

A Review of the EAP Market in the United Kingdom and Europe

Tony Buon
John Taylor

SUMMARY. This research study explores the perception of human resource (HR) managers of the Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) product and EAP providers in Europe. This study had its origins in research undertaken by others, which suggested that EAPs had or were in the process of becoming commodities. Consequently the view was that they had become devalued, standardized, and were often used as an add-on bundled with the purchases of other services. This study, although not setting out to empirically prove or disprove this hypothesis, was designed to explore the perceptions of HR and other managers involved with EAPs (the purchasers), and add to the debate on this important perception. The research study was designed and data was gathered using an online questionnaire. The questionnaire sought to gather data about HR managers' and other managers' perceptions about the EAP product, the services included in EAPs, the factors that influenced the purchase of EAPs, and the reasons for establishing and maintaining EAPs. In general the research results

Tony Buon is the Managing Partner in the U.K.-based ScotCoach consultancy firm. He is also a consultant to the Aberdeen Business School, Robert Gordon University. Tony has extensive experience, spanning 25 years in the EAP and HRM fields.

John Taylor is Senior Lecturer at Aberdeen Business School, Robert Gordon University and Head of the Department of Human Resource Management and was previously a Senior Adviser with the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS).

Address correspondence to: Tony Buon ScotCoach, 2nd Floor, 145–157 St. John Street, London, EC1V 4PY UK. (E-mail: tony@scotcoach.com).

established a much higher awareness of EAPs in the United Kingdom than in Denmark and Germany/Switzerland; the HR and other managers involved with EAPs were working at a relatively senior level but had a relatively low level of participation in the buying decision; there is a possible mismatch of services included in EAPs compared to what respondents actually want—though this may need further research. Price is rated as a “somewhat important” factor in the buying decision, but such factors as the relationship with and the quality of the EAP provider are also seen as important. Purchasers generally believe that EAPs provide value for money and there is little evidence of overselling. Finally, there is very little difference between organizations and participating countries in the reasons for establishing and maintaining EAPs or in fact in the anticipated and hoped for benefits. The research study report amplifies the above findings and suggests some actions for EAP providers and respondents.

KEYWORDS. Commoditization, EAPs, employee assistance, Europe, HRM, price, human resources, purchasing

INTRODUCTION

In late 2007, Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen, Scotland, was contracted by the Employee Assistance European Forum (EAEF) to conduct research into the perceptions of human resource managers (HRM) of Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) in Europe. This was subsequently expanded to include other managers who were involved with EAPs from a management perspective (procurement, purchasing, senior management).

This study had its origins in research undertaken by others, which suggested that EAPs had, or were in the process of becoming commodities (Sharar & Hertenstien, 2006). Consequently the view was that they had become devalued, standardized, and were often used as an add-on bundled with the purchases of other services.

This research study though not setting out to empirically prove or disprove this hypothesis, is designed to explore the perceptions of HR and other managers involved with EAPs (the purchasers), and add to the debate on this important perception.

The research study was designed and data was gathered using an online questionnaire. The questionnaire sought to gather data about HRM and other managers' perceptions about EAPs in the following areas:

- the EAP product
- the services included in EAPs
- the factors that influenced the purchase of EAPs
- the EAP provider
- the reasons for establishing and maintaining EAPs.

EAPs have a long history in the United States. Only in the last decade have they begun to be adopted by European businesses (Reddy, 2005). There is, however, very limited empirical research that has been conducted in Europe.

INSTRUMENTATION AND SAMPLING

Four EAEF sponsoring organizations¹ assisted with the selection of the appropriate cohort from each of the countries (30 from Germany & Switzerland, 30 from Denmark, and 60 from the United Kingdom). Sample organizations were identified and HR professionals (or equivalent) were contacted by the sponsors and commitment gained to complete the online questionnaire.

The sample was 120 HRM from Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, and from the United Kingdom. Following the feedback given to the pilot study it was decided to target those senior HR, personnel, or other similar managers with EAP purchasing responsibility or authority.

The sample was drawn from public and private organizations, from various industry sectors, in the four European countries. The sampling method used was a type of "stratified quota sampling." Stratified quota sampling is the nonprobability equivalent of stratified sampling. The disadvantages of this sampling method are that it may not be as representative of the population as full random sample would be and further it is not possible to assess the possible

sampling error. However, as the respondents were prequalified by the sponsors, participants were motivated to complete the questionnaire, and response rate was high. The decision to use this method of sampling was taken following the results of the pilot study and in consultation with the EAEF.

The instrument for this study was an online questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of general questions about EAPs and questions for those who had and who did not have EAPs in place.

External reliability for this study has been maintained by the detailed and appropriate definition of the procedures and conditions of the study. The questionnaire design to some extent ensured internal reliability. The use of a pilot instrument also assisted with reliability concerns.

Internal validity has been ensured with randomization, control, measurement, and appropriate analysis. One threat to internal reliability was the use of English as the only language for the questionnaire. This was canvassed prior to the study with the EAEF and seen to be acceptable. Based on the widespread use of English in European business, it was assumed that the population who were to complete the questionnaire would be literate and would have few difficulties in completing the survey instrument. In practice it appears that, some (non-U.K.) participants may have had difficulty with some of the language and anecdotal feedback from sponsors suggests that some participants (particularly in Germany & Denmark) may not have completed the questionnaire due to language concerns.

This study also limits itself to Europe, and though the results of the proposed study may appear to be only applicable to the countries involved, it may be possible to extrapolate the results to other European countries. A further external validity issue is the great difference in EAP development in the United Kingdom when compared to Denmark and Germany (and Switzerland). For this reason, it was necessary to look at the data in two cohorts (United Kingdom and "others") for some analysis purposes.

There are of course inherent problems in the Web-based questionnaire design. This technique does not allow for the probing and clarification of responses, as is possible with the personal interview. The personal interview combined with the mailed questionnaire may be the most effective way to collect the type of data required for this type of study.²

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One hundred and three respondents completed the full Employee Assistance Awareness Questionnaire (EAAQ). As one respondent omitted to include critical identification details and other important information, this questionnaire was disregarded resulting in a final response of 102 respondents. There were six additional incomplete questionnaires that could not be used. This was a total of 109 respondents or 91% of the target sample.

The resulting sample size of valid entries was 102 (85%). We received 30 complete questionnaires from Germany/Switzerland (ICAS), 21 from Denmark (Falck), and 51 from the United Kingdom (31 CiC & 20 AXA). The data analyzed in this study is from the responses to the full questionnaire by the 102 HRM and other managers who had responsibility for people.

Although not all of the respondents specified their position, some 19 failed to provide this information, approximately 80% of respondents held positions in HR. The extent of HR involvement with this research study, ranged from 59% in Denmark, 68% in Germany/Switzerland, and 89% in the United Kingdom.

It is also interesting to note the higher degree of involvement with EAPs by middle-level HR people in Denmark and Germany/Switzerland than in the United Kingdom though it is recognized that this level of involvement does not necessarily mean that these respondents were responsible for EAP-related procurement.

Finally, respondents were analyzed by organization size and by the size of the division in which they worked or were responsible. Sixty-seven percent of respondents work in organizations with up to 5,000 employees, and this distribution is consistent across all participating countries.

The first part of the questionnaire attempted to establish how they were involved in the buying or selection of the EAP product. The aim here was to “qualify” the respondent, so that data was representative of the population. The results of this can be seen in Tables 1 and 2

In respect of the low level of involvement in the buying decision, it has already been established that the majority of people involved with EAPS in their organizations and who are participating in this research study hold middle to senior positions in their organizations.

TABLE 1. Respondent Knowledge and Perception of EAPs

	Denmark	Germany/ Switzerland	United Kingdom	Grand Total
Respondents familiar with the term <i>EAP</i>	16	27	51	94
Respondents unsure of the term <i>EAP</i>	5	3	0	8
Total	21	30	51	102
Organizations that have EAPs	11	18	39	68
Organizations that don't have EAPs	10	12	12	34
Total	21	30	51	102

RESPONDENTS' VIEWS ON WHAT EAPS SHOULD INCLUDE

Critical elements of this research study are respondents' views on what an EAP should or should not offer. The study addressed this by asking respondents to select from a predetermined list of services³ those that they considered should be included in an EAP, and those that should not be included. In addition and by way of seeking corroboration, respondents were asked two further questions that required them to state the one service that an EAP should definitely offer and the one service that should definitely not be offered.

The list of services was compiled following a pilot study conducted with employers in Aberdeen the previous year and was reviewed by the EAEF Committee. However, this may be a limitation of the study in relation to internal validity.

TABLE 2. Analysis of Whether or not Involved in the Purchase of the EAP

Involved in Purchase or Selection of EAP Product	Denmark	Germany/ Switzerland	United Kingdom	Grand Total
Yes	8	9	20	37
No	2	8	19	29
Grand Total	10	17	39	66

The response to the selections made from the pre-determined list are shown below in Table 3, as percentages. Table 3 also shows the differences in responses for those who had an EAP and those who did not. This data was not analyzed across countries as there were no significant differences between the groups.

It can be seen from Table 3, that overall respondents feel EAPs should definitely offer the following services:

- telephone counseling for employees
- face-to-face counseling for employees
- telephone counseling for employees family
- alcohol and drug support and/or counseling
- critical incident and trauma counseling
- stress management
- work-life balance services

In particular, it is interesting to note the lack of support for face-to-face counseling for employees' family members (63%), although there is a large response for work-life balance services (88%). It is thought by the researchers that this may indicate a need for EAP providers to better educate their clients as to the benefits of providing counseling support to employees' family, which is, after all, part of the "core technology" of EAPs, and as "family" problems obviously affect the individual they often become "employee" problems. On the other hand, it may be necessary to listen to the customer here and at least in marketing terms be cautious about over emphasizing the employee family component. In particular, there was a significant difference in those who have EAPs and those who do not in relation to services being offered to employee's families (91/68% "with" & 65/57% "without").

Respondents also felt that EAPs should not offer the following services:

- HRM consultation, advice, and information
- concierge services
- management training
- performance management

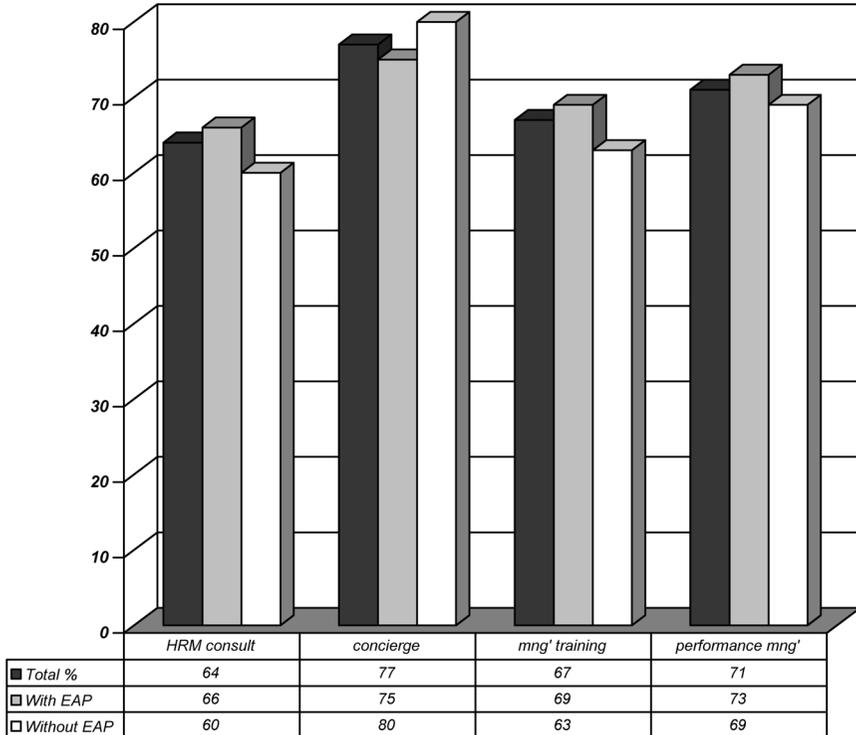
This result can be seen graphically in Figure 1.

TABLE 3. Respondents Views on What EAPs Should and Should Not Offer (percentages, N = 102)⁴

Service	With EAP		Without EAP		Without EAP		Total	
	Should Offer (%)	Should Not Offer (%)	Should Offer (%)	Should Not Offer (%)	Should Offer (%)	Should Not Offer (%)	Should Offer (%)	Should Not Offer (%)
Telephone counseling for employees	99	1	97	3	98	2		
Telephone counseling for employees family members	91	9	68	32	83	17		
Face-to-face counseling for employees	95	5	97	3	96	4		
Face-to-face counseling for employees family members	68	32	57	43	63	37		
Internet based (online) counseling	56	44	65	35	59	41		
Financial, legal, health, & other information services	84	15	61	39	76	24		
HRM consultation, advice, & information	33	66	40	60	36	64		
Coaching	49	51	63	37	54	46		

Alcohol & other drug support and/or counseling	93	7	94	6	93	7
Critical incident or trauma counseling	91	9	86	14	89	11
Concierge services	25	75	20	80	23	77
Stress management services	88	12	84	16	86	14
Workplace mediation	40	60	50	50	44	56
Work-life balance services	88	12	88	12	88	12
Management training	31	69	37	63	33	67
Other specialist training (health, stress, lifestyle)	53	47	54	46	53	47
Harassment, grievance, or other Investigation services	49	51	43	57	47	53
Expatriate support services	61	39	57	43	59	41
Childcare/eldercare services	79	21	62	38	73	27
Performance management	27	73	31	69	29	71

FIGURE 1. Services that Should Not Be Included in an EAP (N= 102)



Note. HRM = human resource managers; EAP = Employee Assistance Program.

With the exception of concierge services, it could be argued that the reason for the above being selected for the category of “should not be offered” is that they are seen by the respondents as appropriate for formal management or specialist HR processes. However, this is speculation on the part of the researchers and could in fact represent an area for further research.

The dislike of concierge services is interesting and consistent with the results of the pilot study (Buon, 2006). The reason for this is outside the aims of this study but would be an interesting area for further study.

It is disappointing that “performance management” is not seen as a desirable part of the EAP. The EAP literature is (see Brody, 1988; Roman, 1981) adamant that performance management is key to

employee assistance and is the “great differentiator” from simply employee counseling. Supervisors are instructed in the EAP literature not to attempt to “counsel” employees about their personal problems but rather confront the employee about their work performance.

It would seem however that our respondents are not rejecting this component of EAPs but rather are not aware of it. Hopkins (2005) and others have lamented the lack of awareness of purchasers of this core EAP component, and this research would seem to support this position. Of course, it is possible that if this question was asked in a different manner we may have received a different result, and this is one area that should be further explored.

The surprisingly high results for alcohol and drug support and/or counseling is of particular interest, given that this was the roots of the modern EAP movement and is one of the great “differentiators” between the U.K./European EAP model and the U.S. EAP model. EAP providers in Europe, if they want to be responsive to their customers, may need to rethink their general reluctance to embrace alcohol and other drug services as core EAP services and look to the U.S. and Canadian EAP models where alcohol and other drug services are central to an EAP.

In relation to what should not be offered, again respondents voted for a limited range of services. Concierge services (23%); performance management (15%); human resource consultation, information, and advice (11%); and management training (9%) were the most frequently selected services falling into the category of “should definitely not be offered.”

It seems that there could well be a mismatch between what EAP providers offer and what their potential clients require. This would clearly have an impact on the perception of EAPs in terms of purchasing criteria and in particular the emphasis on price.

It is of course vital for any successful business to listen to its customers. And it would appear, at least from the respondents to this study, that buyers are looking for what has been described by Roman (1981) and others as “core EAP” services, that is, counseling⁵ and support services for employees (possibly their families) including trauma counseling, stress and work-life services, and definitely alcohol and other drug services. As discussed above, unfortunately the core component of performance management is not seen by the respondents as desirable.

Those EAP providers who wish to pursue products that purchasers clearly do not see as appropriate—such as concierge services, performance management, HR consultation, information and advice, and management training—do so at some possible risk.

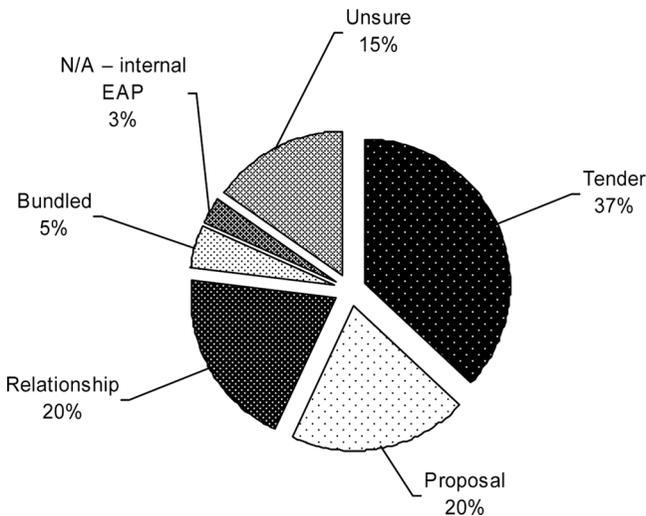
FACTORS INFLUENCING THE PURCHASE OF EAPS

This part of the study is applicable to those organizations who have established EAPs ($n = 67$). A number of respondents who did not have EAPs also answered the questions and have been omitted from the following analysis.

Figure 2 provides some valuable information which when combined with other responses will be of particular interest to respondents and EAP providers alike. This shows that most EAPs are purchased through “formal tendering and bidding” processes and proposals⁶ (total = 57%).

This is perhaps not surprising given the emphasis in today’s business world on value for money, financial integrity, and ethics. However, it cannot be assumed that price, although probably important, was the sole determinant in the buying decision.

FIGURE 2. Purchasing Method ($N = 65$)



Another interesting point is the very low evidence of “bundling” (5%). The literature review refers to other studies that suggest that EAPs have become commodities used as a “makeweight” or an “add-on” in the context of larger buying arrangements.

Important, these results show little evidence of “bundling” across all participating countries in our sample. This does not mean that the idea of commodification of EAPs can be definitely refuted, but it does not support the commodification hypothesis and illustrates the need for further research.

As was previously mentioned, a feature of commodification is that tendering is increasingly used to procure the commodified product or service, and there is certainly an increase in the use of tendering for the procurement of EAPs (Buon, 2006); however, it does not necessarily follow that tendering means that commodification exists. Tenders are of course simply a very good way of securing a good price in a competitive market.

There is no doubt that price will be a significant consideration for organizations in the procurement of services. However, in the purchase of EAPs other factors seem also to be important. For example, Table 4 indicates that the relationship with the EAP provider could also be an important consideration. Table 5 considers the importance of price in the purchase of EAPs, and then the discussion explores what other factors may also influence the procurement decision.

The information contained in Table 5 is interesting as it shows that respondents consider the following as significant in the buying decision:

- the name and reputation of the EAP provider,
- the quality of the EAP provider, and
- the relationship with the EAP provider.

TABLE 4. Analysis of the Influence of Price in Procurement Decisions

How Important was Price in this Decision	Denmark	Germany/Switzerland	United Kingdom	Grand Total
Very important	2	4	11	17
Somewhat important	5	4	22	31
Minor importance	3	2	1	6
Not important	0	1	1	2
Unsure	0	4	4	8
Grand Total	10	15	39	64

TABLE 5. Analysis of the Most Important Reasons for Selecting Current EAP Provider

Most Important Reason for Selecting Provider	Denmark	Germany/ Switzerland	United Kingdom	Grand Total
Name and reputation of EAP provider	2	3	6	11
Price offered by provider	0	0	3	3
Range of services	1	1	6	8
Quality of EAP provider	3	2	8	13
Relationship with provider	4	1	5	10
Performance management	0	0	0	0
Value added by provider	0	0	5	5
Unsure	0	5	3	8
Other	1	4	2	7
Grand Total	11	16	38	65

To further test the commodification hypothesis, respondents were also asked if they would be prepared “to pay more for an EAP run by a world-famous-highly regarded EAP organization.” Table 6 analyzes the responses to this question.

These results suggest that buyers’ are discerning and that they are not prepared to buy solely on the basis of reputation without taking into consideration other factors included those resulting from Table 5.

Therefore, though not discounting the significance of price, it appears that the buying decision depends on the consideration, assessment, and evaluation of a range of factors including the standing and status of the EAP provider, the quality of the EAP product, and it is assumed the likelihood of an ongoing positive relationship with the EAP provider.

TABLE 6. Prepared to Pay More for an EAP

Prepared to Pay More for an EAP Run by a World-Famous, Highly Regarded EAP Organization	Denmark	Germany/ Switzerland	United Kingdom	Grand Total
Yes	1	1	3	5
No	9	9	21	38
Don’t know	0	5	6	11
Possibly	0	1	9	10
Grand Total	10	16	39	65

PERCEPTION OF EAP PROVIDERS

The study sought to establish respondents perceptions of EAP providers in terms of whether or not their products provided value for money and if the products lived up to their prepurchase claims.

The information contained in Table 7 indicates a generally positive perception of EAP providers and their products by respondents. Some 66% of respondents thought their EAP represented value for money, and a further 14% thought that it “possibly” represented value for money.

Denmark (89%) is particularly emphatic in its support for EAP providers and products, and in the United Kingdom 67% of respondents thought they were receiving value for money. The position in Germany/Switzerland is less convincing with 53% showing a positive response.

The next part of the research study report explores the reasons why respondents established EAPs in the first place, the benefits they hoped to receive from establishing an EAP, and the benefits they believe they have in fact accrued.

REASONS FOR ESTABLISHING AN EAP AND DESIRED BENEFITS

The responses to the question of why organizations established EAPs produced a number of responses each highly individual to the organization. In an attempt to marshal this information into a coherent format, the data has been aggregated into common or related themes and is discussed below. The themes seemed to suggest the following emphases:

TABLE 7. Are EAPs Perceived as Giving Value for Money

Is Your EAP Value for Money	Denmark	Germany/ Switzerland	United Kingdom	Grand Total
Yes	8	9	26	43
No	0	2	3	5
Don't know	1	3	4	8
Possibly	0	3	6	9
Grand Total	9	17	39	65

1. employee support: to deal with difficult or stressful experiences or events—in other words a reactive response to a potentially damaging experience;
2. work-life balance and well being: a proactive approach to encourage work-life balance, good health and diet regimes, and generally to educate employees toward good health;
3. from a business and organizational performance perspective: to minimize disruption to work performance and productivity, optimize attendance and minimize absence;
4. to be perceived as a caring employer: to be an employer of choice offering a good and modern benefits package to employees; and
5. to protect the organization from litigation, emphasis on duty of care.

A summary of the main reasons why respondents had established an EAP is provided in Figure 3. The most common responses was to provided support for staff/employees (39%). Significant responses were for “benefit package”⁷ related issues (14%), stress (7%), and “absence management” (7%).

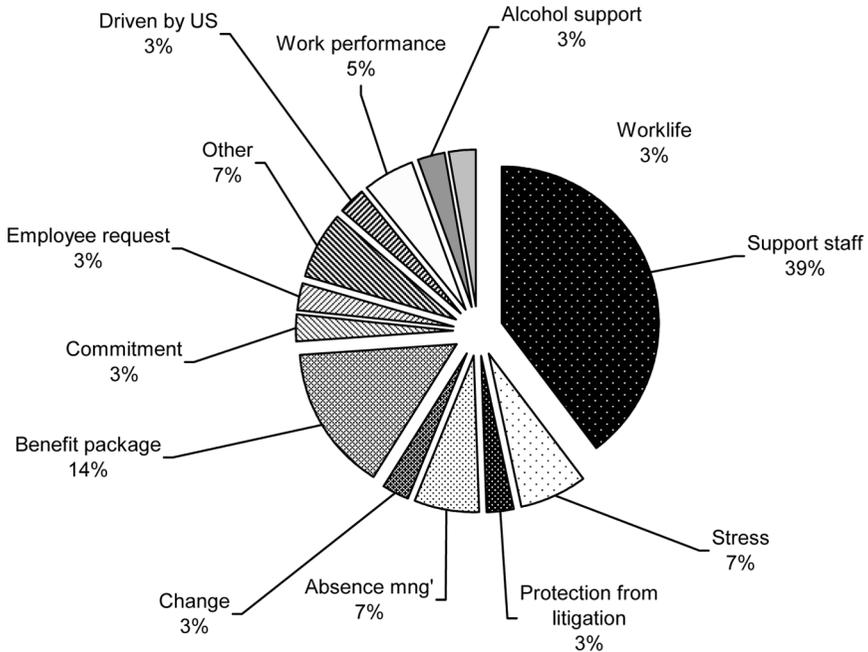
It is worth noting that being required to establish an EAP due to U.S. parent company influence or requirement, something often mentioned in European EAP literature (Hopkins, 2005; Reddy, 2005), was true for only 3% of our respondents.

WHY ORGANIZATIONS MAINTAINED THEIR EAPS

In response to this question, respondents could state as many reasons as they considered appropriate; therefore we have only descriptively analyzed these results.

Responses to this point were very pragmatic and presumably were based on internal monitoring by respondents or simply their experiences in dealing with situations applicable to EAPs. The most prominent reason for maintaining their EAPs was that it was valued by employees and perceived as a positive service to help them deal with a variety of personal and/or work related problems.

Some respondents were conscious of the costs of stress and saw their EAPs as a means of mitigating these costs. Other respondents reported that their EAPs were well used by employees, received good

FIGURE 3. Reasons for Establishing an EAP ($n=73$)

feedback in organizational surveys, added value, and provided cost savings on the in-house provision of similar services.

However, the principal reason for maintaining their EAP was the perceived *raison d'être* for EAPs—to provide an independent, anonymous, confidential, and external service to employees allowing access to expertise not available within the organization.

The main benefits received were as follows:

- the provision of independent and confidential counseling services;
- staff recognizing that their employer is a caring employer;
- support for staff in a number of stressful, critical, and traumatic situations;
- perceived by staff as being a “benefit”;
- increase in staff satisfaction; and
- helps to minimize absence from work.

This list may also serve as a useful benchmark in relation to present marketing and promotion efforts by providers. Again, it is worth remembering that this is the voice of the customer.

In relation to the reasons why EAPs were established, why they are maintained, and the benefits to come from them there was no noticeable variation between the countries participating in this study. In fact, there was a significant degree of correlation with perhaps Denmark having a slightly greater emphasis on alcohol and drug support.

WHY AN ORGANIZATION DOES NOT HAVE AN EAP

The research study concluded by asking those respondents who did not have an EAP why this was the case. The question provided a list of predetermined reasons and asked respondents to select all of the reasons that were applicable. Some respondents made multiple selections, and others did not make any. Therefore, the responses will not total in terms equal to the number of respondents.

The reasons given for not having EAPs were not surprisingly unique to the individual respondent organization; however aggregating the reasons produced some common areas as follows:

- some, only a few, had access to external counseling services;
- HR departments provided some EAP services internally, again very few with Germany/Switzerland having the most activity here: five organizations;
- cost and price: again Germany/Switzerland was the most prominent with four organizations;
- some organizations considered themselves “too small”: 10 organizations were in this category.

Other reasons given for not having EAPs were that EAPs were not needed by managers or employees, and one organization was in the process of acquiring an EAP.

It is difficult to draw any conclusions from the above other than that most of the organizations did not feel that an EAP provided by an external supplier was appropriate for their organization either for reasons of size, cost, or they had access to a somewhat more limited internal and external provision.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of this study, it can be suggested that HRMs (i.e., the customers) have a good perception of EAPs. They see them as professional counseling services offering valuable support services to employees and are generally satisfied with the services they receive.

The research provided information on what respondents considered should be included in an EAP. The results and the responses to questions about “what an EAP should definitely include” and “what an EAP should definitely not include” tend to suggest that it is time for EAP providers to “stick to their knitting.”⁸ The plethora of EAP add-ons may be seen as tempting marketing strategies to revive a declining product, but the first rule of marketing is “listen to your client,” and in Europe at least, many EAP providers are clearly not heeding this advice.

Nearly all of the services advocated by respondents for inclusion in EAP are what might be described as traditional EAP services, for example, face-to-face counseling for employees, critical incident and trauma support, and so on.

Those that respondents suggested should not be included in EAPs or which did not attract support could be described as “add-on” services such as concierge services, and services that could reasonably be expected to fall within normal people management and HRM policies and practices, for example, performance management and harassment and grievance investigation.

Although this is yet another area that could be subject to further research it does indicate that EAP providers may well be offering EAPs with a range of services that respondents do not want; and therefore this may well be contributing to the price pressure just as much as, if not more than, commodification.

NOTES

1. AXA PPP Healthcare (UK); CiC (UK); Falck Healthcare (Denmark); ICAS Schweiz AG (Germany & Switzerland).

2. For further details on the sampling and instrumentation, please contact the authors.

3. This list was developed by the researchers and tested in the pilot study. It was then modified and confirmed by an expert panel (EAEF Board).

4. The headline total of 102 was adjusted in some categories to account for those respondents who did not complete the individual question.

5. In Europe *counseling* is a term used to describe brief and short-term EAP type therapy and other psychotherapeutic interventions normally provided by EAPs.

6. A proposal is a less formal version of the tender or may be a precursor to formal tendering.

7. Offer benefits to employees/extend range of benefits/be a top employer.

8. A British idiom that means if companys stick to their knitting, they continue to do what they have always done instead of trying to do something they know little about.

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