

# Measuring Workplace Outcomes in EAPs

## New Approach Appears Promising

*By David Sharar, Richard Lennox & John Burke*

What defines an effective EAP? Are the most effective EAP providers the ones that obtain the highest utilization rates? Retain accounts over time? Earn the most money? Have the most Fortune 500 employers as clients? Build the best websites? Demonstrate adherence to industry standards?

An owner, manager, or chief executive of an EAP may consider such measures as effective because they denote increased business or customer satisfaction. However, what if effectiveness was defined as obtaining positive outcomes in a workplace setting? This definition would require you to understand the end results of specific EAP interventions, including the effects that interest employers most – such as reduced absenteeism and presenteeism, increased levels of work engagement, and decreased distress at work and home.

The bad news is that the use of outcome measures in EAPs is still in its infancy, even though it is common today to view requests for proposals (RFPs) that contain a question such as, *“Please describe your approach to measuring outcomes and return on investment.”*

Conversely, the *good* news is that a new approach presents a better model for both client organizations and EAP providers by scientifically demonstrating the correlation of cost to results, providing ROI documentation for specific programs, moving from activity reporting to the presentation of empirical results, and differentiating programs and services with outcome data.

However, before this article discusses this new approach, it’s necessary to take a step back and explain where the field *has been* in terms of outcome-related measuring practices.

### **The Historic Approach**

To date, few EAP providers have been able to demonstrate a workplace-specific outcome without manually reviewing charts and making subjective determinations or undertaking a complex, retrospective study that usually involves a time-series design. The reasons for not using a more systematic workplace outcome measurement system include:

- The lack of a scientific platform or in-house scientific expertise;
- The absence of a short, valid, relevant, and affordable measuring tool;
- Limited resources or automated data collection capabilities;
- Little to no cooperation from employers as to when data is needed; and/or
- A lack of formal training that emphasizes the integration of research and practice.

To date, the EA field has operated as though we are in the “counseling” business rather than in the business of improving workplace productivity through our behavioral health expertise. Many EA providers believe their continued viability hinges solely on developing innovative new products, integrating them with other products, and increasing market share.

However, the fact of the matter is that employers don't care very much about *how* we improve the workplace by helping employees change their behavior – they simply want it to happen. To use an analogy, consumers are only mildly interested in whether the service is better at K-Mart or Walmart. However, they *are* passionate about understanding the actual *value* of their purchases. Similarly, employers will choose their particular version of value, which is always a balance between costs and perceived or expected benefits and results.

Employers have not traditionally viewed EAP workplace outcome measures as highly persuasive or credible, leaving low price as the one measure they do understand. In theory, no employer is willing to pay for a service that does not produce positive workplace outcomes – but in the absence of standard outcome monitoring, there has not been a link between price and expected results. Consequently, EAP providers are not paid in proportion to their effectiveness. This is unlikely to change unless we embrace improved outcome measurement.

### **A New Approach**

It's time to spend less energy and money on measuring *processes* and invest more in measuring *outcomes* and demonstrating results. Employers look mostly to their vendors to initiate outcome evaluation, whereas they struggle with the task of finding a relevant outcome measure that is workplace focused and appropriate to the EAP setting.

The new approach, developed by Chestnut Global Partners in collaboration with Burke Consulting and Richard Lennox, a research psychologist and psychometrics specialist, uses a short, precise, and easy to administer survey that collects employee feedback, both before and after EAP services are provided, on five key aspects of the effects of personal issues on workplace functioning:

- Absenteeism;
- Presenteeism;
- Work engagement;
- Life satisfaction; and
- Workplace distress.

Results may be used in a comprehensive report that not only analyzes the average change in employee behavior, but also documents the impact on their participation and contribution in the workplace. This approach – a workplace outcome-based survey tool – can illustrate the real ROI from an EAP service by translating improved productivity into cost savings.

In addition, each scale in the suite can also stand alone, allowing the EAP provider to select only the measure(s) needed or desired. Toward that end, the short scales contained in the suite are designed to provide the “sharpest pencil” available with minimal expense to the EAP provider in terms of data administration and respondent burden. This is important because one of the major obstacles EAP providers have faced has been that most outcome measures are simply too long, consider only one aspect, and/or are expensive to purchase or dispense.

The survey may be administered manually or automated in a number of ways – including building the process into your existing EAP database, integrating and installing survey software within a web portal, or designing access to a secure outside web page (provided by the EAP vendor) so employees can log in to respond.

## Using the Suite

You can access the suite here:

<http://www.eapassn.org/files/public/workplaceoutcomessuite0110.pdf>

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