

Utilization of EAP Services

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ABSTRACT. *This Research Note reviews the issues concerning different ways of how to measure the use of employee assistance program services and which utilization rates are most useful for understanding the effectiveness of the program. They key metrics for utilization to consider include the clinical case rate, the all people use rate and the all activity use rate.*

What Are EAPs? Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are employer-sponsored programs designed to alleviate and assist in eliminating a variety of workplace problems. EAPs typically provide screening, assessments, brief interventions, referrals to other services and case management with longitudinal follow-up for mental health concerns and substance abuse problems. The source of these employee problems can be either personal or work-related. Those who work for EAPs come from many different professions including social workers, psychologists, counselors, substance abuse specialists, occupational nurses, and others. In Canada, the services are called Employee and Family Assistance Programs (EFAPs).

Understanding Utilization

Utilization reports seem to be a good method for assessing the effectiveness of an EAP provider and its services. However, the lack of standard metrics for

reporting on EAP utilization in the industry can result in differences between how various providers and programs count the activities of their service.^{1,2,3} For example, some EAPs consider a "case" to be any call that comes into the EAP whether it involves additional services or not; while other EAPs define a case only when the call turns into a face-to-face interview or use of other services with a counselor or associate. Consequently, utilization rates can vary depending on how the company defines key parts of what is included in measures of utilization.¹ In addition, most reports tend to include a great deal of information about the nature of the clinical issues that characterize the individual users of the service and provide less information on other aspects of the service.⁴

Sample Utilization Reports

Program use rates considered in the selection process for an EAP provider should be based on the provider's entire "book-of business" or more specifically from the business market that fits the interested organization (e.g., retail business, education, public sector). Actual reports from other organizations that are similar to the interested organization can also be examined as case examples (if permission is given to share the reports). Some EAPs participate in pooling their data with other providers through third-party database services and this

allows the utilization of the EAP to be compared to benchmark data from other EAP providers.^{1,5}

Three Key Utilization Metrics

Given the lack of standardization of reporting metrics in the industry, it may help to understand the utilization of services by focusing on three simple measures of what happens at EAPs.^{2,5,6,7}

Clinical Case Use Rate. The first and most important utilization rate is also the most conservative number. This measure is the *clinical case* usage rate. This metric counts the number of people or cases (employees and family members) who received a clinical assessment and have one or more counseling sessions from the EAP during the reporting period. This count of cases is divided by the total number of employees at the organization with access to the EAP benefit. For example, 50 clinical EAP cases out of a population of 1,000 employees yields a rate of 5.0%. Clinical case utilization rates can range from between 1 to 5 percent or higher. For example, one national data warehouse of operational information from over two dozen different EAP providers has a benchmark average in 2007 of 3.9% for the annual utilization rate for clinical cases opened.⁵ This rate of use is important because it tracks the kinds of cases that are the most likely to yield high business value in cost-related outcomes from the counseling.

People Use Rate. The second basic utilization metric counts the total number of *people* who used the EAP for any reason – not just for assistance with clinical problems. This measure adds up all of the unique people who used the EAP, either for clinical counseling, information and referral, management or organizational services, attendees of worksite trainings, crisis management events and so on. This number total is divided by the total number of employees at the organization with access to the EAP benefit. The people use rate is often double or triple the size of the clinical case use rate (perhaps, 5% to 15%). This rate includes employees and also family members (if eligible to use the EAP). Note that many EAPs report that about 1 in 10 users are non-employees. Thus, EAPs are being used by many people for a wide variety of reasons – not just for clinical issues – and many of these clients use EAP services in a preventative manner when their

issues are not severe enough yet to merit clinical treatment from the EAP counselors.

Total Activity Use Rate. The metric of total *activity* rate for EAP utilization is also useful to know about. This rate is the most inclusive of all of the services offered by the EAP and thus is the highest level of the three use measures. It adds up all of the contact events and discrete services provided by the EAP, including all calls, website hits, attendees at worksite trainings, management consultations, sessions with clinical counselors, sessions with the EAP's legal or financial consultants, and so on. This total number is divided by the total number of employees at the organization who have access to the EAP benefit. As long as this measure is not the only rate presented the purchaser (as it is biased toward high rates – 15% to 30% are common), a total activity rate provides information on the overall level of use of the EAP. Knowing the total activity with the EAP is helpful, as it shows how much it is being used and thus indicates the general level of awareness of the EAP among those in the organization.

For example, a data warehouse of different EAP providers has a benchmark average of 4.6 services provided per each clinical case.⁵ Thus, when their benchmark average of 3.9 clinical cases per 100 employees is multiplied by the 4.6 services per each case, the total activity rate is 17.9% - which is about 18 EAP services delivered per year per every 100 employees. Note that this example is for the clinical cases only and does not include all of the other kinds of non-clinical cases (e.g., users of management consultations, trainings, critical events, and so on).

Industry Trends. According to the EAPA Professional Standards Committee,⁸ although there are many differences among EAP providers in how and why their services are used, certain patterns in overall program utilization are commonly observed in the industry. These usage trends include that there is often higher use of employee assistance services by female employees, by employees with higher educational attainment, at smaller size companies, at companies where the management is trusted by the employees, and among employees working in the helping professions (e.g., health care providers, medical care, counseling, etc.).

Conclusion

The utilization of EAP services can be measured in several ways and is best examined in the context of the different services the purchaser is interested in most. Comparisons over time for the same EAP service and also to industry benchmarks are also useful. The key metrics for utilization to consider include the clinical case rate, the all people use rate and the all activity use rate. As the field of EAP has yet to adopt industry-wide standardization in the measurement of program service utilization, the comparison of use metrics between different providers should be made with caution.

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Suggested Citation for this Research Note:

Attridge, M., Amaral, T., Bjornson, T., Goplerud, E., Herlihy, P., McPherson, T., Paul R., Routledge, S., Sharar, D., Stephenson, D., & Teems, L. (2009). Utilization of EAP services. *EASNA Research Notes, Vol. 1, No. 5*. Available online from <http://www.easnsa.org>.