

A New Approach To

# Maximising EAP Usage



## What are EAPs?

One of the most popular benefits an employer offers to staff is access to an Employee Assistance programme (EAP). With an increase in employers' awareness of the benefits of employee wellbeing, the competition for EAPs has also increased. EAPs were developed in the early 1900s in the USA as a way of combatting alcoholism amongst the working class. During the 1980s EAPs made their way over the Atlantic and into the UK. According to the Employee Assistance Programme Association (EAPA), over 8.2 million people had access to an EAP service in the UK in 2008. With employers increasingly looking into new ways to save money, many are switching from paid EAPs to low cost or free EAPs. However, a high proportion of free or low cost providers are not specialised in EAP services but in other fields such as insurance or disability services.

## The Cost: Are free EAPs really fast?

One of the biggest factors that may influence employers to opt for a free EAP service is the low premiums. This is a big incentive particularly for small businesses (typically those that employ less than 500 people). On the face of it, low cost EAPs provide a similar service for less money. According to BenefitNews.com, low cost EAP advertisers state that their services cost around 10 cents to \$1.20 per employee every month, whereas typical fee-based providers cost \$1.50 to \$2.50. However, these low cost providers often raise the premiums of their other services such as insurances to compensate for the loss they are making in relation to the EAP. In addition to this, the services of low cost/free EAPs are different from paid EAPs. For example, the latter services usually include support hotlines that are tailored to the needs of the client. They also keep statistics on their clients' EAP usages. Low cost/free EAPs usually provide a single standardised service and phone number for all their clients and do not keep records.

## The Service: Value for money?



Buon and Taylor (2009) carried out an in-depth questionnaire with 109 HR managers and found that they looked for a variety of services that only premium EAPs consistently provide. The participants revealed that they saw face to face counselling, stress management and telephone counselling for family members as essential for EAPs. The study highlights a few interesting points. Firstly, it shows that people recognise the difference between a good EAP and a bad EAP. Secondly, it emphasises that people believe that they deserve comprehensive care as part of their benefits package rather than a service that doesn't fulfil the full requirements of the employees. According to the study, furthermore, these managers felt that EAPs have become "devalued, standardised, and where often used as an add-on bundled with the purchases of other services". Keeping this in mind, low cost/free EAPs that do not provide a comprehensive package will leave employees feeling disillusioned by the service their employer has provided for them.



# Prevention is better than crisis management

Roman and Blum (1988) identified several services that EAPs should follow in order to provide an adequate service. The points they listed were as follows:

1. Providing support to managers dealing with challenging issues in the workplace
2. Confidential and timely support
3. Constructive methods to aid employees including confrontation and intervention
4. Referral to other professional services if needed e.g., to a clinical psychologist
5. Play a role in the organisation's decisions on employee benefits
6. Evaluation of its own effectiveness
7. Monitoring and providing follow-up services

These criteria imply that an EAP is most effective when it is used to identify and prevent issues very early. In order to do this an EAP must take statistics from the calls that it receives, evaluate its own performance and play a role in the organisation's decisions on employee benefits. Taking statistics from incoming calls means that common or emerging problems can be spotted before they spiral out of control and have a significant impact on an organisation. In addition to this, evaluating their own performance means that the EAP can become more efficient at tailoring their services to a specific organisation. Having an involvement in selecting employee benefits means that an organisation can tailor their benefits to employee needs by using the information the EAP has gathered. This can prevent potential future stress and anxiety.

Low cost EAPs need to reduce their overheads as much as possible in order to provide the cheapest price, which often results in services being cut. As a result, most of them do not engage with organisations to promote the use of their services. They may also lack proactive support tools that support managers in dealing with issues among their teams. These services contribute heavily to the effectiveness of EAPs in relation to employee well-being. Even though EAPs include services that support their clients in times of crisis, it is important to receive support that minimises potential risk. In the long-run this will be more effective both in terms of wellbeing as well as costs.

## Conclusion

In essence, there seems to be a gulf between premium EAPs and low cost or free EAPs. While free EAPs seem to be free, their clients either sacrifice quality and risk prevention or pay through increased premiums on other services. Where this is the case, it undermines the purpose of EAPs and may exacerbate the problems organisations face rather reduce them. It is important to understand the purpose of EAPs and the opportunities that come with it. Please feel free to use this whitepaper as a checklist of services that any potential EAPs should provide before making a decision.

