

# EAP Utilization:

## The EAP Field Doesn't Do Itself Justice

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A recent article in the *Society for Human Resource Management*<sup>1</sup> addressed the utilization of employee assistance programs, and quoted an industry consultant as saying that “usage is abysmal. Most companies aren’t communicating their EAPs well. It wouldn’t occur to employees to call.” This, despite SHRM’s assertion that “employers struggle to understand why only a tiny minority of workers take advantage of a marquee employer-provided tool to help them improve their mental health: employee assistance programs.”

In its January 31, 2020 issue, the *Wall Street Journal* published an article entitled “Stressed Out at the Office? Therapy Can Come to You.”<sup>2</sup> It outlined how many employers, from “Dell to Delta” were bringing in therapists for on-site counseling. Employee assistance programs were not mentioned once in this article. The author did not see a public response to either the *WSJ* or to *SHRM* from any prominent EAP professionals or from any large EAPs to these unflattering articles.

Unfortunately, employee assistance programs have bought into the idea that utilization is too low, and devised some questionable tactics in their efforts to raise this number. Aside from traditional counseling and on-site support for employees, many EAPs have begun offering services that cover child and elder care and any of a number of wellness programs through third-party vendors. Along with this, in an effort to provide clients with “positive” information about its programs, the EAPs have begun counting all of these services (and its attendant clients) as part of the annual utilization. Other EAPs include dependents and spouses in the numerator count, leaving just eligible employees in the denominator count, which inflates utilization.

So, for instance, if a company has 1,000 employees and 50 of those employees utilize the EAP counseling service in a given year, the proper formula to establish utilization is  $50/1000 = .05$  (5% utilization). If, however, at this same company, the EAP were to calculate utilization by including both counseling clients and those employees who utilized the Work/Life services, the number of yearly “clients” could jump to 75, and the EAP might calculate “utilization” as  $75/1000 = .075$  (7.5% utilization). This is a distortion of the true utilization rate.

The author, in her work as an EAP consultant, has even seen some EAPs count “no-shows” toward annual utilization.

The EAP field has not done itself justice in explaining utilization. Traditionally, a utilization rate of 5% of the employees that use the program (*per year*) was the goal (with the number of employees seen acting

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<sup>1</sup> Agovino, Theresa. “Companies Seek to Boost Low Usage of Employee Assistance Programs.” *HR Magazine*, Winter 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Feintzeig, Rachel. “Stressed Out at the Office? Therapy Can Come to You.” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2020.

as the numerator, and the number of eligible employees acting as the denominator). Where the counting has gone askew is that EAPs have used the *single* year as the total utilization regardless of number of years, but in reality the number is much different.

For example, when the author was a consultant to a Fortune-50 premier corporation for its employee assistance program, she acted as the evaluator and monitor of the data provided by the two EAP vendors. It was a robust program. At one point, the company raised the issue of the 5% utilization, and the author suggested this did not reflect a true usage count. She suggested that the two vendors review for a seven year period the number of unique employees that had used the program during this span. It turned out that during this period, almost 35% of the company's employees had used the EAP.

The mistake the EAP field has made in counting utilization is they have only used one-year's data, rather than a cumulative approach to the data count. A formula for a more realistic utilization count would be the number of unique employees utilizing the EAP program in years 1-2-3-4-5 divided by the number of employees. Counting utilization as suggested gives a much more appropriate count and EAPA should encourage such as best practice.