

Employee assistance programmes: past, present and future

Chris Athanasiades calls for an expansion of workplace provision

In recent years, there has been a consistent increase in the purchase of Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) services by British employers and currently 10 per cent of British employees have access to EAP services¹. The success of the sector is analogous to the increasing volume of supportive evidence of the effectiveness of EAPs to improve employee wellbeing and help reduce absenteeism – a main source of lost productivity². The EAP sector has grown under the conditions of economic stability of the preceding era but how will EAPs be affected by the current economic uncertainty and the changes that this brings to the workplace and what can EAPs do to respond to future challenges? This article will attempt to shed some light on the likely future developments in the field of employee assistance.

The rise of EAPs

EAPs came into existence in the United States in the early 1950s^{3,4}. However, it is thought that the modern EAP movement commenced earlier, with the famous Hawthorne studies at the Hawthorne Works of the Western Electric Company, between the years of 1924 and 1933⁵. The enthusiasm that ensued from the Hawthorne studies led to the employment of counsellors by Western Electric in a drive to help increase productivity⁶. In the post-1950s era, EAPs took on an important role in assisting employees with alcohol addictions^{3,4,5,7}.

In the years that followed, EAPs responded to new marketplace demands which called for an expansion of services from just counselling to a number of employee-centred services⁸. EAPs broadened their portfolio, beyond counselling, to offer services such as 'stress management, critical incident debriefing, trauma debriefing, wellness programmes, mediation, change management and managerial coaching'⁹. Suggestions were also made for the provision of senior care services¹⁰.

Over time, the EAP movement spread from the US to other parts of the world, including Canada, Australia and Europe¹. In the UK, EAPs started their operation in the 1980s¹¹. At the outset, UK EAPs focused on counselling employees in an attempt to help organisations address the wellbeing/work-performance relationship¹¹. In the years that

followed, UK EAPs diversified their services to include assessment of needs, referral to appropriate psychological, medical, legal or other type of assistance, and short-term intervention⁷. UK EAPs currently offer a number of services to support employee 'professional and life issues'¹² within a 'work-life' focus¹¹.

Modern EAPs in the UK

According to the Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA), the trade body for EAP providers, modern EAPs exist to help 'improve organisational performance through the provision of structured management and employee assistance services'¹. The growth of the sector in the UK in recent years may have been, additionally, helped by the Government's endorsement of the promotion of psychological wellbeing in the workplace¹³. The EAP market in the UK has been growing consistently and in 2007 there were 1,137 organisations with 2.26 million employees (representing 10 per cent of the workforce) that made use of EAPs¹. A recent study identified a number of reasons why UK employers purchase EAP programmes. These included providing 'additional support, duty of care, support for employees through major change, help with alleviating stress, enhancing welfare packages, support for HR, protecting organisation from litigation, encouraging retention/loyalty, and addressing sickness/absence'¹⁴.

Buon and Taylor¹ conducted a review of the EAP market in the UK, Germany, Switzerland and Denmark. They approached a total of 120 organisations (60 were from the UK). Of these, 73 had used an EAP. The authors asked human resources managers in the sampled organisations to state the reasons why they had or had not opted to use an EAP. The main reasons for opting to use an EAP were: 'to offer psychological support to employees who needed it, to help employees achieve a work-life balance, to combat absenteeism and to help increase productivity, to help the organisation project a caring image and to fulfil the duty of care requirement'. The most important reasons for maintaining an EAP were the perceived value of the counselling service and the employees' appreciation of this service. In addition, some

Chris Athanasiades is a chartered psychologist and a fellow of the Higher Education Academy. He has held various academic posts with his most recent appointments being at Leeds University and at Mediterranean College in Athens, Greece. He has research and professional interests in counselling in organisations. Email: ca1922ls@yahoo.co.uk

respondents also acknowledged the value of EAPs in helping address occupational stress. The main reasons for not opting to use an EAP were 'the existing provision of an external telephone counselling service, internal EAP services provided by HR, the cost of the service and the perception of the organisation as too small'. When Buon and Taylor¹ asked respondents what services an EAP should or should not offer they obtained the responses that can be found in figure 1.

The most striking evidence from this set of data is the importance that has been attributed to therapeutic counselling, including both face-to-face and telephone counselling. In fact, most respondents thought that these two services should definitely be offered by an EAP. Another important finding is the emphasis placed on alcohol and drug support/counselling. This deserves further attention, considering that it was previously thought that this service was no longer essential.

The Buon and Taylor¹ review is supportive of the continuing importance of EAPs in the marketplace. The importance that employers attribute to therapeutic counselling is a significant indication of the recognised benefits of this service for employees, and by extension, for their employing organisations. Taking into consideration the anticipated increase in the number of people losing their job there may be an even greater need to counsel employees who are or are likely to be affected by redundancy¹⁵. The uncertainty that redundancy causes will undoubtedly be a source of considerable stress that will require the services of accomplished practitioners.

The future

Sharar¹⁶ engaged four American EAP stakeholders in a discussion about the future of the sector. The

following came out from this discussion as important action points: (1) to promote the skill of EAPs in improving work performance; (2) to project EAPs as a multi-level service and not as a mental health service; (3) to create educational opportunities for the EA professionals of the future; (4) to develop holistic solutions, that is, solutions that embrace both personal life and work; (5) to demonstrate cost savings to employers via convincing research evidence; (6) to maintain flexibility and adaptability of EAPs to a changing workforce. Clearly, some of these suggestions relate to increasing the business benefit of purchasing EAP services. Employers need to understand what EAPs actually do and how effective their services are. This may be a matter for individual EAPs to make clear in their literature and in their outward service promotional communication. Nevertheless, a collective and coordinated approach is also required, possibly through the EAPA and BACP Workplace. There needs to be a research programme that will produce high quality research and peer-reviewed publications. This can be achieved through academic research, the rigorous methodology and scrutiny of which increase the validity and appeal of its findings. This kind of high-impact research will turn out the convincing evidence that employers need in order to justify and maintain EAP provision². An idea worth pursuing would be the establishment of a centre of excellence, an idea that has been supported by McLeod². Such a centre could be based in a university department where cutting-edge research can take place and where the EAP professionals of the future can undertake their training, including master's and doctoral research in the area of employee assistance.

With regards to specialist training, Claringbull¹⁷ has proposed a model worthy of consideration

Service	Total % should offer	Total % should not offer
Telephone counselling	98	2
Face-to-face counselling	96	4
Alcohol and drug support/counselling	93	7
Critical incident and trauma counselling	89	11
Stress management	86	14
Work-life balance services	88	12
HRM consultation, advice and information	36	64
Concierge services	23	77
Management training	33	67
Performance management	28	72

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Figure 1. List of the main services that EAPs should or should not offer (n=102) (Buon and Taylor¹)



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their internet and telephone counselling services further to reach out to more employees¹⁸. It would appear that employers are also supportive of the idea of their employees having access to counselling by telephone and via the internet'. The market may demand counselling 'from a distance' for a variety of reasons including saving or reducing costs¹⁰. However, one needs to be sceptical of the probability of success of this type of service with longstanding psychological issues that normally require the benefits of a stronger therapeutic alliance. Nevertheless, telephone and internet counselling may provide clients with a satisfactory outlet for some less serious issues and it may help raise awareness of the availability of counselling services in the workplace.

Remote counselling services may be a useful addition to an EAP's portfolio and good quality remote counselling will require high standards of practice. Maintaining high standards may be difficult if EAPs transfer their telephone and internet counselling to other countries to cut down on cost, following the example of some American EAPs¹⁹. This kind of outsourcing may compromise the quality of the counselling offered as it would make it difficult to regulate counsellors in other countries or to enforce minimum standards. This may pose a serious threat to professional workplace counselling

❧ EAPs will need to embrace new ways of delivering their services such as online chat-rooms and the provision of educational material such as videos and online demonstrations ❧

that centres on specialist training at postgraduate diploma and master's levels. This would involve advanced study of organisational development and therapeutic approaches appropriate for use in the workplace, as well as undertaking supervised clinical practice in EAPs. Certainly, Claringbull's¹⁷ model would equip the workplace counsellors of the future with appropriate therapeutic training and experience in work-specific issues. Furthermore, it would give them the advantage of better understanding the dynamics of an organisation and the way that an employee's working environment may be contributing to his or her difficulties. In addition, expert training would equip counsellors with indispensable knowledge of the relevant field and it would help create the required professional cohesion.

In addition to the above, the EAP sector may need to make better use of available technologies to better respond to the demands of the future¹⁸. For example, EAPs should consider developing

and to the continued success of EAPs. Counselling can overcome this by strengthening its professional identity via research, training and certification.

A further possible threat to counselling is its replacement with coaching¹⁹. However, the argument is not convincing considering the estimated prevalence of mental health difficulties amongst employees⁶. The nature and severity of these difficulties would require therapy and not coaching. In any case, counsellors normally assess the needs of the client and are able to offer a service that meets those needs or they can make an appropriate referral. Nevertheless, coaching skills could be useful in clinical practice and, therefore, coaching could be incorporated in the training of workplace counsellors, perhaps as a module in Claringbull's¹⁷ model.

In summary, the evolution of the EAP sector will depend on the future needs of employees who will continue to seek balance between their work and personal life. Similarly, EAPs will continue to

be of importance to the corporate world since organisations will continue to have an interest in the wellbeing of their workforce with a view to increasing productivity¹⁸. These parameters will keep EAPs in business. In addition, it is likely that the EAPs of the future may have to offer an integrated service that targets the whole of the person's life, including aspects of both their working and personal lives²⁰. Future services may include education on health and nutrition, provision of fitness facilities, initiatives to encourage integration with the community, meetings with senior management, psycho-education, stress audits, programmes to help those on sick leave return to work and the provision of a confidential helpline²⁰. Certainly, technological advances in telephony and the internet may help shape the future of the sector. Furthermore, EAPs will need to embrace new ways of delivering their services such as online chat-rooms and the provision of educational material such as videos and online demonstrations¹⁰.

Conclusion and suggestions

In conclusion, the scope of the work of EAPs has broadened considerably through the years in response to economic trends and to market demands. EAPs currently offer a multi-level service, the aim of which is to provide well-rounded assistance to employees and their dependents with a variety of work-related and life issues. Present-day economic setbacks, such as the increasing levels of unemployment and overall financial instability, are pushing EAPs to re-examine and to redefine themselves. EAPs need to identify and keep the core services which add value to the EAP provision and identify the ways in which employees can be best supported holistically in order to meet the workforce needs in a changing macroeconomic reality. Therapeutic counselling is shown by research evidence to be the flagship of employee assistance and a sought-after service. Therefore, counselling at work should continue to be developed and promoted. It goes without saying that the way forward for EAPs is a generous investment in research programmes that will help refine the strengths of EAPs, identify the current and future needs of employees and of employers, and propose action and make suggestions for best practice. Finally, EAPs will need to keep developing their professional identity through collaboration and promotion of certification¹⁸. ■

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