

# **DO EAPs WORK? A COMPLEX ANSWER TO A SIMPLE QUESTION**

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The main purpose of this paper is to stimulate debate about what effectiveness means in the context of EAPs by challenging some widespread and taken-for-granted assumptions about the benefits of counselling for individual and organizational performance. I also hope to stimulate debate by suggesting some possible costs and benefits of EAPs which it appears have not yet been systematically considered or assessed. I will argue that it is only by looking for more complex answers to the question of whether EAPs work that serious and significant progress can be made in the design and delivery of EAPs. This is not an attempt to argue that counselling does not 'work', but rather an attempt to unpack what 'work' means - particularly in relation to the wider claims of EAPs.

What EAPs are and how they are defined is by no means straightforward. However, one widely used and well-known definition of EAPs, provided by the UK Employee Assistance Professionals Association, is as follows: "...worksite focussed programmes to assist in the identification and resolution of employee concerns such as personal or work related matters, which affect, or may affect performance. The aim of EAPs is to enhance individual performance in the workplace to the benefit of both the individual and the organisation" (UK EAPA, 1998).

So if this is what EAPs are, do they work? First, we need to examine this definition. The early part concerns the identification and resolution of employee concerns which, in this context, would usually be through some form of counselling: So far, so simple. The next part of the definition refers to employee concerns which affect or may affect employee performance. This is where we start to see a clear division between the claims made for the benefits of counselling in general and the claims made about counselling delivered in the context of an EAP. EAPs also aim to resolve concerns which do or may affect, in a negative sense I assume, employee performance. Not only do EAPs aim to make people feel better they also aim to improve individual performance at work. The final part of the definition makes it clear that this performance enhancement should not only benefit the individual but the

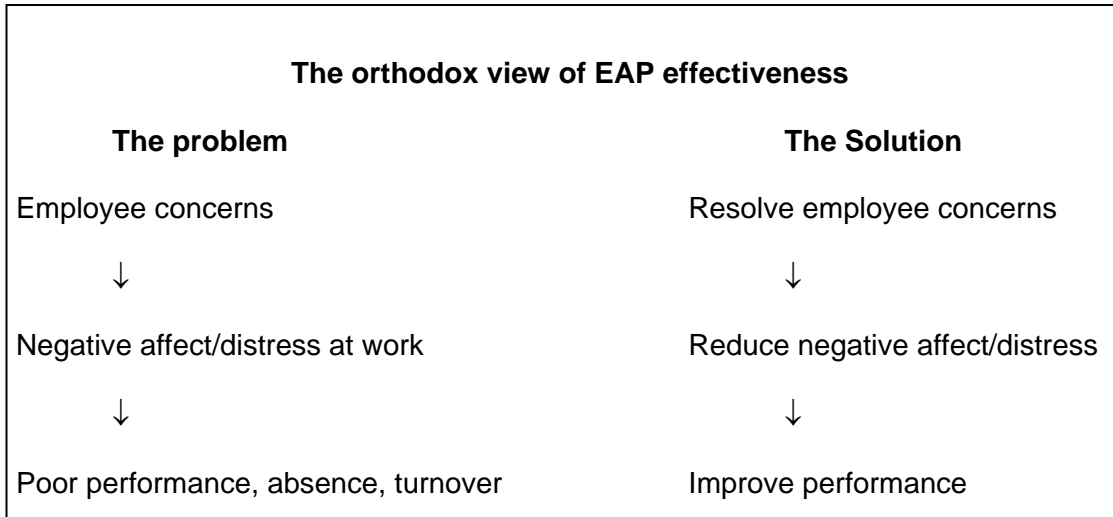
organisation as a whole. Here too, we see an important distinction between the aims of counselling and the aims of EAPs as EAPs also aim to benefit the organisation as a whole.

For some people, these claims would appear to be quite modest and the answer to the question of whether EAPs work or not, in these terms, a resounding 'yes'. Most people involved in workplace counselling have worked with clients for whom personal concerns were indeed having a detrimental affect on their work performance and in turn when these concerns were resolved through counselling work performance seemed to improve. One cannot argue with these individual successes. What it is easy to take issue with, however, are the general claims for EAPs encapsulated in the definition provided above and found in the marketing literature of many EAP providers: That individual concerns *do* generally impact negatively on performance and that resolving these concerns *will improve* performance. One can also take issue with the narrow and even unimaginative ways in which the value or effectiveness of EAPs is conceptualised: Is it not possible that EAPs have all kinds of other impacts on individuals, groups, and organisations which have not yet been considered? We will return to this issue later.

What I will argue here is that perhaps, as traditionally construed, EAPs do not in fact 'work' or, rather, that there is little direct evidence that they do and that there is evidence and theory which suggests that they might not 'work' in the way they are claimed to work. I will then go on to suggest that there are a number of other possible complex costs and benefits of EAPs which have not received widespread attention and it is through examining these that a new understanding of what 'work' means in relation to EAPs can perhaps be developed.

What are orthodox views about EAP effectiveness and what's wrong with them? The key idea, as already stated, is that if employees have personal concerns these may or will impact negatively on their performance and hence, by reducing these concerns, employee performance will improve. Performance can mean many

different things but here we will consider it to mean the quality and effectiveness of individual work performance, attending work (i.e., low absence), and not leaving work (i.e., low turnover).



The first problem with this orthodox view is that it is based on the assumption that employee concerns and associated negative mood states lead to poor individual performance, absence and turnover. While it is quite easy to think of individual examples where this appears to be true, the weight of existing evidence finds somewhat weak or no links between stress and negative feelings at work and these behaviours (see Briner & Reynolds, 1999). This appears to fly in the face of common sense: Surely if people feel bad they are less likely to perform well? Though it certainly is the case that in *some specific circumstances* this idea probably makes sense there are many other circumstances in which it does not. In many jobs performance is not determined strongly or indeed at all by how an employee feels but by factors such as the pacing of machines, the behaviour of team members, the nature of the task, technology, individual skills, effort, and so on. In other words, in many if not most jobs, employee performance is not strongly related to employee feelings and concerns. A second problem with the orthodox view is that apparently negative performance such as absence and turnover may actually be beneficial for the organization as a whole. This point will be discussed in more detail later. A third

problem is that even if EAPs worked in the way suggested by traditional reasoning, EAP take-up may be so low in most organizations that it has no significant impact on the organisation as a whole. In other words, although the performance of some clients improves, such small numbers of clients are involved that the bottom-line impact is negligible. Finally, while there is plenty of evidence about the impact of counselling in general on clients' well-being there is very little evidence about real behaviour changes at work following counselling.

There are also numerous possible costs of EAPs for both individuals and organizations which appear to have not been widely considered. The first possible cost occurs where clients are presenting with similar work problems that are being resolved at an individual level but not at an organizational level. This is particularly likely to occur where adequate feedback mechanisms to the organization are not in place. The EAP may therefore inadvertently be helping the organization to avoid tackling problems on an organizational level. Second, while the provision of an EAP might encourage a positive image of the organization amongst employees it may also encourage a negative one. This might be a particular problem where the EAP is external and where employees feel that managers and human resource staff are not prepared to tackle employee concerns directly but rather pass them on to an external service. Third, not all turnover is necessarily undesirable. It may be beneficial both for the individual, and/or their coworkers, and/or the organization as a whole if they leave. Providing counselling and support through an EAP *could* mean that a person who would otherwise leave the organization might stay as a consequence of counselling. Fourth, EAPs may actually *increase* turnover which is undesirable for the organization or the client's coworkers. For example, a highly competent manager who is performing excellently may, after counselling for whatever issue, decide that they are in the wrong career or committing too much to work and decide to leave. Fifth, counselling may simply have some negative impacts on clients by increasing distress or changing the client's behaviour in ways that are considered very negative

by coworkers and the manager. For example, a client who feels empowered and less prepared to do what they are told at work may become more difficult to work with. Last, employee concerns may impact positively on performance. People who have concerns may throw themselves into their work as a means of distracting themselves from those concerns hence resolving their concerns through the provision of an EAP will have a negative impact on their performance. These six points provide some indications of the possible costs for individuals and organizations of EAPs. EAPs, like almost *any* organizational intervention, are likely to have costs *and* benefits.

#### **Some possible costs of EAPs**

- Organizational problems which need to be solved on that level may remain where feedback mechanisms from the EAP are non-existent or inadequate
- EAPs may produce a negative image of the organization amongst employees if the EAP is seen as a means by which the organization pushes aside employee concerns
- EAPs could *decrease desirable turnover* where employees who are not valued or seen as productive decide to stay with the organization as a consequence of counselling
- EAPs may *increase undesirable turnover* where valued employees leave to make career changes as a consequence of counselling
- Counselling may simply have negative impacts on clients and other changes in clients' behaviours may be viewed negatively by co-workers and managers
- Employees with personal concerns may perform *better* than those who do not by throwing themselves into their work as a means of distraction. Resolving their concerns through an EAP will reduce their work performance

But what about some of the less orthodox benefits of EAPs? In what ways might EAPs provide benefits over and above those that are usually claimed? First, EAPs may bring about significant changes to the client's *co-workers and immediate team*. In other words, a major impact of EAPs may be through the impacts changes in client affect and behaviour have on the client's co-workers and team. For example, it may be that the individual performance of the client is only minimally reduced as a consequence of their personal concerns but this very small performance reduction has a major knock-on effect on co-workers and removing it will have large effects on

the coworkers. Changes in a client's mood and emotional state may also play a significant role in changing the feelings and behaviours of coworkers: There is plenty of evidence to suggest that we can 'catch', through a process known as emotional contagion, the feelings of other people (see, for example, Parkinson, et al, 1996). An employee experiencing negative affect may negatively influence the mood of others and hence improving an employees feelings may also improve the feelings of their coworkers. The same principle may also apply to work attitudes and job satisfaction. Such effects are likely to be stronger where the client is a manager or has considerable influence on others at work. Some preliminary evidence from Reynolds (1997) showed that across time the provision of counselling improved the average levels of well-being in a number of departments of an organization even where those relatively few individuals who attended counselling were removed from the calculations. In other words, the general increase in well-being could not be explained by those few individuals who felt better as a consequence of attending counselling. One explanation for this effect is emotional contagion. It should also be noted that this study found that the provision of counselling was more effective than more organizational and group level interventions such as changing the way work was scheduled. In general, many of the effects of mood and attitudes on performance which are *not* found on an individual level have been found on a group or organizational level. One person's mood state may have relatively little impact on their performance, but the average mood state of a team or organization can have impacts on the team or organization's performance.

A second benefit of EAPs is the positive effects they may have on line managers. This could occur in a number of ways. Clearly it may be easier to manage distressed people if you are secure in the knowledge that you are able to refer them to someone else. Also, having an EAP may reduce the amount of time managers have to spend with distressed employees as employees have somewhere else to turn. Finally, line managers may also benefit from improvements in

employees affect through emotional contagion: Managing people who are have greater levels of positive affect may affect managers' feelings. A third possible benefit of EAPs is through enhanced organizational reputation. This may not only influence current employees, but job applicants, and the organization's consumers and clients.

The three possible benefits which have been discussed thus far are just three of many which do not appear to have been considered in any systematic way either in terms of evaluation or service design.

#### **Some less orthodox possible benefits of EAPs**

EAPs may produce impacts on clients' immediate co-workers and team

- Performance - client's performance change small but it has large knock-on effects on team
- Mood and emotions - through emotional contagion co-workers may start to feel better if the client does
- Work attitudes - if the client has negative work attitudes that become more positive this may also influence the team positively

Impact on line managers

- May be easier to manage distressed employees if there is someone the manager can refer the employee too if thing get too difficult
- May reduce management time spent dealing with distressed employees
- Improvements in clients' mood may also impact on line managers

Enhancement of organizational reputation

- Existing employees
- Job applicants
- Organization's local community, customers and clients

So do EAPs work? And work for whom and in what ways? The complex answer I have tried to provide to the simple question is as follows. First, they may not work particularly well in terms of the orthodox way of thinking about EAP effectiveness. Second, EAPs may also have costs which need to be acknowledged and incorporated into EAP design and evaluation. Third, EAPs may have numerous other kinds of benefits which we have barely begun to consider either in EAP design or evaluation.

EAPs deal with individual employees in a way we hope will also impact on the organization. What happens on an individual level may or may not impact on the organization and vice versa. We cannot always assume that what is good for one is good for the other and indeed in many cases they may be in a direct inverse relationship. What it is reasonable to assume, however, is that whenever we intervene in organizations the effects are likely to be complex and produce costs as well as benefits for different stakeholders. In addition, interventions such as EAPs will produce effects which are subtle, non-obvious, which work through mechanisms which are difficult to detect or observe, but are nonetheless important. It is now time to move beyond the simple question whether or not EAPs work to more complex questions about what 'work' might mean and how we can tailor EAP design and evaluation accordingly.

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