Implementation of EAPs

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ABSTRACT. *This Research Note describes how to effectively implement employee assistance program services in an organization.*

What Are EAPs? Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are employer-sponsored programs designed to alleviate and assist in eliminating a variety of workplace problems. EAPs typically provide screening, assessments, brief interventions, referrals to other services and case management with longitudinal follow-up for mental health concerns and substance abuse problems. The source of these employee problems can be either personal or work-related. Those who work for EAPs come from many different professions including social workers, psychologists, counselors, substance abuse specialists, occupational nurses, and others. In Canada, the services are called Employee and Family Assistance Programs (EFAPs).

Effective Implementation

Once the right EAP program and delivery partners have been selected, the next question becomes how should it be set up and promoted so that it will be used. The initial planning process to guide the implementation of an EAP should include a review of current company data, reports, and costs. The key stakeholders for the EAP should be identified, engaged, and then asked to collaborate on tailoring a plan to implement the EAP. Specific goals, metrics, and analytics should be developed for each of the defined areas of management focus. These results need to be measured, reported upon, and then will become the basis for making improvements and changes in how the program operates.

The implementation planning process is similar to setting up a sophisticated home theater system. There must be specific "cabling" and compatible "connectors" for each component of the system to achieve potential and play its unique role. Varied functions need to be coordinated and integrated to create a high quality output. The following are suggestions for the implementation and initial promotion of an EAP.

Leadership Support of EAP. Senior executives at the organization can announce the availability of EAP services and help to define management's motives for offering these programs. A joint announcement can be made if there is union involvement in the EAP. The announcement should emphasize the organization's interest is maintaining a healthy workforce and outline the steps it has taken in terms of offering an EAP. This act favorably introduces the EAP into the culture of the organization and encourages its use.

Case Study of EAP Implementation

When Heritage first implemented its EAP, all employees were notified of the new service through a letter of introduction from the CEO. As a follow-up, training sessions, which were supported by the EAP vendor, were also conducted at each of the company's 27 locations to explain the benefit and how to use the EAP. This training was supported with ongoing distribution of informational flyers and business cards, as well as by posting the EAP's toll-free phone number in break rooms.

The EAP vendor also provided training sessions at each location for the company's managers and supervisors. Getting the "buy-in" from the supervisors was the most important factor in the implementation process. Part of the reason that supervisors were supportive of the new EAP is because it was positioned as an avenue of referral for those employees who were struggling on the job because of non-job related reasons. In fact, the supervisory referral has turned into the most beneficial feature of the EAP.

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Company Policy. Part of the implementation process involves formalizing the availability and role of the EAP by including it in the written HR practices and policies for the organization. The purpose is to establish a specific practice guideline regarding how the EAP will operate and function internally. Within the guideline, all goals and responsibilities for the EAP should be clarified.[1] In addition, leave of absence, progressive discipline, sick leave and disability management, Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO), Americans with Disabilities (ADA), and threat management policies should each reference the availability of EAP as a problem solving resource to be utilized at defined times and conditions. Research has shown that there is increased use of the EAP when the company policy features the EAP.[2,3]

Utilization Targets. Merely offering an EAP does not mean it will be used. The company should develop a specific target level of utilization and then create a realistic plan to promote the EAP in order to achieve

the utilization desired. High utilization of the EAP is best achieved through repeated promotional efforts and, most importantly, through positive word of mouth from managers and satisfied employee users of the service. The organization could even conduct a survey to determine what specific kinds of EAP services and topics are of most interest to the employees.[4]

A novel approach for seeing the results of good EAP use is for employers to share their organizational chart with the EAP. When this organizational level information is linked to the HR employee eligibility database that is shared with the EAP, it can create customized reporting that shows the utilization of the EAP by each part of the organization. This kind of EAP reporting is called Organizational Mapping.[5] Part of the appeal of this approach is that it provides a snapshot of the current status of the EAP's relationship with the organization and shows where it can seek to improve and have more interaction in the future.

Promotional Communications. A necessary component of implementation is to maintain regular communications with employees and family members regarding the availability the EAP and the importance of being proactive concerning its use. All of the staff in the organization should be encouraged to approach the EAP with an attitude that any one of them could need to use the service at some time. From an employer perspective, offering the EAP sends the message to employees that "Your individual well-being is important." Communications can note that the EAP offers self-help tools and educational resources, which can and should be used. Some places see the EAP as a resource of last resort, when it is much better to create expectations that no problem is too small or too big to get help. Employees should be encouraged to have a "low-threshold" for deciding when it is appropriate to use the EAP.

The Internet. Recent years have witnessed an increasing use of the Internet in the promotion and delivery of EAP.[6,7] Web-based services have allowed many employees to become more familiar with the purpose of EAPs. Websites for EAPs are becoming more elaborate and offering access to provider lists, tip sheets, online health and wellness presentations, live Webinars, and self-assessment tools. Some EAP

websites are embedded within the larger company intranet or HR website.

One advantage of a web-based approach is a lessening of the reluctance some people have about using EAP services.[8] Offering clinical services and prevention over the Internet, where it can be accessed at any time with relative anonymity and complete privacy, might also reduce the stigma normally associated with mental health concerns and substance abuse problems. For example, at Ernst & Young, when they combined the website functions for the EAP, Work-Life and HR/benefits into one website, the result was an increase in the use of the EAP and of the Work-Life services – from 8% and 12%, respectively as separate services, to a combined 25% annually versus 20% for the year before when combining both services.[9]

The use of online or web-based tools for the delivery of *clinical* counseling between EAP clinicians and employees is advancing as new practice model.[10] With careful attention to ethical and privacy issues, the online method of counseling is being used successfully at some EAPs and its use is likely to only increase in the future.[11,12]

Manager Training. A successful implementation should provide trainings to encourage managers to make both formal referrals to the EAP when certain events occur and to also make informal "positive" referrals for employees where there are indications of personal issues or other needs. Managers should be alert to changes in behavior or information indicating the presence of individual issues regarding relationships between colleagues or among subordinates. Supervisors can be taught how to establish a proactive approach to identify personal and behavioral issues and take appropriate action to involve the EAP.[13]

Managers sometimes just accept problem employee situations, because "that's just the way it is, and there's nothing I can do about it." This failure to address problems can negatively impact the workplace. Research has shown that there is increased use of the EAP when there is greater training provided to managers and supervisors about the EAP.[2,3]

Conclusions

Implementing EA services is an important final step after the employee assistance provider and program have been selected. After the initial review of organizational records and resources, the EAP should be promoted with the support of company leadership. Company policy and other HR/benefits materials need to be updated to include the EAP. The organization should also set utilization targets for how much the EAP is expected to be used and what components of the program are emphasized. Another critical task for implementation is to create a range of promotional communications and other visibility tactics to inform others about the EAP service. The endorsement of supervisors and management is critical to the success of an EAP and thus trainings should be designed and delivered to all supervisors and managers.

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