The Impact of Employee Assistance Services on Workplace Outcomes

A STUDY FUNDED BY THE EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE RESEARCH FOUNDATION

PARTNERS

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

Increasingly, employers are asking EAPs to justify their costs in terms of impact on worker productivity. Although studies have documented positive associations between workplace counseling and improvements in work-related outcomes, few have assessed the effect of EAP on work-related outcomes using a broad sample, validated measures, and rigorous methods. This study 1) recruited a diverse and large employee base; 2) included validated self-report¹ and objective outcome measures of worker productivity; and 3) used a prospective, quasi-experimental design in which groups were matched using propensity-score techniques on pre-intervention characteristics. Measures of depression, anxiety, hazardous alcohol use, absenteeism, presenteeism (reduced productivity while at work), and workplace distress were collected from study participants pre- and post-services.

STUDY SETTING

C-SEAP has a long history serving as the EAP for the State of Colorado. Services are designed to maintain and strengthen mental health and productivity through assessment, short-term counseling, and referral. C-SEAP counselors have been trained in administering substance use and mental health screening tools, and in using motivational interviewing techniques to raise employee awareness and motivate positive change.

The comparison group is selected from state employees who agree to participate and complete an online survey. The survey includes the same set of questions asked at intake and follow-up to those using C-SEAP services. Using propensity-score techniques, the comparison group consisted of a subset of online survey respondents who best matched the intervention group on demographic and pre-intervention characteristics.

STUDY UPDATE – MAY 2015

Baseline and follow-up data have been collected from 156 EA employee-clients and 188 matched comparison employees who did not receive EA services. At baseline, matched comparison employees did not differ significantly from EA clients on demographic characteristics, help-seeking behaviors, workplace problems, and psycho-social distress measures of depression, anxiety, and alcohol use.

¹ http://www.chestnutglobalpartners.org/ResearchTools/Tools/WorkplaceOutcomeSuite
INTIAL KEY FINDINGS

- EA employee-clients reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety to a greater degree than matched comparison employees who did not receive services.
- EA employee-clients reduced absenteeism and presenteeism to a greater degree than matched comparison employees who did not receive services.
- Tests of mediation indicate that EAP improves absenteeism and presenteeism through reductions in symptoms of depression and anxiety.
- Participation in EAP was not significantly associated with changes in hazardous alcohol use or workplace distress.
- For the most part, severity of pre-existing problems did not influence program impact: EAP improved absenteeism and presenteeism equally well for clients with varying levels of baseline productivity and alcohol use.
- However, EAP reduced absenteeism to a greater degree for those with low levels of severity of depression and anxiety pre-intervention.

CONCLUSIONS

Employees receiving EA counseling services improved work functioning more than similar employees who did not receive services. Furthermore, tests of mediation suggest that EAP exerts its impact on workplace outcomes, at least in part, through improvements in employee mental health. Matching subjects on diverse factors that differentiate EAP from non-EAP users increases the likelihood that observed improvements in clinical and work-related outcomes were the direct result of workplace counseling services. EA services may be less well-positioned to improve individual employee experiences of global distress in the workplace, which may require workplace changes more than counseling; in contrast, EAPs may be particularly beneficial for those experiencing low-to-moderate levels of depression and anxiety. Overall, findings support the value of EAPs “to improve and/or maintain the productivity and healthy functioning of the workplace... through the application of specialized knowledge and expertise about human behavior and mental health” (EAPA – Definitions of an Employee Assistance Program – www.eapassn.org).

NEXT STEPS

A portion of study results have been submitted to The Journal of Occupational and Health Psychology and a second manuscript is being prepared for submission. In addition, researchers are in the process of collecting timecard records for study participants from state government human resource departments. Objective measures of absenteeism, compared to self-reported absenteeism, will be examined as soon as data are available.

We thank the Employee Assistance Research Foundation for the opportunity to conduct the study, disseminate findings, and advance the research on EAPs.