29. Employee Assistance Programs

Introduction

Employee assistance programs (EAPs) are increasingly being used by employers as a health care cost management measure and as a tool for improving employee productivity, morale, and job satisfaction; reducing absenteeism and turnover; and improving the corporate image.

EAPs provide counseling services directed toward acute problems that affect job performance. These programs were originally designed to identify and address the problem of employee alcoholism (and then drug abuse). Today, alcoholism and drug abuse continue to be a major focus of many EAPs. However, counseling is also being offered on stress management, family and marital problems, workplace violence, pressures from child and elder care responsibilities, and coping with the effects of company downsizing.

Today, more and more employers are offering EAPs. In 1993, 62 percent of workers in medium and large private establishments were eligible for these programs, compared with 43 percent in 1988 (U.S. Department of Labor, 1994). Employers concerned with their employees' physical and mental health may offer in-house or outside counseling services and/or provide information on such problems as substance abuse, smoking, and stress through seminars, classes, or written materials.

Employers often provide coverage in their company medical plans for the treatment of substance abuse and mental health problems in addition to offering EAPs. Often, this coverage is provided within the framework of an integrated program that includes an EAP as well as a network of behavioral health providers.

Like health promotion programs, EAPs are being developed and offered by employers to address three basic issues: rising health care costs, increasing concern about how employees' personal problems affect job productivity, and growing awareness of the benefits of good health and fitness. EAPs offer employees, and in most cases their families, the opportunity to receive confidential professional counseling and assistance. (See chapter 28 for more information on health promotion programs.)

 Types of EAPs

All EAPs differ. A basic EAP may offer informational pamphlets, while a more comprehensive EAP may offer diagnostic, counseling, and referral services.

EAPs can be provided internally or externally. An internal EAP is an in-house program that offers employees direct assistance through the employer's own staff counselors. Most EAP counseling services that are provided in-house are free of charge to the employee.

Some employers provide external EAPs by contracting with specialists such as psychologists, counselors, or social workers to provide services for their employees. Employers may also contract with a community agency to provide services to employees. An employee who is referred to an outside counselor may be required to pay a fee.

Some EAPs utilize telephone hotlines. Employees can use the hotlines to talk with trained counselors who make assessments and provide referrals to sources of professional help or services.

Today, in addition to addressing the "traditional" problems such as alcoholism and drug abuse, EAPs offer a broad range of services. According to a William M. Mercer survey, the most prevalent counseling service offered through EAPs (besides chemical dependency) is for family or marital problems (94 percent), followed by stress management (92 percent) and
work place concerns (i.e., downsizing and reorganizations) (73 percent).

Planning an EAP

If employees are to seek out the services of an EAP, the program must be structured to guarantee confidentiality and trust. Communication with employees about the program needs to emphasize the EAP’s role in assisting those who need help.

Confidentiality of records is very important. Employees need to be assured that, by participating in the EAP, they are not jeopardizing their jobs. Confidentiality makes the collection of information for evaluating the EAP difficult. However, employers will need a way to measure the EAP’s use, the program’s effects on job performance, and how employees feel about the program.

Supervisors and managers must be formally trained to refer employees to the EAP for problems that are affecting their job performance. Supervisors who label employees as alcoholics or drug abusers and who try to coerce them into treatment programs could cause legal problems for the employer.

Conclusion

As EAPs have grown, they have lost their stigma as a resource for alcoholics and drug abusers. These programs have become a valuable employee benefit for all workers. Employees are able to utilize the counseling services for problems ranging from those of everyday life to very serious issues.

It is estimated that employers spent close to $4,200 on health benefit costs per employee in 1995 (A. Foster Higgins & Co., Inc., 1995). EAPs may help employees deal with problems that could be interfering with their work performance and costing employers several billion dollars in productivity each year. It is estimated that EAPs cost employers approximately $25 per employee but that they recover $4 to $5 for every $1 spent. Many employers believe they have achieved significant cost savings through the initiation of employee assistance and health promotion programs. Moreover, they point to employee satisfaction with such programs.

Bibliography


Additional Information

EAP Digest
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