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Kevin Friery discusses EAPs

Easing away the stresses and strains – the service of providing counselling for employees' personal problems has been the preserve of big companies but due to its success, large numbers of small businesses are now signing up. Kate Hilpern finds out why.

Rewind a couple of decades and it was seen as something of a luxury for a company to offer its employees a counselling service. Today, 20 to 30 per cent of the UK workforce is provided with access to an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) – and staff aren't afraid to use it. EAP [provider Bupa Wellness recently found that 98 per cent of EAP users say their employer should retain the service and the same number would use the service again, while 99 per cent would recommend the service to a colleague.

Whether our partner's left you, you're fed up of your sciatica, your teenager is giving you hell or you can't afford the electricity bill, EAPs exist to help staff concentrate on their job rather than the problem itself. The net result is that everyone's a winner – you because you've worked out some coping mechanisms and perhaps even a solution to your problems and your employer because your anguish doesn't encroach on your performance at work.

Fierce Competition

With fierce competition among EAP providers having brought the prices down from an average £28 per head per year five years ago to just £14 now, even those Pas that don't currently enjoy access to an EAP may do so soon. There are even reports of an astonishing £1 a head cover among some providers. This certainly helps explain why it's no longer the big companies that are most likely to offer their staff EAPs – fast growing numbers of SMEs (small and medium sized businesses) are also signing up. With many Pas taking over HR duties in such firms, it would come as no surprise that in many cases, it's Pas who actually suggest the introduction of an EAP service within their organisation in the first place and it's them that also go about setting it up.

ICAS is the most popular EAP providers, currently taking 27 per cent of the market share, Paul Timoney, client services manager at ICAS, says, 'I think there are lots of reasons for the increase in take up of EAPs generally. Among them is the fact that the Health and Safety Executive is increasingly placing expectation on employers to address stress. There is also legislation that suggests organisations provide access to a confidential counselling line. Then there's the fact that organisations are realising how much they depend on their staff. All the state-of-the-art technology in the world isn't enough – you need human beings behind this technology, and these human beings are a lot more likely to be happy and thereby productive if they can deal with their problems rather than bring them to work. Finally, I think many employers are realising that what used to happen isn't a very good thing – that is, people going off sick when they have mounting problems and staying off sick.'

Valuable asset

Right Corecare, another EAP provider, believes there's a further reason too. "Simply having an EAP gives the nod to staff that they are the most valuable asset an organisation has," says Kevin Friery clinical director. "Concepts such as retention have become a higher priority for businesses because staff can walk away if they wasn't to."

Staff, he adds, tend to like the fact that EAPs are one step removed from the employer and that nobody – not your colleagues, nor your boss or even your family – needs to know if you take up the service. "It is truly confidential," he says. "Time and time again, staff tell us how important that is to them. The fact that we don't feed back their individual details to the company is paramount for employees. In fact, usage tends to treble when you move way from an in-house welfare programme to an EAP."

Like many EAP providers, Right Corecare has a "red flag" system – which involves reducing risk when an employee is in imminent danger of either self-harm or harming others. The system is also able to alert HR to potential problems. "For example, if we picked up that a particular department had a lot of employees who were feeling overworked we would be able to tell HR – without giving anything about any individual away."

The average take-up among staff of EAPs hovers around the 10 per cent mark in most organisations. Some employees call on the EAP providers for advice or information, whilst others use its counselling service. Indeed, most EAPs provide both a telephone service and up to six counselling sessions per employee (which family members can also use in many cases).

Strengths

Timoney points out that beyond this, each EAP provider tends to have its own very particular set of strengths. "Ours is the quality of our clinical excellence," he says. "Each ICAS counsellor has to be BACP (British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy) registered and they have to have continuing professional development. We also pride ourselves on the range of our services – we have face-to-face counselling through to a life management service which offers practical help. We also have some very specific services, such as one that deals with debt. So far, we have processed £25-£30 million of debt, which we have achieved by having a strategic partnership with the largest charity in the UK that deals with debt. Other examples of specific services include an online cognitive behavioural package and an online health profile that enables companies to target specific areas of the company for health promotions. We also have an evaluation tool, so that companies can actually measure if the EAP service works."

No Quick Fix

Critics insist there are risks. Some point out that while EAPs are able to provide a short-term solution for things like financial, legal and emotional problems, they are rarely a long-term answer to serious physical or mental distress. By their very existence, some employees could assume they can get a quick-fix to their misery and find themselves deeply disappointed.

Other cynics point out that there is a danger of cowboy EAP providers entering the market place, particularly with costs coming down so fast. Organisations wanting to simply "tick the box" of having an EAP and avoid faffing around with researching the market are particularly in jeopardy of choosing one of these substandard providers.