

# Employee Assistance Programs: Some Background and Employment Opportunities

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## Abstract

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are services offered to employees as part of their fringe benefit package. An EAP can include a wide variety of programs such as health and fitness programs, smoking cessation and short term counseling. Employers often hire mental health professionals to offer short term counseling to employees as part of a comprehensive EAP package. Mental Health services can range from career planning to counseling on personal issues and substance abuse. EAPs are growing in popularity and are now utilized by increasing numbers of major corporations. Mental health practitioners can significantly expand their practices by contracting with employee assistance programs to provide services.

## Key Words

EAP, Employee Assistance Programs, Mental Health

## Introduction

An Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is a service offered to employees by their employers as part of the fringe benefit package. It can include a wide variety of health and fitness-related services such as memberships to health clubs, smoking cessation

classes, weight reduction support groups and substance abuse programs. The mental health component of an EAP often includes the provision of a wide variety of services- from career planning and short-term counseling, to finding suitable child or elder care, intervening in family problems, dealing with grief and loss, substance abuse, and stress management (Pancratz,2000). The mental health components of EAPs are beneficial to both the company and the employee. As employees resolve personal problems, productivity in the workplace increases.

EAP programs began in the 1940s. At that time they typically served as company-directed alcohol treatment programs. EAPs did not gain popularity, however, until the 1970s when the impact of drug and alcohol abuse was becoming an overwhelming problem in the workplace (Atkinson, 2001). This led to companies developing mandatory programs that required employees to seek help, whether they wanted it or not. A distrust and dislike for EAP programs evolved because of the autocratic nature of the companies involved.

Over the past 30 years, EAPs began to develop other avenues of helping employees, such as mental health care and stress management. However, the EAP continued to suffer from the stigma of being a program where employees were sent as punishment for bad behavior. This stigma still exists today in some quarters. EAPs suffered another setback in the 1980s when independent researchers from the Wall Street Journal uncovered employers using the information gathered from employee assistance programs to spy on employees (News Briefs, 1994). Employees stayed away because they could not risk higher insurance premiums or loss of employment because of the confidentiality breaches of these so-called helpful programs. The rate of participation dropped and EAPs did not anticipate an optimistic future. Fortunately, over the past decade, they have evolved into more employee-friendly, ethical and trustworthy programs.

The mental health components of EAPs were originally developed to treat drug and alcohol abuse. Today, the expanded role of mental health in EAP programs is rapidly becoming a popular and cost-effective portion of a comprehensive benefit package for companies and their employees. The company that once provided a paycheck and a pat on the back, is now providing a full spectrum of services to the employee. In return, this company is losing fewer employees and gaining greater productivity, fewer sick days and higher morale among its workers. Companies realize that firing and re-hiring employees is inefficient, both logistically and fiscally. If it is possible to resolve an employee's difficulties through counseling, the company will not have to hire a new employee, train that employee, or a the lapse in work created by the difficult situation. In addition, a company's initial EAP investment is quickly regained when medical claims, sick days, and low productivity are diminished or eliminated due to an employee's accessing the EAP services (Atkinson, 2001). In turn, an employee tends to become a more devoted and confident member of the company's work force because the employee experiences the company as supportive of workers, not only on the job, but in their personal and home environments as well (Cohen, 2001). For employees, the mental health component of EAPs act as a helpful solution to a stressful and uncertain work and/or family environment. The average employee encounters a variety of work and family issues.

Knowing that services which effectively confront these issues are offered confidentially and without cost, adds to an employee's security and mental well-being.

Today, EAPs are typically confidential programs which commit to employees that employers or insurance companies will not use information gathered against employees. This is beneficial to both employees and employers because it can allow for both to achieve their respective goals of support and productivity. As a result, EAP programs are growing both nationally and internationally. The rapid growth in EAPs over the past few years can translate into an increase in employment opportunities for mental health providers. Companies either hire or contract with mental health practitioners to provide services for their EAP programs. Usually a company will expect the mental health provider to have some experience in providing EAP services, or at least have some knowledge of the EAP model of helping, before a contract is offered.

### The EAP Model

The mental health component of EAPs is not meant to be a long-term counseling experience. It is usually short term and meant to find solutions to difficulties when possible, or to act as a referral vehicle by connecting an employee to services external to the company. A mental health professional can expect to spend a maximum of six to 10 sessions with clients, guiding them to developing effective solutions to difficulties encountered at the workplace or at home. If this cannot be accomplished, EAP counselors help employees find the services they need for more long term care.

The general pattern of work expected from an Employee Assistance Program's mental health practitioners, is very similar to brief solution-focused therapy models that are prevalent in the literature today. The counselor listens to the client's concerns and assesses the situation in the initial session or two. During the subsequent session, goals are set on how to address the concerns, and the remaining sessions help the client work towards meeting those goals (Freiman, 2001). If the employee cannot be helped in a relatively short period of time, a referral is made. Rotarius, Liberman & Liberman (2000) recommend situations in which an employee may need to be referred to long term care. Some of these situations are related to diagnoses, such as long term pervasive developmental problems; addictive disorders; dual diagnoses on Axis I or II of the DSM-IV; psychotic symptoms and issues such as homicidal or suicidal ideation; history of previous violent or abusive behavior and court-ordered or other mandatory treatments.

### Certification

As with many mental health designations, there is a certification process for mental health practitioners interested in providing services to EAPs. Not all companies require certification for mental health practitioners to contract with them. However, certification can aid in securing employment in this field. A certified Employee Assistance Program Professional can work with a company or work for an independent EAP which provides local, national, or international services. To become a certified Employee Assistance Professional, one can contact the Employee Assistance Certification Commission. The

requirements of certification include experience and hours in the field, training, education, an exam, continuing education and continuing education requirements (Atkinson, 2001). For more information call the EACC (703) 522-6272 or use their websites EAP-SAP.COM or eap-association.com.

### Employment Potential

EAP programs are being incorporated into many businesses because of the potential cost savings. The need to recruit and retain well-trained and productive employees motivates many companies to offer EAP services as well. Small and mid-sized companies typically contract for EAP services with individual mental health providers. Larger companies often have an on-site EAP center or they will contract with an EAP company outside of their businesses to provide services. Contracts are usually offered on a fixed charge per employee or on a pay-per-session basis (Freiman, 2001). On average, 5-10 percent of employees in companies that have EAP services utilize services in a given year (Atkinson, 2001).

### Conclusion

EAPs have growth potential largely because of the mounting stress in contemporary work and family environments. The need for EAP providers to serve this population and the ultimate need of the employer to contain the mounting cost of health care, also adds to the growth potential (Pancratz, 2000). Companies who are interested in beginning an EAP often contact the Employee Assistance Certification Commission to obtain a list of all certified members of the program in their area. Thus, it may be important to become a certified member of this organization. Mental health providers should have little problem in incorporating these services into their practices. In addition, they could explore serving in full-time, employed positions in EAPs where they are salaried and work exclusively for the company.

### About the Authors

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