

Employee assistance programmes: building South Africa's productive capacity

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There is no single commonly agreed upon definition of employee assistance programme (EAP) because various types of EAPs exist. However, all focus on the human element, performance, productivity, and the quality of personal life-styles. EAPs refer to a set of policies and procedures by which organisations legitimately intervene to:

- identify and deal with a variety of employee problems impacting on job performance;
- influence working relationships and worker morale.

Why EAPs?

If serious political, social and economic challenges are left unattended, they have the potential to erode our promising but fragile future. EAPs aim to develop South Africa's productive capacity by preventing the impact of such political, social and economic malaise on the individual, the organisation and the economy

These ills manifest themselves in the form of a decline in employee performance and productivity. The ultimate consequences include increased absenteeism, tardiness, poor productivity and decision-making; damage to equipment; safety violations, increased attitude and behaviour difficulties; poor interpersonal relationships, family alienation, marital disintegration, abuse; higher recruitment and training costs; loss of skilled people, increased stress; potential labour relations breakdowns and exorbitant litigation costs

Examples would highlight the need for EAPs in organisations:

- The HIV/AIDS pandemic poses a threat to economic development in Southern

Africa. Gloomy figures include average life expectancy being reduced by 20 years and HIV/AIDS causing a 2% drop in economic growth. Over the next ten years, many South African organisations will lose close on 4% of their employees to AIDS each year.

- Excessive substance and alcohol consumption and abuse have adverse effects on individuals, their families and their job performance. Research indicates that every worker who is dependent on alcohol will cost an extra quarter of his or her salary per year in terms of absenteeism, occupational accidents, and loss of productivity. This amounts to a total cost to the economy of well over R1-billion per year.
- Harassment manifests itself in many forms. Given our history, sexual and racial harassment is most common in South Africa. Sexual harassment costs companies money because it affects productivity, morale and motivation. Companies may lose valuable staff or incur legal costs if the problem is not handled positively. A survey found that 76% of South African career women have been subjected to some form of sexual harassment during their working lives and most would rather resign than 'make a fuss'.
- Violence, and domestic violence in particular, is a business as well as a personal problem. Its impact spills over into the workplace in the form of increased absenteeism, high insurance costs for medical claims, lower productivity and risk to other employees

should the perpetrator decide to attack his/her partner/victim at work. Murder and violence in the workplace are becoming common in South Africa.

Critical success factors

Standards and principles

Guidelines and codes of ethics serve to ensure viable EAPs. When an EAP is designed, it should encompass certain elements to ensure an effective, smoothly operating and comprehensive programme. The Employee Assistance Professional Association of South Africa (EAPA-SA) has developed standards for EAPs. Although these standards are non-regulatory, they aim to help all stakeholders to establish high-quality EAPs.

When an EAP is designed, implemented or evaluated, the organisation should apply standards and guidelines that are appropriate to its unique culture and operation. Certain basic principles underpin successful EAPs: creating a neutral space between management and labour; making assistance and services accessible and available to all employees (and their families); keeping all employee information confidential; removing all chances of victimisation or dismissal; allowing employees to use the programmes voluntarily; preferring the EAP referral system to terminating an employee's service; collectively agreeing on a policy statement that guarantees survival of the EAP, and ensuring quality service delivery.

Approach and positioning

The strategic positioning of EAP infrastructure in an organisation is essential. Introducing EAPs as an integral part of human resources management is an ideal means of delivering employee assistance services. It makes it possible to manage the impact of EAP-related issues on employees' functioning and productivity in pursuing business objectives.

Over the years EAPs harnessed a broad-brush approach. This new focus meant that employee assistance extended beyond substance abuse and alcohol dependence to a wide range of personal problems that affect job

performance. It reflects the complex problems facing today's workforce, including blended families, stepchildren, elderly care, gambling, HIV/AIDS, violence, harassment, trauma, finances etc.

Some EAP interventions and strategies are reactive, addressing troubled employees. Other EAPs are proactive, offering education, life-skills training, promotion and awareness to ensure the prevention of problems.

Legislative imperatives

Managing and administering EAPs is sometimes a challenging and daunting task. Certain legislative requirements have to be considered in view of the legal risks facing EAP practitioners and employers.

The most common mistakes organisations make in their EAPs that provide sufficient reason for a lawsuit, include prejudicial or discriminatory practices; violation of employee privacy; improper assessment; failure to obtain informed employee consent; and conflict of interest. Few cases in South Africa are based on EAP legalities. This could be attributed to the fact that most employees are apathetic and unaware of their rights in terms of EAPs. The situation could improve as people become more aware of their mainstream legislative rights.

Some EAP practitioners pointed out that current legislation is implicit about EAP issues. There is, therefore, a great need for the formulation and development of an explicit legislative framework, specifically for EAPs. However, such a framework has to be integrated with the relevant legislation.

NPI's contribution

The NPI would like to establish strategic alliances and build public/private partnerships with other organisations that see EAPs as a strategy to achieve sustained improvement towards world competitiveness.

The initial plans for 2001 include workshops country-wide. The long-term goals would revolve around lobbying for the formulation and development of a legislative framework for EAPs.