

Strategic commentary

How the EAP can boost productivity and performance

Zofia Bajorek and Andrew Kinder

The evidence is there to support the idea that employee assistance programmes (EAPs) work in terms of helping reduce sickness absence and the kinds of mental health problems that lead to presenteeism and a workplace malaise. But as a service, it's been pigeonholed. Its reputation is that it's the counselling service, the safety net for HR that helps managers avoid challenging personal issues around relationships, debt and mental health.

The limited use of the EAP is an issue highlighted by a new report by Lancaster University's The Work Foundation. Just 9 per cent of HR manager respondents involved with the research into the use of EAPs had attempted to evaluate their EAP in terms of a cost utility benefit or return on investment via the impact on sickness absence, productivity, performance or engagement. Thirty-one per cent admitted there had been no attempt to evaluate the quality or impact of the EAP and 9 per cent didn't know whether there was any evaluation. In the study, HR managers also pointed to an ongoing stigma associated with the EAP, as a counselling service primarily for staff with mental health issues.

Potentially there's an under-use of services, which might well be the missing link in helping organisations

improve performance and productivity among staff left dazed by growing pressures.

But what can organisations do? In practical terms, it means re-thinking when managers and their line reports should be using the services available. It shouldn't be the last resort, but a more natural source of support around everyday concerns at home and in work, so managing finances as well as who to better deal with relationship issues at work, give up smoking, how to overcome periods of stress and generally stay feeling healthy and positive.

Managers at all levels should be encouraged to play a more active role in promotion and in positioning what the EAP actually is. They need to ensure people know that the service is there primarily for prevention, as a way of avoiding situations that can spiral into far more serious problems. It also means think about the language used around the EAP, being clear it's not only about counselling.

A huge step forward will be to start measuring the impact. There's more scope for demonstrating how your use of the service is saving the business money – just simply in terms of calculating the numbers of cases referred, the potential for absence and forecasting the savings from what was avoided by comparison with sickness absence

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and other impacts on management time, etc.

A national map of psychological well-being in the UK workplace would help employers, well-being support providers and the government in better understanding and managing the complex issues involved.

There's a model of what might be possible in the insurance industry, where businesses share information for mutual benefit. By sharing data on levels of usage and tracking what issues are being raised and by which employee groups, we'd have a much stronger basis from which to get a grip on what's happening in terms of employee well-being, and where HR needs to focus resources.

The most common reason for organisations not trying to evaluate their EAP in the research was a lack of pressure from senior executives. The EAP is just considered to be the "right thing" to offer. There's a fundamental perception of EAPs as a "cost-effective" or "far less expensive" option than other well-being improvement schemes. But in the context of economic

uncertainties and the availability of data from other areas of workplace operations, how long will this lack of scrutiny last?

Sharing data through mapping would open up the potential for benchmarking EAP services, even if it's only at a simple level. For both HR and EAP providers, there's the opportunity to demonstrate a hard basis of evidence for return on investment by tracking positive outcomes against standard costs for long-term absence and other workplace disruption. It's so important that organisations move away from only seeing the measurable as important. Instead, there needs to be this kind of converted and collaborative effort into making what's increasingly critical to organisations, the well-being of employees, effectively measurable.

No-one would argue that reaching a standard measure for use of services and return on investment figures will be easy. We're in a situation where the range of EAP services and forms of delivery are very different, and sometimes confusing for the buyers to

understand how they compare and the value for money involved.

The EAP should form part of a virtuous circle by integrating the service into wider health and well-being strategies, tracking impact and justifying ongoing investment and attention to the role of both physical and mental well-being.

Although EAPs are already successfully helping individuals to cope, they need to proactively support the organisation, whether it's tackling a culture of long hours, the glass ceiling or a hotspot of bullying and harassment, and give employers the data, resources and support to bring down these barriers to performance and productivity.

The report "The evolution of employee assistance: investigating the use, impact and reach of EAPs in today's organisations" can be downloaded from www.eapa.org.uk

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