

Offering assistance

How employee assistance programs can benefit your company

It's no secret that times are tough. On top of an uncertain economy, businesses are dealing with ever-escalating health care costs. No employer wants to cut health care benefits, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

However, there are answers out there, including the implementation of employee assistance programs (EAPs). EAPs are employee benefit programs typically offered in conjunction with a health insurance plan. They help employees deal with personal problems that might adversely impact their work performance, health and well-being, and generally include assessments, short-term counseling and referral services for employees and their family members.

EAPs are great ways to help your employees deal with issues such as stress, anxiety, family problems, substance abuse or anything else affecting them. They focus on work, family and wellness. And it is key that employees utilize EAPs to manage issues well before they become unmanageable.

Besides having the benefits of a healthy and happy staff, the company sees benefits from EAPs in the forms of increased productivity and reduced medical costs, turnover, sick time, accidents, grievances and substance abuse. Not only that, you, as the employer, show that you and the company truly care about the employees.

"EAPs are worksite-based programs designed to assist businesses with productivity issues and help employees resolve problems that can affect job performance," says Ginny Hridel, the product manager of health insurance and wellness programs for the Council of Smaller Enterprises (COSE).

Smart Business spoke with Hridel about EAPs, how they work and why it may be a good idea to implement one.

What exactly are EAPs?

EAPs have changed and grown since the 1940s, when these services focused primarily on controlling the effect of alcohol abuse on job performance. Over time, the emphasis has grown to include other personal issues that impact job performance. The range of services provided by EAP professionals has broadened to include marriage and family issues, stress-related problems, financial and legal difficulties, and psychological and



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workplace conflict. Businesses have recognized that many everyday life stresses can negatively affect employee attendance and concentration, general workplace morale and an employee's ability to perform well on the job. Today, many companies provide EAP services for their employees to help remedy and prevent these problems.

Essentially, an EAP is a counseling service for employees and their eligible dependents that may be experiencing personal or workplace problems. EAPs furnish professional counselors who provide confidential assessments and short-term counseling to employees and their families in order to assist in dealing with matters of concern. EAPs are phone-based or in-person, which makes it very easy for people to use. Many EAP providers have secure online access to connect employees to an extensive network of resources. Everyone has problems from time to time, but sometimes problems persist, becoming serious enough to affect employees both on and off the job. At such times, an EAP counselor may be able to help.

EAP specialists are behavioral health pro-

fessionals who help people get through hard times. They aid with the stresses of life — relationship issues, family, substance abuse, anger and conflict — that can impact absenteeism, tardiness, loss of productivity, on-the-job accidents and increased health benefits claims.

How does employee health and well-being relate to productivity?

Worsening employee health status and stagnating productivity are major concerns of employers nationwide. Stress is a major concern for employers and managers, and mental health and substance abuse continue to be major causes of illness and lost productivity for most employers. According to leading employee benefits adviser Watson Wyatt, factors such as mental health issues, sleep problems, mental health stigma, and substance use and abuse affect business performance by reducing productivity and increasing both planned and unplanned absences. Many of these factors are either preventable or modifiable.

Why should my company offer an EAP?

First, it's smart business. If employees are doing well and day-to-day problems aren't a distraction, they are more likely to be alert, motivated and concentrating on the job. This results in a more productive organization. Second, it costs more to hire and train a new employee than it does to help and keep a current employee. And third, employers who care about their employees want them to be happy. It's that simple. The intent of EAPs is to ensure that employees and family members have access to confidential assistance when they need it and, hopefully, before problems appear on the job. When problems do occur, EAPs help supervisors, managers and employees engage constructively to support the employees as they address problems, seek and receive counseling or treatment and return to work. <<

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