

Finding the right balance

How to utilize Employee Assistance Programs to benefit your employees **Interviewed by Amy Dison**

When an employee's personal problems spill over into his or her work, the result can be problematic, for both the employee and the employer. To help resolve the employee's problems, companies often utilize Employee Assistance Programs (or EAP) as resources capable of helping both parties in the equation. While EAPs are often seen as an HR benefit program, in fact, they represent an important component for employers looking to improve the overall health of their work force.

The value of providing special services for troubled employees with EAPs is widely accepted, but the "cost" of such services is misleading. It is often assumed that using EAP services is something only a large company can afford, but the opposite may be closer to the truth. In many cases, it's the small company that can't afford not to offer assistance to troubled employees.

"Employee assistance programs aren't just a perk for large companies," says Richard S. Citrin, Ph.D., vice president of EAP Solutions and Worklife Services, part of the UPMC Insurance Services Division. "Smaller businesses can benefit from the variety of services that go well beyond offering support for mental health problems and drug and alcohol addictions, the historic role of EAP."

Smart Business talked with Citrin about how EAPs are changing and how companies can benefit from such services.

Do small companies really need EAPs?

In many ways, small companies have a greater need for EAP services than bigger ones. For example, if an employee who works in a company of six people were going through a difficult divorce, it could conceivably have more of an impact on the overall workplace atmosphere and productivity than it would if the employee were part of a much larger organization. If a company has a problem with an employee who is performing poorly, that employee could be more easily compartmentalized in a large company than would be the case at a smaller company.

Another reason a small company needs EAP services is because people tend to know each other on a more personal level at small companies. This means it may be more difficult for management to deal with a problem



Richard S. Citrin, Ph.D.

Vice president, EAP Solutions and Worklife Services
UPMC Insurance Services Division

employee. Sometimes, at small companies, management is not as effective in imposing limits or setting performance expectations. A large company that has a human resources department generally does a better job in those areas. It's reasonable to conclude that the kind of management coaching that an EAP could provide would be very helpful to a small company.

What types of EAP services make the most sense for small companies?

Historically, EAP services have been associated with employees who have alcohol or drug use problems. While EAPs have expanded far beyond that, that traditional service is certainly still very important for small companies. If a small company has an employee with an alcohol or drug use problem, chances are the company does not have the resources to deal with that employee in an effective manner.

An EAP can provide specific recommendations about courses of action for an employer to take. For example, if an employee comes to work intoxicated, the company needs to properly document that fact. There are steps companies need to take to avoid

legal issues, and EAP services guide management in the correct direction.

Why should small companies use EAPs instead of simply terminating an employee?

Small companies understand how much it costs to replace an employee. In most instances, it is in a company's best interests to try to rehabilitate an employee before trying to replace that employee. Simply put, when a company uses EAP services to help its employees make it through difficult times, it is making an important statement to its employees: Your employer cares about you. It's important for employees to know that their employer cares about their health and well-being. This increases retention.

How are EAP services changing?

EAP services now include the training and coaching of managers, which may be more crucial for those in small-business settings. EAPs can provide a host of work-life resources designed to help employees manage their finances, seek legal help, plan a vacation, schedule a car repair or even reduce credit card debt. EAP services, as always, are confidential and now can be delivered in person, by telephone or online. They are designed to help employees address life and work issues at the earliest stages, when the problem can be more easily managed. EAP services can help employees to find a better balance in their life and avoid more complicated and costly health care or workplace interventions later. Increasingly, EAP services include on-site educational programs on work-life issues, such as stress management, the increasing importance of health in the workplace and balancing work responsibilities with family obligations.

How do you know when to use EAP services?

In general, you can use the '60-minute' rule. Any personal problem or activity that would require more than 60 minutes of an employee's time on the job to resolve could be better handled by EAP services. <<

RICHARD S. CITRIN, Ph.D., is vice president of EAP Solutions and Worklife Services, which is part of the UPMC Insurance Services Division. Reach him at (412) 647-9471 or citrinrs@upmc.edu.

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