

The Value of an EAP During Uncertain Times

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The last several weeks have been stressful for everyone, in a lot of different ways. On the one hand, we've been faced with illness (our own or family members), social isolation, job loss, fear of exposure, and maybe even the loss of a loved one due to COVID-19. On the other hand, business owners and management have also faced disrupted supply lines, loss of revenue, forced closure due to the Safer at Home order, loss of staff due to illness, new safety concerns, or

perhaps even permanent business closure/dissolution. The COVID-19 virus has brought widespread challenges on both personal and professional levels, across our nation.

While we struggle with health concerns, financial concerns, and business sustainability concerns, our Employee Assistance Program (EAP) has been at the ready to help us navigate the stress and anxiety. If your organization has an EAP, I hope you have been able to (and continue to) promote it to your staff as a resource. Let your people know that help is available. And as we transition forward into the summer, whatever that will look like, the EAP will continue to be needed. If you do not have an EAP, maybe now is the time to take a close look at signing up for one.

EAPs, generally speaking, can help address a number of issues which may be even more difficult this year:

- Financial problems are more prevalent now as people are experiencing job loss or reduced hours.
- Employees who are caring for elderly family members face increased stress as they try to keep their loved ones safe while still providing day-to-day care.
- Substance abuse is continuing, and for many people it has escalated during this difficult period.
- Divorce rates are expected to go up as spouses struggle with financial concerns, as well as the changes to their relationship while being isolated at home for weeks.

- Parents are facing the pressure of having children at home. Some parents have had to adjust to being a home school teacher and day care provider while working at the same time. The children cannot participate in sports, school, and other external activities, so the parents have to find ways to establish a new normal in their household.
- Leaders have had to figure out how to handle team dynamics, productivity, and discipline during a time of reduced staffing or remote work.
- Some owners and leaders have had to face the heartbreak of layoffs and business closure.

If any of these sounds familiar, an EAP can help you and your employees address a variety of issues that go beyond the abilities of management and Human Resources.

But just what is an EAP?

An EAP is a resource. It's an organization that can offer benefits that range from counseling to referral services for resources across a broad array of topics:

- Mental health issues
- Marriage and family issues
- Interpersonal communication
- Financial and legal issues
- Substance abuse
- Workplace conflicts
- Grief assistance

Assistance is typically available for employees and their family members. Some EAP's also offer assistance to company management, including education and counseling.

How do I choose an EAP?

Your first decision is whether to choose a national EAP service or a locally based service. If you have a geographically diverse workforce, a national EAP is likely your best solution as they would be able to provide services electronically or telephonically to all of your employees. Some even have the ability to set up consultations with local providers. On the other hand, if you are in a smaller geography that is served by a local EAP, you may be able to tap into EAP representatives to come on site and conduct

informational sessions, training, and other on-site services. This may work in your favor for familiarizing employees with the services the EAP provides, resulting in higher utilization.

EAPs may offer other services such as wellness programs, drug free workplace and DOT compliance programs, and pre-employment screening programs, to name just a few. Costs are typically based on the number of employees you have and the menu of services you select. EAP services are sometimes bundled with group life and disability insurance products you may purchase, or, can be purchased as a stand-alone product.

As with any vendor you consider, ask for references of employers using their services who you can contact to verify the quality of the actual services that are provided.

Why is it a good solution?

It is confidential. Employees can seek help without sharing personal details with anyone at the organization, which may make them more likely to seek assistance.

Employees get professional assistance specific to their situation. Managers, including HR professionals, should not be trying to counsel employees. The EAP can provide assistance for personal issues that go beyond the scope of a workplace discussion.

An EAP can be a valuable resource in addressing performance and behavior issues at work. Whether it's anger management, communication issues, or managing stress, an EAP is a resource that an employee can access to help get performance and work behavior back on track.

Employees who have resources to help them address their problems are more likely to have higher productivity and less stress in their lives. Many EAPs offer a certain number of counseling sessions at no cost to the employees and can help employees find resources in their area.

If you currently have an EAP, continue to remind your employees (including owners and managers) that this resource is available. If you do not have an EAP, maybe it's time to look into getting one. If not right now, perhaps you could put it on your list for your next fiscal year, or when you have your annual benefits renewal. As we continue to move forward with COVID-19, whatever that will look like in the coming months for your business and for our country, an EAP can be a valuable partner in facing whatever comes next.