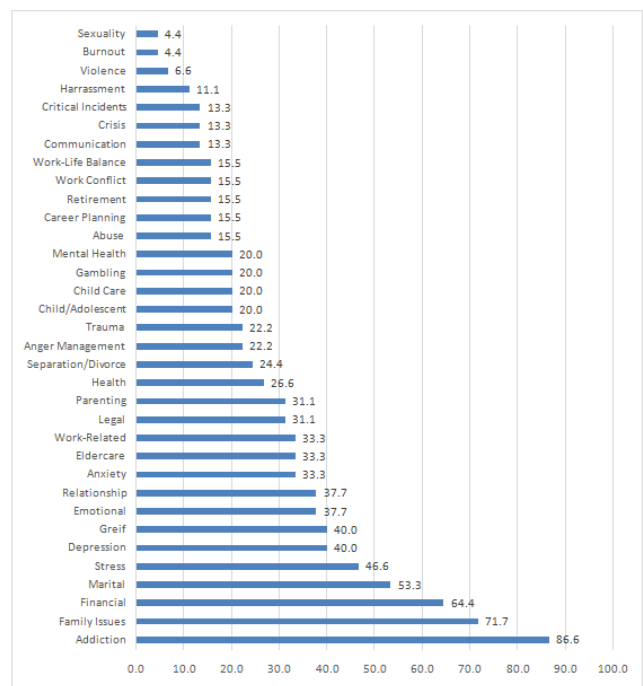


Figure 1. Frequency (%) of Issue Appearing in Brochures

The issues areas were further divided into five themes: family, work, mental health, physical health, and financial/legal. The thematic area that was most commonly presented in the brochures was financial/legal with a cumulative mean score of (47.8). This was followed by family issues with a cumulative mean score 36.4 (Figure 2) for the eight themes. Mental health had the greatest number of associated themes, 15, with the greatest frequency range of

86.6 (addiction) to 4.4 (sexuality) producing a cumulative mean of 28.4 (Figure 3). Physical health was grouped by itself (26.6). Surprisingly given that the intent of Employee Assistance Programming is to be a workplace-based

intervention was that the workplace grouping of six themes had the lowest cumulative score (26.6) with the most frequent term, work-related only appearing in one of every three brochures promoting reasons to use an EAP (Figure 4).

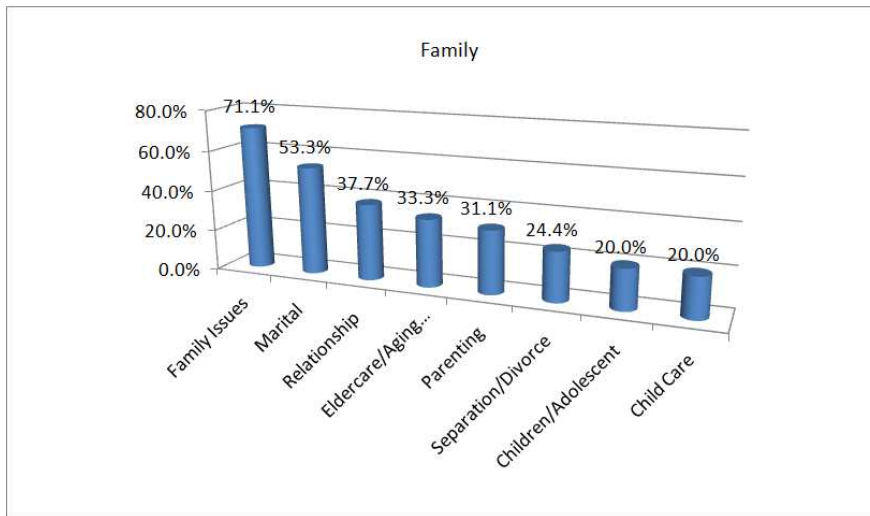


Figure 2. Frequency (%) of Themes Associated with Family Appearing in Brochures

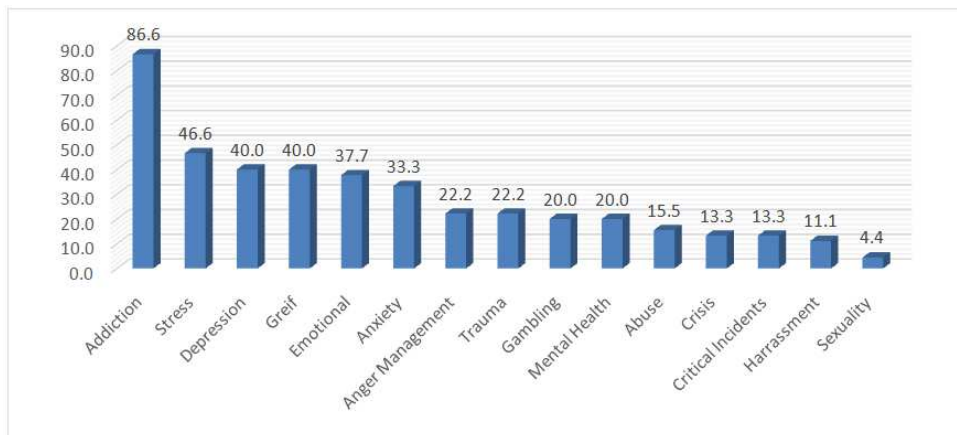


Figure 3. Frequency (%) of Themes Associated with Mental Health Appearing in Brochures

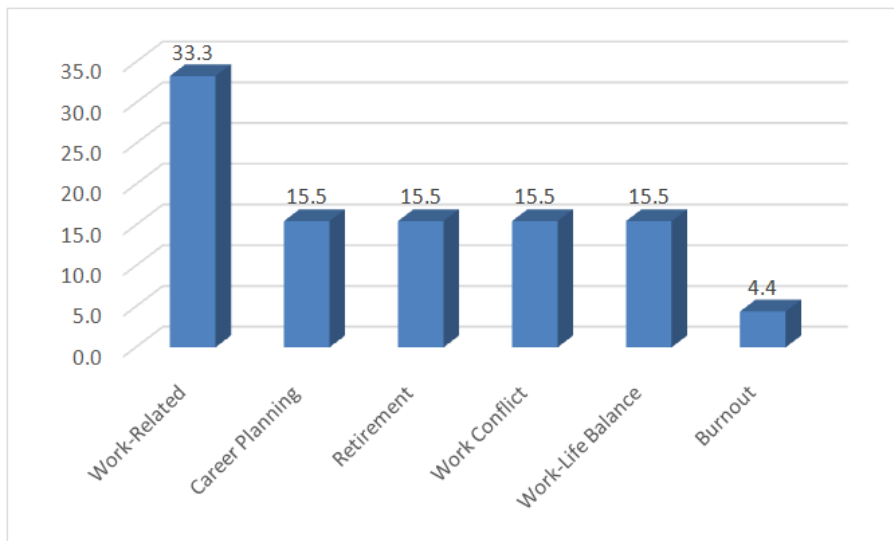


Figure 4. Frequency (%) of Themes Associated with Work Appearing in Brochures

3.2. Program Access

Once an employee or family member has determined that they have an issue that EAP can assist with the next step is to determine how to access the program. The words, key concepts, and phrases used in the analysis of program access were: 24 hour, bilingual/ multilingual, EAP provider, email, emergency, immediate assistance, referral, referral agents/volunteers, self-referral, toll-free number, telephone and website.

The only universal feature found in the entire content analysis occurred in this category, with every brochure offering a specific telephone number to contact the EAP. As well, just under one half (44.4%) of the brochures also provided a toll-free number that could be used to contact the program. In this component of the analysis the most

interesting finding was that not all the brochures actually indicated who the service provider was. Brochures of 19 (70.0%) of the 27 EAPs who were obtaining service from a third party vendor stated that organization’s name in the brochures (42.2% EAP company) while 11 brochures had specific information on how to contact a peer referral/union counsellor for assistance. Thus in total 38 of the 54 (70.4%) brochures had a name to go along with the phone number. Just over one third of the brochures highlighted the fact that the service operated 24 hours per day (37.7%) and that there was also a website that could be accessed for additional information regarding EAP (35.5%). Twenty percent of the brochures provided an email address to access the program as well as a telephone number (Figure 5).

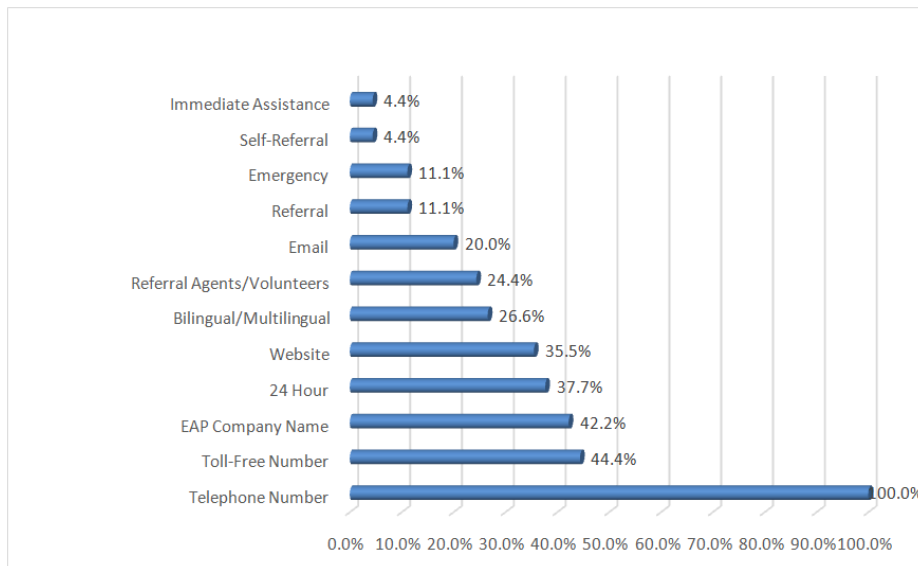


Figure 5. Frequency (%) of Contact/Accessibility Options

3.3. Counselling Format

Another unexpected finding was that the types of counselling services EAPs offered were mentioned in only a small percentage of the sample. Figure 6 illustrates that only 31.1% of brochures made a reference to individual

counselling, with an even smaller percentage, 15.5, making a reference to face-to-face counselling. The fact telephone and online counselling options were available were mentioned in only 13.3%, of the brochures with family, couple and group counselling mentioned in less than ten percent.

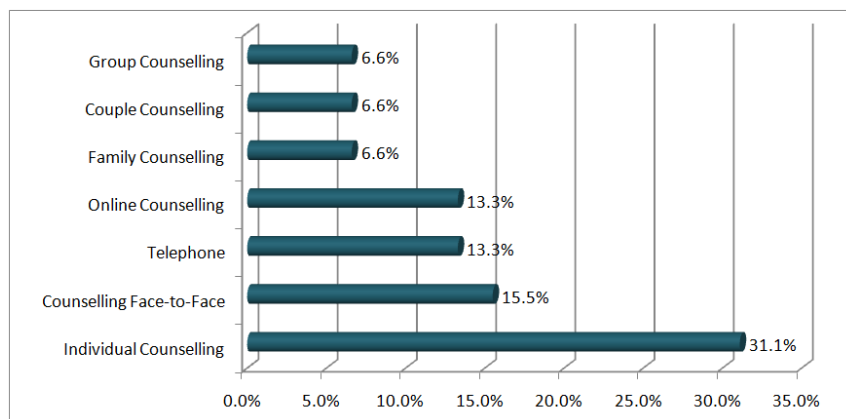


Figure 6. Frequency (%) of References to Counselling Formats Offered

3.4. Employee Concerns

Since the transition from Occupational Alcoholism Programs to EAP there has been a concern that the acronym stood for Employee Assassination Program rather than Employee Assistance Program. Some of those issues are directly addressed by content included in the brochures reviewed. Underscoring EAP is the issue of confidentiality and all but one of the brochures (97.7%) explicitly mentioned that it was a confidential service. The idea of who can access EAP was also prominent in the majority of brochures with employee eligibility mentioned 71.1% and eligibility for family/dependents listed just slightly less at 64.4%, though

obviously not every brochure provided this information. Slightly more than one half of the brochures (51.1%) explicitly stated that there was no cost associated with services through yet another interesting discovery was that 28.8% stated there was a fee for service associated with long term use of the program, though what long term meant was not explicitly indicated in any of the material. The term voluntary was only used in 26.6% of the brochures with a reference that using EAP would have no impact upon job security or job protection appearing in 11.1% of the brochures (Figure 7).

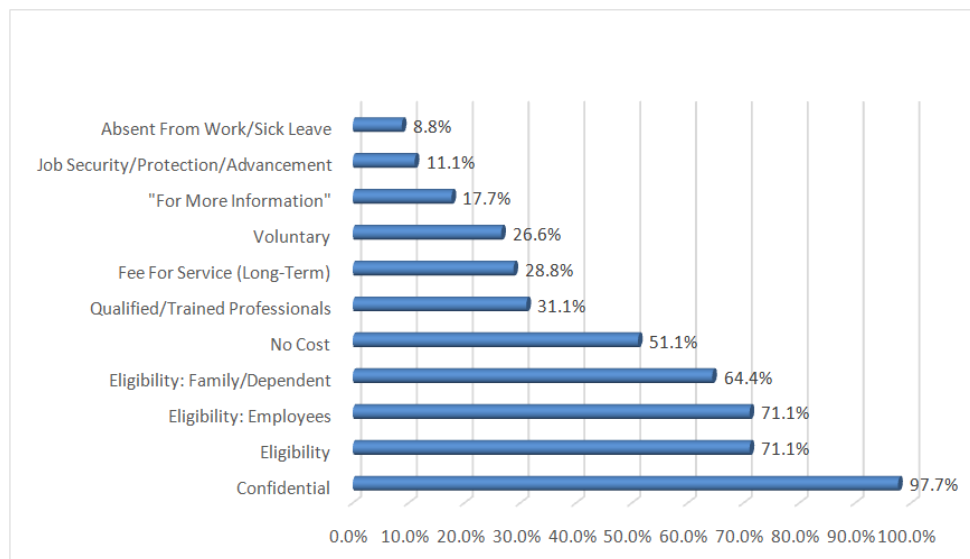


Figure 7. Frequency (%) of Employee Concerns

3.5. Graphics

Social psychology has taught us that the more often we see an image the more acceptable and even attractive it becomes to us. Social branding has become a significant area of marketing and thus for the final unit of this content analysis a visual examination of the EAP brochures was conducted. The units of analysis were divided into four areas:

- type of graphic: pictures (abstract/scenery), pictures (people), drawings (people),
- logos: EAP provider, organization, EAP
- grouping of people in the graphic: individual, family, work group
- ethnicity of pictured people: Caucasian, People of Colour

The most significant findings from this analysis are that 82.2% of the sample had some form of branding with employer logos being the most common (60.0%) followed by a specific EAP vendor corporate logo (33.3%) though there with no unique EAP-specific images identified. Thus, branding was corporate or corporate vendor and sometimes both but not EAP-specific in any instance. One third of the images were of individuals, with 24.4% of the brochures including an image of an identifiable family grouping while

8.8% had some type of mixed group, intended to represent a work group. Of the visuals presented 37.7% of brochures had images of Caucasians while 20% included persons of colour with 17.7% being drawings rather than actual images.

4. Discussion

After deciding to invest in an EAP, which most contemporary medium to large North American organizations have by now done, the next issue to resolve is how to inform potential users about the program. Since the beginning of occupational assistance programming a standard approach has been the EAP brochure. A typical EAP brochure is an 8.5 by 11 inch three-fold piece of paper with six panels whose function is to convey information to a largely naïve audience about a program that they are generally ignorant about but that could potentially help them deal with a life-altering family crisis or even save their job. That is an immense responsibility to convey in a document of a 187 square inches typically comprised of a logo, an image and a few hundred words. Yet even in the age of ever increasing technology and expanding social media this fundamental form of communication remains a primary tool for conveying information regarding Employee Assistance Programming.

The question is how well is this being done? Does this form of media actually contribute to program utilization?

There were 54 brochures reviewed in this study provided voluntarily by a broad cross section of Canadian organizations in terms of their geography, sector and service provider and this diversity may in part explain the range of information found in the various brochures. While all the brochures listed issue areas the EAP would assist with and some information regarding how to access the program there was no consistent message other than the provision of a contact phone number though interestingly addiction was the most common theme while work-related issues was the least included cluster. This latter finding speaks to an underlying concern that EAPs continue to focusing almost exclusively upon issues of employee weakness rather than examining workplace and structural issues that contribute to personal problems.

There was also no consistent message conveyed regarding what EAP counselling actually entailed, which is partially due to the range of actual services provided though not even fundamental information such as who was eligible for program use or a reference to confidentiality appeared on every brochure. Not surprisingly the graphic representations were very diverse but what was disappointing was to find that when there was consistency in messaging it was a result of generic brochures, mass produced with identical visuals with only the company name changed. This was found to be a practice of four private EAP vendors. However, the study's findings need to be tempered first by the fact that a convenience sample was used to obtain the brochures and secondly that there were only 45 unique brochures used in the content analysis.

What this small study does aid in doing is reinforcing what is already well known by those who both study EAP and who provide EAP services; that there is no standard Employee Assistance Program format. It should not be surprising that program promotion varies to such a degree given the range of EAP programs, how they were developed, how they are managed and how the product is delivered. The question that needs to be asked is what messaging can best inform potential users about what EAP is and can provide. The next step in this research process is to determine what the impact of this type of program marketing is, if it is still relevant in 2014 and if so what should be featured in the 187 square inches of available space to maximize its goal of increasing voluntary utilization by both employees and their family members.

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