

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMMES

by
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Introduction

Productivity losses as a result of employee alcoholism drug abuse in the form of reduced productivity, medical expenses and theft; stress in form of psychosomatic illness are of increasing concern to the business world. In recent years, Asean Managers have become increasingly worried about Productivity and Performance.

In the U.S.A., the problems associated with the "troubled employee" have been highlighted by several researchers. A 1973 study by Knox and Burke reported losses due to employee alcoholism alone to US\$15 billion. In 1983, Swegan reported the escalation of this figure to US\$40 billion. Many American businesses have responded to both current and future productivity losses by providing EAP counselling services to their employees and their families. This rehabilitative approach has resulted in EAP's being recognized as one of the fastest growing components in the field of Human Resources Management. Most Human Resources Managers in the USA have now been entrusted with the creation and implementation of EAPs. Many Malaysians and Singapore companies have implemented some form of counseling services through their Personnel Department. It may be worth the effort to implement EAP's in its fullest sense in this region to improve productivity and performance.

EAP - What is it?

Employee Assistance Programme is the commonly accepted term for workplace efforts to provide counseling services to employees. An EAP can be defined as a company policy/procedure for identifying and responding to personal or emotional problems of employees that directly or indirectly interfere with job performance. The EAP usually provides information or referrals to appropriate counseling and support services for which the

Company may pay in part or in whole (Walsh, 1982).

History of EAPs

Employer's initiative to help alcoholic employees are not new. In the USA, several programmes have been introduced. They included acceptance of alcoholism as a disease, the passage of the federal Comprehensive Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism Prevention, Treatment and Rehabilitation of 1970, the initiation of the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA). American Businesses and Unions also moved to fight this disease. In Malaysia several companies for instance KCT Sdn. Bhd. (Kelang Container Terminal) have launched full fledged counselling services. In Negara Brunei Darussalam, the Government introduced counseling services. In these 2 situations, most of these efforts were directed towards solving personal problems of employees rather than alcoholism problems. Though most EAPs evolved first through a focus on alcohol related problems, there have been others with a broader mission (Trice & Schanbrunn, 1981).

According to Walsh (1982), EAPs grew out of a tradition of handholding in the personnel department, informal counseling and trouble shooting by employees. This is still the situation in most part of Asean with a few exceptions. Organized EAPs, therefore are not a new endeavour but formalising an old tradition with trained personnel.

Apart from the alcoholism problem, there has been increasing concern for the last 20 years about drugs abuse rooted in various psychological and community problems linked with pathologies in home and family life. This environment developed and interest in the observed correlation between social stress and coronary heart disease. These findings complemented the findings on organization stress in work settings (Wilinsky & Wilinsky, 1951). This resulted in the emergence of various Quality of Worklife programmes, in-

cluding EAPs. The late 70's and early 80's saw several local asean companies introducing Quality of Worklife (QWL) programmes. Credo, a Malaysian based training firm had launched several QWL programmes.

Why EAPs

The traditional supporting arguments for an organization funding an EAP is based on the notion that it is more desirable both economically and socially to rehabilitate previously proven, trained and experienced employees than to discharge them. Many companies are aware that the troubled employees "cost" them by way of absenteeism, accidents, low morale, excessive utilization of medical benefit. EAPs unfortunately have been considered as an alcohol referral service. This view is totally untrue.

The American Society for Personnel Administration reported that about 21% of American companies had EAPs. Lanier (1981) cited the NIAAA report, which states that over 2400 organizations have programmes for counselling services. Lanier also reported that 60% of Fortune 500 companies have programmes for counselling troubled employees having performance difficulties due to personal, social or emotional problems.

Service Delivery Systems

Phillips and Older (1981) highlighted six major service delivery systems. They are:

1. In-House programmes
2. Service Centre programmes
3. Internal programmes with service centre support
4. EAPs located in a Social Service Agency
5. Union based EAPs
6. Group consortium.

Most American programmes have largely focussed on internal programmes with service centre support or with EAPs located in a social service agency. In the local scene,

most organizations have had to look out to service agencies to support.

Roles of the EAP Professional

Generally, the roles include problem assessment/diagnosis, referral, supervisor training, client follow up, marketing EAP services, development and design of company wide policies for control of drug abuse through educational activities. The EAP professional is a consultant. They can intervene to solve the problem affecting performance related to personal, emotional or social problems. It depends on the company philosophy also. The company can either adopt a punitive policy to terminate poor performers or take a more rehabilitative approach so as not to lose those employees. There may also be special needs of employees - single working girls, working mothers, older workers who need special attention which can be satisfied by the EAP professional.

Financial Gains

Though we do not have statistics from local companies in this region, American examples are numerous. A study by Illinois Bell 306 employees with medical behavioural problems demonstrated an estimated savings of USD 500,000 in reduced absence, accidents and medical benefits. Ohio Bell, with 2400 employees saves USD 4 Million annually with a recovery rate of 60% from its alcoholism treatment recovery programme. Lanier (1981) reports that General Motors gets back 3 dollars for every dollar invested in the EAP. Lanier also documents that in 1981 General Motors saved \$3,700.00 per employee successfully enrolled in its EAP, or a total of USD 3.7 Million for the 10,000 employees who made use of the com-

pany's EAP that year. Insurance and Health organizations generally have agreed the EAP's do give a good return on investment. It is simply another way and a very good approach to helping employees perform to required standards.

Factors affecting EAPs

EAP Philosophy

The overall EAP philosophy reflects a rehabilitative approach (Hollman, 1981). The view that the workplace can be kept separate from other aspects of an employee's life is a myth (Kanter 1977). On the job activities affect an employee's off the job life and vice versa. It is important to see the employee from a holistic view and that EAP interventions are taken through suitable professional means.

EAP services are directed to address problems affecting performance and productivity. Though supervisors may refer employees to an EAP, the referral is based on performance decline and not on any clinic diagnosis as supervisors do not have the expertise to make such a diagnosis. So long as the organization recognizes that personal problems can be successfully resolved and encourages its employees to take advantages of the EAP, the EAP will be successful. The participation in the EAP no way relieves the employee of the responsibility to meet acceptable work performance standards and at the same time the decision to seek assistance through the EAP should in no way harm the employees promotion or job security.

Referral Sources

Employees may obtain assistance through an EAP by self-referral, su-

ervisor referral, supervisor recommendation and medical referral.

Administration

In general, EAP interventions are brief encounters of two to three sessions. The EAP is usually coordinated by the Human Resources Department. Immediate supervision identify employees with performance problems and offer EAP services to them. Employees have responsibility to use the EAP as an avenue to resolve problem and improve performance.

Limitations

EAP's have been firmly established in USA, Canada and Western Europe. There have been efforts in Australia and India.

EAPs represent a positive and proactive approach to dealing with troubled employees. Fundamental limitations should be systematically addressed to make the EAP more proactive. EAPs need to look not only at the personal problem but also on the environment that creates, sustains and alleviates the problem.

EAP services emphasize confidentiality but will a traditional Malaysian workforce have sufficient trust. Despite the limitations, EAP professionals by working closely with the Human Resources professionals can bring about positive organizational benefits.

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