

Benefits Insights

Improving the Utilization of Employee Assistance Programs

Employee assistance programs (EAPs) are employer-sponsored programs that offer services or referrals to help employees deal with personal problems. These programs can boost employee well-being, satisfaction, performance and health. Unfortunately, these programs are often heavily underutilized. According to Mental Health America, 98% of mid- to large-sized companies offer EAPs, but only 4% of employees use them each year. This represents a significant missed opportunity for employers and employees. Employers can use the guidance in this article to improve the utilization of their EAPs.

What Is an EAP?

EAPs vary between organizations, but most have common elements. Some programs focus specifically on certain issues, such as mental health issues or substance misuse, but others offer expanded services to address eating disorders, marital issues, legal problems, child and elder care, gambling addiction, psychological issues and more. Depending on how these programs are structured, they can offer employee education, evaluation, hotline services, counseling or referrals. These services are confidential and may be run in-house, outsourced through an independent EAP provider or a combination of the two. When effectively utilized, employers may notice the following benefits of EAPs:

- Lower health care costs
- Fewer disability claims
- Less absenteeism
- Higher productivity and focus
- Improved employee morale
- Fewer workplace accidents
- Higher retention

Why EAPs Are Underutilized

Despite the numerous benefits of EAPs, employees overwhelmingly ignore this resource. Employees may forgo the use of EAPs due to stigma surrounding concerns like mental health or substance misuse issues. In this case, they may feel ashamed of asking for help or fear retribution from their employer for using the programs. EAPs are confidential in almost all cases, but workers who would benefit from these programs may be unaware of this.

Many employees also lack a fundamental understanding of what EAPs provide or how to use them. One study published by the National Library of Medicine found that 53% of public health workers didn't use their EAPs during the COVID-19 pandemic because they had difficulty accessing them. Lack of awareness is another common problem. A 2020 study by benefits provider Unum found that although 93% of HR professionals say they offer EAPs, nearly half of workers say their employer doesn't offer an EAP or they're unsure if they do. Employees may also underuse their EAPs due to a lack of motivation, time or other personal commitments.

How Employers Can Help

Most employees want their employers to provide mental health support and benefits. According to a 2023 study by software company Calm, 67% of employees want their employer to help them take care of their stress and anxiety. Further, employees are more likely to stay at organizations that support their mental health. While an EAP is typically designed for short-term use rather than long-term therapy or health care, it is equipped to educate employees and direct them to the resources they need. The following are best practices for increasing the utilization of these programs:

- **Communicate frequently, honestly and transparently.** Employers can boost employee awareness of EAPs with a comprehensive and engaging review of benefits offerings during onboarding and open enrollment, frequent communications (e.g., emails, lunch and learns, and newsletters) and wellness fairs. Further, employers can ensure managers and supervisors are educated on the EAP services offered and trained to communicate effectively with staff when mental health concerns arise.
- **Address confidentiality concerns.** Employees may elect not to use EAPs over concerns that their participation will be tracked by employers and negatively impact their careers. Employers can address this concern by informing employees that it's against federal law for EAPs to disclose information shared by employees with their employers. If information regarding EAP services and usage is tracked, employers can improve employee trust and communication by clearly identifying what these areas are and why they are monitored.
- **Challenge mental health stigma.** Many employees may avoid using EAPs due to the stigma surrounding mental health. If EAP utilization is low, employers can consider emphasizing other services EAPs offer, such as caregiver resources or financial planning, and reiterating that employees don't need to be in a state of extreme distress to use EAP mental health benefits. Moreover, organizations can take steps to create a supportive mental health culture. This may include encouraging employees to prioritize their mental health, training managers to recognize the signs of mental illness and stress, offering flexibility and scheduling regular check-ins with employees.
- **Monitor and evaluate EAP performance.** Employers can collect and analyze EAP usage to understand the effectiveness of their communications. A combination of quantitative and qualitative data can be useful. As such, employers can also consider asking for employee feedback via one-on-one conversations, surveys and focus groups. This can help employers understand the strengths and weaknesses of their programs and create an actionable plan for improvement.

Conclusion

Although the majority of employees want mental health and other benefits, only a small percentage take advantage of their employer-provided EAPs. Employers who proactively address barriers like mental health stigmas and educate employees about their EAPs may see increased utilization of these programs, which can contribute to increased employee engagement, retention and attraction.

Contact us today for more information.

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