

Go Hybrid...Get More Mileage Out of Your EAP

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The Situation

Beginning in late 2008, utilization data of Corporate Counseling Associates' (CCA) book of business showed a sharp up-tick in overall Employee Assistance Program (EAP) usage related to the steep economic downturn and the effects of the recession. This increase was apparent in almost every industry.

Employees Want In-Person Counseling But Are Reluctant to Leave the Workplace

CCA counselors began to notice another interesting sub-trend: an increasing number of employees were reluctant to use the in-person counseling benefit. Fewer callers were willing to schedule these off-campus, in-person sessions, particularly during the day, and even after traditional work hours. Typically, when employees are stressed about personal issues or have difficulties managing work challenges, they prefer to speak with an EAP counselor in person. We wondered why employees were not taking greater advantage of the opportunity to meet with our counselors face to face.

Our clients were observing related trends:

- Many of the Human Resources liaisons at our client companies were telling us that employees were reporting **increased levels of stress and expressing strong feelings of uncertainty and anger** about job security after layoffs and company re-structuring.
- Health Services staff reported that **drop-in visits were up**, with more employees presenting with anxiety, panic attacks and symptoms of depression, including some with alarming thoughts of hurting themselves or others.
- Benefits managers were seeing **more short-term disability claims and skyrocketing behavioral health care costs** for stress-related mental health and medical issues.

A deeper look at this phenomenon revealed employees were hesitant to schedule appointments because they were too anxious about taking time away from work to use the EAP. Many were survivors of downsizing and felt that any extended absence from the workplace might be seen by a manager as a strike against them and might make them vulnerable in future layoffs.

Risk factors for both individuals and employers were rising. This confluence of forces—increased stress in the workplace and the reluctance to take time away from work to get help—cried out for a response and an innovative approach.

The CCA Hybrid Model Is Born

CCA developed a simple solution—adding an onsite component—to make EAP counseling services more accessible to employees. With onsite services, employees can see

counselors at the workplace and spend less time away from their desks, while continuing to have all the resources available through their existing full-service EAP.

Basic “Model T” EAP

To better appreciate the efficacy of the hybrid approach, it’s instructive to look at the evolution of EAPs. EAPs first appeared in the 1940’s as a response to senior level executives who had serious alcohol or drug abuse problems. Organizations found it more cost effective to provide counseling and treatment than to go through the time-consuming process of replacing key executives. Originally housed internally within the organization—usually in the Medical Department—EAPs provided counseling, primarily, for addictions. Over time, services gradually expanded to include counseling for personal and work-related problems, as well as dependent care concerns.

History shows that the model of the original “internal” EAP had distinct advantages, including:

- Strong utilization,
- Effective identification of employees with substance abuse problems,
- High probability that managers would refer employees to the program and
- Enhanced opportunities for partnership with the organization.

According to a 2000 survey of 54 Fortune 500 firms conducted by EAP Support Systems and published in Behavioral Health Management onsite counselors were more likely to “provide training to supervisors, meet with human resources staff, cultivate referral relationships and acquire specific knowledge of company policies, procedures and corporate culture.”

The main disadvantage of internal EAP programs was the perception that services were not entirely confidential. This view was primarily related to the fact that counselors were also employees of the firm. Another constraint was the limited array of services and locations available. Organizations wanted to provide more comprehensive services to all employees in multiple locations and they wanted to extend access to family members. This need to expand the reach of program services led to the present day inclusive model known as the Work/Life Assistance Program.

Trading Up

Though some in-house EAP programs still exist, most employers today prefer the external program delivery model. This option offers program flexibility, comprehensive services, a perception of greater confidentiality, wider reach to all employees (including remote workers) and is consistent with current corporate outsourcing trends and practices.

The National Business Group on Health 2008 Employer’s Guide to Employee Assistance Programs reports that a majority of employers offer EAPs through external organizations: either independent, hospital-based or stand-alone (40%) or health plan/managed care (29%) organizations. Fewer employers provide internal EAPs using staff (7%) or contracted

vendors (24%) to provide services. It's unclear how many organizations deliver services in a variety of ways.

Switch to a Hybrid to Jumpstart Utilization

We suggest adding another critical component to your existing external program...onsite access. The Hybrid EAP model combines the best of both worlds. It gives a face to your existing external program. It enhances reach, capability and effectiveness, and boosts overall utilization. The availability of onsite counseling also sends a strong message that the company appreciates the time constraints employees are dealing with and cares about their health and well-being.

Onsite counseling is an effective way to lower barriers to access:

- Time-starved employees are seeking **convenient support** on matters that distract them from productive work. The recession and high unemployment continue to have a profound psychological effect on employee well-being and engagement at work. Employees are putting in longer hours, facing greater challenges balancing work/life demands and exhibiting more anxiety and fear of job loss. Reports of stress associated with managing change and uncertainty continue to climb.
- Personal **time is a precious commodity**. Onsite counseling draws in those employees who might otherwise be reluctant to see a counselor because of the travel time and costs associated with making an appointment outside office hours.
- “Just in time” access creates an immediate benefit. Onsite counseling provides an **easy opportunity to address situational work-related stress** while the desire for help is paramount. An employee having a tough day can work with the counselor to develop specific strategies and skills for gaining control of their situation.
- Targeted counseling **helps employees re-focus their mental energy on work**. Employees are coached in managing unsettling emotions, including frustration and anger, before these feelings escalate and create performance problems or lead to loss of motivation and enthusiasm. Quality of life at work improves and ultimately translates into a more productive workplace.
- Managers seem more comfortable using the onsite component. A positive experience with a counselor on giving feedback to an employee with performance problems **provides critical support in keeping employees on task**. Managers are also more likely to refer troubled employees before they spiral to the final stages of performance management. This collaborative teamwork translates into improved manager effectiveness, employee engagement, productivity and retention.

Boosting Business Mileage

Let's look at the rise in healthcare costs associated with stress-related illnesses and employee use of mental health services. There is no lack of evidence from research studies that make the business case for providing greater access to workplace-based

mental health services through EAPs. These programs help employees address unhealthy habits, stress and complex personal problems affecting health, well-being and productivity.

A recent annual survey of employee benefits by the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM, 2009) indicates EAP services were widely available to employees at more than 75% of companies in the United States. Fundamentally, the services provided through an EAP are known to contribute to the core vitality of an organization. Productivity is the bedrock of any thriving and growing organization and a good quality EAP's *raison d'être* is to support job performance.

A survey of healthcare trends conducted by Hewitt Associates shows that 42% of employers report they have a formal policy or strategic health care plan in place. EAP is a critical component used by 35% of companies incorporating behavioral health programs into their strategies.

Shirley Wang who writes about health issues for *The Wall Street Journal*, reports that some employers are expanding their EAPs as a way to control behavioral health care costs associated with the new parity laws. While a culture of health is still emerging in many organizations, there's an increasing interest among employers in taking a holistic approach to improving both the physical and mental health of their workforces.

An onsite counseling component helps the organization address these key issues:

- EAP counselors partnering with on-site health services providers offer **a holistic approach to health care**.
- Employees with medical health-related issues *can address co-existing emotional or psychological problems* through the EAP often **accelerating improvement and shortening recovery time**.
- EAP counselors support health services staff, acting as a “go to” person when employees come in with serious psychiatric issues. An employee experiencing a psychotic episode or suicidal thoughts can be **assessed immediately while the EAP counselor and Health Services staff work as a team to provide urgent care**. One client firm found a correlation between the advent of onsite EAP counseling and a reduced number of employees needing to go to the local emergency room services for stress-related anxiety attacks during the workday.
- Human Resources also benefits from easy, immediate access to an on-site counselor. If an urgent employee relations issue arises, the EAP can partner with HR to address the crisis without delay.

- Those who are initially reluctant to try counseling find it easier to speak with a mental health professional when someone they trust makes the recommendation. Employees typically trust Health Services staff. This trust is extended to the EAP when the physician and nursing staff recommend use of counseling.
- As more employees access short-term counseling through the EAP, ***mental health care costs go down.***

See for Yourself...Take a Test Drive

Many CCA client companies already enjoy the benefits of the hybrid model. These include organizations in financial services, publishing, transportation, academia, media/entertainment and hotel/hospitality industries. Here's the best way to get started:

- ***Set up a pilot program*** for 3 – 6 months. Offer onsite counseling on a trial basis to assess employee interest.
- ***Start small***, a little goes a long way. The commitment does not have to be five days a week; even a few hours once a week can make a significant impact.
- ***Talk to other HR professionals*** about their experience. CCA consultants are happy to introduce you to clients now using the hybrid model.

Promotion Keeps Your Program Running Smoothly

On-going and multi-faceted promotion is crucial to creating employee awareness of EAP services and essential to strong utilization. Studies show that in workplaces where employers comprehensively promote the EAP and in which EAP staff provide onsite activities, employees are more likely to use the counseling service.

Following are some proven strategies for optimizing utilization of onsite counseling program. All rely upon consistent promotion of the program through your organization's various "official" and "unofficial" communication channels:

- ***Roll it out with a fanfare.*** Ask company stakeholders to support the effort; convey their belief in the value of onsite EAP counseling.
- ***Enlist your CEO to be your champion.*** An introductory email from the CEO will go a long way. A message that using the program is viewed as a pro-active approach to maintaining well-being and productivity helps reduce the stigma associated with EAP services.
- ***"Brand" your onsite program.*** Advertise counselors as work/life coaches. Unfortunately, the perception that EAPs are only for individuals with serious mental health or substance abuse problems remains despite efforts to change those outdated views. Work/life coaching and EAP counseling share similar goals and methodology including assessment, problem identification, strategy development and action plans for resolving concerns in a short period of time.

- **Consider “coaching” versus “counseling.”** Interesting fact: we have found that more managers and supervisors use this service when it is promoted as work/life coaching instead of EAP counseling.
- **Partner with HR.** Engage HR as a key partner in promoting the value of onsite counseling. Invite the counselor to an HR team meeting to talk about the program.
- **Get manager buy-in.** Establish buy-in at the management level to enhance the reputation of the service. Manager support is crucial to employee comfort in accessing the service. Managers can create unnecessary barriers to employee access when they don’t understand the value of the program and its connection to productivity.
- **Create buzz.** Host special events like *Coffee with a Counselor* or *Lunch with a Life Coach* to generate more employee interest.
- **Reach employees using all available media.** Use your company Intranet, Web and print materials. We’ll show you how to make the most of these communication channels.
- **Take a more holistic approach.** Incorporate wellness seminars, manager training and educational programs into your communication strategy.
- **Employ creative partnering strategies.** The onsite counselor can collaborate with other onsite providers. For example, CCA often co-presents programs on wellness with Health Service nurses or health coaches, focusing on the behavioral aspects of weight management or stress reduction.
- **They’ll hear it through the grapevine.** Count on word of mouth promotion once the onsite program gets rolling. Grateful employees will spread the news. As the reputation of the EAP is enhanced, company return on investment (ROI) increases.

Confidentiality ...A “Must Have” Feature

In an atmosphere of belt-tightening, re-structuring and downsizing, many employees are concerned that needing help with personal or work issues implies weakness and may ultimately lead to negative perceptions regarding capability and productivity.

Organizations with onsite medical centers have the advantage of locating the EAP office in Health Services, thus preserving employee anonymity. If your organization doesn’t have an onsite health center, don’t let that be a barrier to instituting a program. Instead, let us help you determine alternative settings for your onsite program.

Refuel and Recharge

According to Shelly Wolff, Watson Wyatt’s national leader of health and productivity consulting, “Companies are finding some relief from high benefit costs by investing in programs that improve the health of their workers.” Wolff continues, “Workers who haven’t lost their jobs are under great amounts of stress and are increasingly turning to

their employer for advice, treatment or assistance that goes beyond basic coverage when they get sick.”

The Watson Wyatt survey of 282 U.S. companies found that: 47% of employers are seeing an increase in their workers’ use of the EAP. General research on effectiveness demonstrates that employers get the strongest return on their investment when they use an external program in combination with an onsite counseling.

The hybrid model combining external and internal EAP services provides the best of both worlds. It supports employee well-being, engagement, motivation and productivity. Adding onsite counseling to your existing Work/Life Assistance Program creates the most effective model for delivering timely and critical mental health services by:

- Reducing the incidence of stress-related illness
- Keeping employees productive and focused at work
- Providing easy access to counseling services
- Reducing mental health care costs
- Helping employees adapt to changing work requirements
- Reducing absenteeism
- Making employees feel supported by the organization

Customize Your Hybrid EAP

We are available to speak with you about how the hybrid EAP approach can better serve your organization and support its culture by keeping your employees healthy and productive.

To explore how this approach can work for your organization contact us at 212.686.6827 or info@corporatecounseling.com

“ Access to excellent and effective Health Care is becoming increasingly more challenging and expensive. Our on-site EAP counselor has been a tangible benefit and confidential resource for our employees. She is an empathetic, objective licensed mental health care practitioner. Face-to-face onsite counseling sessions can have an immediate positive impact in your employees lives.”

*Lynn Foster, R.N. HBO Health Center Manager
Home Box Office*

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