

EAPs

WHY COUNSELLING MAKES MORE SENSE

With mental health such a big consideration in the workplace, EAP counselling services can be more powerful than newer tech for employers looking to boost productivity and reduce absenteeism, says **Charles Benayon** of Aspiria

WHEN it comes to determining the best elements of an employee assistance program (EAP) for an organization, providing truly helpful services to employees should be the main motivator. But this decision is also an important move for both a business and its human resources.

Nowadays, most organizations are very conscious of being employers of choice.

Offering a benefits package that includes quality EAP services ultimately expresses that they care about employees' mental (in addition to their physical) health, which can

make an organization more appealing.

Companies that invest in EAPs and make these resources readily accessible will truly make an impactful difference to the well-being of both the employee and the organization.

Boosting usage

When employers make available services to help employees and their family members address their mental health issues, it can be incredibly positive. Equally important is ensuring employees know about the services that are available to them in the first place.

This way, they will feel more

encouraged to seek professional counselling or the complementary services available when they need them.

EAPs have changed dramatically over the years. Historically, they were created to address alcohol and substance abuse for employees suffering from these diseases within the manufacturing industry.

In terms of sorting through the many different services that can be included in an EAP today, examining both demand and the market will help dictate what to offer. It may not always be clear what employees need most, but evaluating the numerous programs that EAP competitors provide in the market can further aid in choosing the most needed offering for your organization.

Ultimately, basic EAPs should provide quality options for employees to access services that are either close to their home or their work — whether in person, over the phone, through internet video or via online messaging.

While technology can sometimes hinder the quality of mental health services, its rise in popularity also provides employees with greater ease and comfort when it comes to reaching out for help.

It is important to note that emphasizing the anonymity and confidentiality of EAP services in any medium, perhaps unlike other benefits, can further calm an employee's anxiety about accessing them.

Emerging areas to consider

Today, there are many programs disguised as EAPs that do not offer the same benefits. Health and wellness

apps, for example, should be looked upon as a secondary offering. This is because they lack the important personalization that speaking with professional counsellors with master's level education — whether in person or through other technological mediums — offers them for support.

The more EAPs have evolved, the more they are about developing a broad-brush approach to health and wellness. Although many users appreciate the quickness and passivity of apps, when it comes to addressing personal matters (especially mental health issues), these tools may not be as effective in genuinely addressing mental health concerns.

To better complement EAP mental health services — including psychological and crisis counselling — there are additional work/life services available, such as legal, financial, coaching and nutrition help. Some EAPs also offer extras such as specialized counselling for individuals affected by cancer, as well as management consultation services.

Going above and beyond when it comes to mental health benefits is key. In addition to offering access to a

STRONG ROI TO EAP INVESTMENTS



\$8.70

ROI of an EAP for every \$1 invested at Canadian employers.



46%

Number of EAP users who would have missed work if not for the EAP.



\$10

ROI of an EAP for every \$1 invested at organizations with usage levels of 15 per cent and above.



1 in 3

Number of those same workers who would have lost more than 20 days of work.

Source: Morneau Shepell



professional counsellor of employees' choosing, you may decide to offer less conventional services and practices that have additional proven benefits: mental health breaks, mindfulness, meditation, massage therapy, acupuncture and the like.

A quality EAP will also consist of services designed specifically for the employer as they are often overlooked when an EAP is designed. Organizational services include key management consultations (access to senior mental health experts), monitored referral programs and wellness initiatives.

These types of services are becoming a regular part of EAP plans that employees will appreciate. In turn, they will ultimately translate into increased productivity among the workplace by helping to address and manage any mental health issues that were previously hindering attendance and focus.

In general, it is a very positive sign that employers are aligning to help break the stigma regarding mental health.

As awareness grows and becomes more mainstream, it makes everyone

more conscious and (hopefully) accepting of people with mental health issues in the workplace.

While we are seeing a positive movement toward the inclusion of mental health options in employee services, the real debate is what companies are willing to pay for them. When you reflect on the high premiums for what are supposedly "must-have" benefits — in contrast to what mental health services cost — it is baffling that many organizations give EAPs so little consideration.

Despite the progress in destigmatizing mental health, EAPs are often thought of as an add-on that is not as highly valued as more traditional benefits (such as medical, dental or vision plans).

Finding the value in an EAP

Employers might wonder if an EAP really does help employees and their families and how it can also impact the organization. In reality, an EAP can make a significant difference in people's mental health and, therefore, positively impact absenteeism and presenteeism rates, productivity and your bottom line.

While technology may be effective as a supplemental option, ideally, it should not replace actual counselling services, which have a greater human connection.

Deloitte recently looked at a group of Canadian companies providing three years' worth of data around mental health initiatives and found a return of \$1.62 for every dollar spent. For those employers with programs in place for more than three years, the median yearly ROI was \$2.18.

When comparing what EAP service providers offer, remember that the most value will likely come from those that extend help equally across the board.

Regardless of the specific mental health issue or diagnosis, choosing services with a wide range of options may be the most beneficial to employees.

Some individuals appreciate newer technology tools, while others will maintain that face-to-face counselling

is the most effective for them.

While technology may be effective as a supplemental option, ideally, it should not replace actual counselling services (which have a greater — and, arguably, more effective — human connection). It is encouraging to see the accessibility of mental health services increase through the rise of technology, but it is important to examine and distinguish between offerings to ensure a continually high level of quality services for employees and their families in the workplace. **CHRR**



Charles Benayon is the founder and CEO of Aspiria in Markham, Ont. For more information, visit www.aspiria.ca.