Quality EAPs Carry Their Weight

by Ann D. Clark, Ph.D.
Responding to modern employees’ expectations of their employers, employee assistance programs (EAPs) are providing an array of services unheard of even a few years ago.
With the rise of Millennials in the workplace and 24/7 work/life blending, employee engagement is dominating conversations about benefits. Modern employees are “homing from work” and working from home, expecting much more than a paycheck from employers. Businesses are tasked with recognizing and addressing ever-changing workforce needs and supporting employees both personally and professionally.

Investing in practices that produce a less stressed and more satisfied and engaged workforce is important to an organization’s bottom line. One source says that highly engaged workforces generate 29% more revenue, have a 44% higher retention rate and increase annual profits by $2,400 per employee on average.¹ But nearly 70% of employees are not engaged at work.² Companies are responding by increasingly investing in benefits and perks (28% of U.S. companies increased employee benefits in 2014³), from mainstream benefits like healthcare to top-of-the-line services like concierge and trendy perks like egg freezing and unlimited vacation time.

The Contemporary EAP: A Tool for Employee Engagement

The employee assistance program (EAP) industry is also changing to meet the needs of a diverse, high-tech, global workforce. For decades, EAPs have been standard inclusions in workplace benefits packages. In the United States, over 97% of companies with more than 5,000 employees have EAPs, as do 80% of companies with 1,000 to 5,000 employees and 75% of companies with 250 to 1,000 employees.⁴

Often overlooked and undervalued, the EAP has evolved from its early origins as a substance abuse resource to become a multifaceted support program that works to mitigate the effects of substance abuse, emotional health issues, work stress, life-balance difficulties and many other stressors that affect employees and the workplace. An EAP with strong promotion and high utilization can help solve the problem of employee disengagement and generate a significant return on investment in several ways. Employees who use EAP services receive help for the issues affecting them at work and at home, leading to improved health, happiness and performance, increased productivity and morale, and a reduction in absenteeism and workplace conflicts.

A comprehensive, traditional EAP program includes the following services, according to the Employee Assistance Professionals Association:

- 24-hour telephone response, with qualified EAP professionals providing immediate support
- Confidential assessment and counseling by licensed, professional counselors
- Referral support for long-term or specialized care, with customized referrals based on client preferences or needs
- Emergency intervention and critical incident stress management when the office is threatened by natural disasters, violence, terrorism, etc.
- Expertise in substance abuse, as this issue significantly affects the workplace
- Dependent and domestic partner coverage
- Guaranteed confidential recordkeeping.⁵

A contemporary EAP expands beyond basic services, offering a wide range of creative perks and innovative services to support employees and family members in every aspect of life:

- Comprehensive life-management support including child-care, elder-care and pet-care assistance
- Legal and financial consultation, including do-it-yourself document preparation and identity theft protection and recovery services
- Personal assistance referrals for busy employees
- Threat assessment and violence prevention consultation and support services
- Comprehensive veteran assistance services
- Virtual and Skype® clinical sessions
- 24/7 access through mobile apps and dynamic websites

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¹ Source: AON Hewitt.
² Source: AON Hewitt.
³ Source: AON Hewitt.
⁴ Source: AON Hewitt.
⁵ Source: Employee Assistance Professionals Association.
High-quality EAPs also provide significant support for human resources (HR) and management:

- A dedicated account management team
- Virtual or on-site orientations and trainings
- On-demand training materials
- Management consultation for any workplace challenge or need
- Formal management referrals to address employee performance issues
- Utilization reports with insights gleaned from workforce data.

The Best Ways to Promote an EAP

With contemporary EAPs now providing a broad scope of employee and management support services, employers may find this a good time to revisit how to better use and promote the EAP at the workplace. The major challenge facing EAPs is that employees do not fully understand what benefits are available or how to access them. EAPs must also overcome the stigma that services are relevant only for those with emotional health or substance abuse issues or in times of crisis.

High-quality EAPs are strategic partners, working collaboratively and continuously with HR and other company stakeholders to promote a happier, healthier workforce. Partnership marketing is one element of robust management support, where committees composed of EAP personnel, HR and management meet regularly to strategize promotion and find creative ways to engage employees.

EAP partnership marketing best practices include:

- **An implementation plan**, including a time line to establish goals, notify and train stakeholders, create materials and launch the program
- **A kickoff campaign** that begins with an announcement e-mail to notify and excite employees about their new EAP benefit and instructions on how to access services
- **Website and portal integration** with direct links to program access, materials and information across internal company sites and portals
- **Social media postings and interaction**—cross promotion on company and EAP social media platforms to drive program visibility and utilization
- **Video marketing**—posting and sharing of orientation and program videos
- **A user acquisition strategy** that encourages all eligible users, including employees and family members, to visit their EAP landing page, register for an account, download mobile apps and follow the EAP on social media for the latest benefit news and announcements and 24/7 program access
- **Content updating** including review and revision of all company printed and digital benefits information such as the employee handbook, new hire information and online resources
- **On-site ambassadors**—HR representatives, managers and supervisors who have been cultivated to drive program referrals, including through strong orientations, continued refresher training and ongoing communication and interaction
- **Crisis response on social media**, with EAP outreach postings featured across social media platforms to company locations impacted by critical incidents (e.g., severe weather; workplace, local or national tragedies) reminding employees that support and services are available
- **Content marketing** such as creation of an annual EAP promo-

**takeaways**

- A well-promoted and highly used EAP can help an organization have a healthier, happier and more productive workforce with less absenteeism and fewer workplace conflicts.
- Some EAPs go beyond the customary services to include creative perks and innovative services.
- Often, employees don’t understand what EAP services are available or how to access them or believe EAPs are available only for employees with emotional health or substance abuse issues or in times of crisis.
- EAP use may increase if information about the benefit is integrated with an organization’s other benefits, with a single point of access.
tional calendar with a month-by-month outline of content including ongoing e-mail blasts and newsletters (covering seasonal topics and services available), scheduled management trainings, regular blog and social media postings as well as any company-requested targeted messages.

- **EAP attendance at company events** (e.g., benefits fairs, health fairs, employee appreciation days, etc.) when applicable.

By working with their EAP provider and employing these best practices, companies can build program awareness and increase program use.

A client with over 100 locations nationwide wanted to reinvigorate its benefit program following two years of moderately successful utilization rates. The goal was to ensure users who could benefit from the support services knew what was available and could access services instantly.

To achieve this goal, a steering committee was formed comprised of customer stakeholders across management, marketing, brand, training and legal. A three-month implementation plan covered creation of new materials, development of online tools and a strategy to raise visibility. As part of the engagement strategy, a new benefits website was created that allowed users to submit direct requests for services, live-chat with EAP specialists and search for a wide range of available resources. The steering committee agreed on an official launch date, with a promotional plan that included e-mail announcements, trainings and video orientations, social media promotional posts as well as posts of benefit information across internal company websites.

After a targeted relaunch campaign including new interactive online tools, the organization saw a 166% increase from the previous year in users accessing services and 20-25% increased utilization during and immediately after e-mail outreach campaigns, as compared with months in which no targeted efforts were made.

EAPs as strategic partners engage both management and employees by making services visible, responsive and management-friendly. An EAP benefits package that sits quietly and invisibly in an employee handbook cannot produce the positive results that an actively promoted EAP can create in the workplace.

### EAP Integration With Other Benefits

A single point of access for a company’s entire suite of benefits can help address the needs of employers and employees in a comprehensive way. Most benefit platforms do not offer plug-ins or easy integrations with third-party software and applications. But creating simple, intuitive user experiences—and easy benefits administration for HR and management—can be important to driving benefits engagement.

Innovative EAPs are using compatible technology and a holistic approach to employee well-being by integrating support, services and systems that traditionally have existed in silos, from “perk packages” that bundle multiple benefits, to wellness programs that incorporate physical, emotional and financial wellness, to concierge services to help employees meet responsibilities personally and professionally, to software solutions for payroll and HR systems, benefits administration, open enrollment and more. Integrated EAPs can also leverage technology and resources to support corporate initiatives (e.g., training, leadership development, 401(k) participation, compliant leave, reduced absenteeism, etc.) through strategic benefits communication and partnership marketing.

### Gamification: The Next Frontier

According to a recent survey, 78% of employees are using games-based motivation at work, leading to increased productivity for 90% of workers. Advanced gamification applies game mechanics and tools to create a more entertaining and engaging educational experience. The goal of a gamified benefits experience is to deliver enduring value. Features include engagement strategy, personalized content and incentives in-

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including both extrinsic rewards (i.e., prizes) to draw users in and intrinsic rewards (e.g., sense of purpose, understanding, mastery) to keep them coming back. A gamified benefits experience can increase the effectiveness of corporate communications, reduce training time, motivate habitual engagement with benefits and utilization of EAP services, and provide increased return on an employer’s benefits investment.

An increasingly tech-savvy workforce, combined with Millennials’ easy acceptance of work/life integration, is changing the way companies support employees. EAPs need to be quick to adapt to industry and cultural trends. Strong EAPs that offer comprehensive services, robust management support, proactive promotion and dynamic response to workforce changes provide companies with powerful tools for employee engagement.

Endnotes