

Employee Assistance Research Foundation Announces Winners of Its First Grant Awards Program

Employee Assistance Research Foundation Public Awareness Committee

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ABSTRACT. *The Employee Assistance Research Foundation has announced the winners of its first grants. Two organizations, from two different countries, will each receive a \$40,000 grant for a one-year study to be completed by the spring of 2012.*

Introduction

The Employee Assistance Research Foundation exists to stimulate innovative, rigorous, and theory-based research activities. That research will promote excellence in the delivery of employee assistance services throughout the world, assist in attraction and recruitment of outstanding scholars to conduct research, bridge the gaps between knowledge and practice by translating valid research findings into policy and practice, and promote and support effective measurement practices, performance tools, and outcome criteria.

In September 2010 the Foundation issued its first call for abstracts: "Understanding the Current State of the EAP Field." Many organizations submitted abstracts and a smaller number of applicants were then invited to submit a full proposal. In March 2011 the Foundation announced that two organizations, from two different countries, will each receive a \$40,000 grant. This issue of *EASNA Research Notes* offers an overview of these two projects. The following

applicants were awarded the Foundation's first grants:

- ISW Limits (Institute for Stress and Work) and the University of Leuven (Belgium), in partnership with Capaconselhamento, Lda and the Autonomous University of Lisbon (Portugal). Dr. Debora Vansteenwegen and Dr. Manuel Sommer will lead the study entitled "EAP in Continental Europe: State of the Art and Future Challenges." This research project will survey employers and employees in six European countries, examining the characteristics of existing Employee Assistance Programs and looking at future needs tailored to the European situation.
- The National Behavioral Consortium (United States). Dr. Stan Granberry will lead the study entitled "Creating a National Benchmarking Resource of Metrics for the EAP field." The Consortium is a nonprofit trade association and membership organization comprised of 17 companies representing EAP, managed behavioral health, and work-life firms throughout the US. This study will collect nationally representative data to examine the basic metrics and characteristics that describe external EAP vendors across the U.S.

Later in 2011 the Foundation plans to hold a teleconference open to all interested participants

in which the grant winners will offer an overview of their research projects. In 2012 the Foundation expects to host an event at which the research results will be presented. The investigators will also disseminate their findings via publications in peer-reviewed journals and present at other professional conference venues.

In the next section, we present more information about these newly funded studies.

Study 1

EAP in Continental Europe: State of the Art and Future Challenges

ISW Limits (Institute for Stress and Work) and the University of Leuven, in partnership with Capaconselhamento, Lda and the Autonomous University of Lisbon

Introduction and Aims. This project starts from the observation that in continental Europe, Employee Assistance (EA) services look very different than the standard EA services provided in the U.S. (see Masi & Tisone).¹ They tend to focus on a wider variety of issues and are much more flexible, less structured, and more tailored to the specific needs of the companies they serve. This is also reflected in the variety of ways in which they organize their service delivery. One potential reason for these differences is that the European market has other needs, or different approaches to meet these needs. So in order to survive as an EA company in Europe, other services should be explored or different organizational structures should be developed.

There are numerous reasons that European EAP needs and approaches may differ.² One potential reason is the greater availability of public health care services. The need for employer-sponsored services focusing on counseling for individual employees and their families might be less significant as public services already meet part of these needs. Employers in Europe need to be convinced that the well-being of their employees can contribute to a more successful business in terms of an increase in productivity, in performance and a decrease in absenteeism for

example. Therefore tools that make organizational reports available and that link the EAP activities within a specific company to reports about well-being, absenteeism or other outcomes can have an important additional value.

At the same time, there is a tendency for some EAP providers in Europe to position themselves more and more as a mental health service that is present in the company on a more continuous, strategic and permanent basis. This is in contrast with the original focus of EAP service of providing individual coaching quickly available in case of urgent needs. It is possible this is an important future direction.

New research is needed to determine whether we need to develop similar EAP services as in the U.S., the U.K., Ireland and Scotland, or alternatively whether and how we should design and build our own services tailored to the specific European situation.

This research aims to provide a systematic overview of the characteristics of the existing EAP services and perceived needs in six Continental European countries, and will answer the following questions:

- What types of services are currently provided within EAP?
- What types of services should be provided according to the employers?
- What types of services should be provided according to the employees?

We furthermore want to focus on specific aspects of the services with regard to both content (stress, burn-out, trauma support, depression, alcohol and drug prevention, resilience and motivational programs, health education, work-life balance, family support, financial and debt management), and organizational structure (call center, online support, forum, chat, training and workshops, individual counseling and therapy, well-being assessments, advice and support to develop a well-being policy).

Significance. This research will contribute to a more professionalized EAP industry that is more tailored to the approaches and needs of European

employers as well as employees, and that is more in line with European organizational and social culture. It should lead to an EAP field in Europe that is better prepared for the future.

At the same time, by bringing evidence together in a more systematic way, a platform will be set up to conduct further research about several topics in the EA field (e.g., systematic cost-efficiency studies, controlled outcome studies). The study will provide a solid basis for obtaining future funding for larger-scale, innovative European research in the field of EAP.

Approach. The collaborators in this project have a substantial network and can contact stakeholders throughout continental Europe. Whereas ISW Limits can make contact with EAP providers and stakeholders in the Northern countries of Europe, the Lisbon partner can contact the Southern countries.

In a first preparation round, a desktop and literature search will be done to identify the different EA providers in Europe, to make a systematic overview of the type of services they provide and the type of companies they serve. From this list, a stratified sample of employers and employees will be selected to receive an online questionnaire. The goal is representation from at least three northern and three southern countries and employees and employers that differ in gender, age, level of education and role in the company. In total, at least 200 employees and 150 employers/HR-managers respondents will complete the online questionnaire.

The survey to be developed in this project will cover a wide range of content on services currently offered and perceived needs. Instead of asking HR-managers whether or not they agree with a certain definition of EAP and which services they think EAP should offer or not (see Buon & Taylor)³, we will ask HR-managers as well as employees to indicate to what extent they would find it helpful that their company hired an external partner to provide services to the employees. A fixed list of services will be presented to them. This approach is different from asking about the EAP service as an existing service and asking what employers/employees expect

EAP to offer. There are mainly two reasons for that. First, many people in Europe are unfamiliar with EAP and therefore would find it difficult to answer the questions, and second, the goal is to avoid ending up with a conservative view on EAP simply because employers or employees may have a rather narrow definition of EAP.

Next, a subset of the respondents will be interviewed more in-depth about their concerns, needs and views on EAP services. The information from these interviews will complement the quantitative data analysis. When both components of the study are completed, preliminary findings will be presented to a focus group existing of different EAP providers. The Employee Assistance European Forum (EAEF) will also be asked for feedback. On the basis of the obtained data and the results of the discussion with the EAPA and EAEF members, recommendations and further research questions for the EA field in continental Europe will be formulated. They will be presented in a final, publicly available report.

Study 2

Creating a National Benchmarking Resource of Metrics for the EAP Field

The National Behavioral Consortium

Introduction and Aims. The EAP field is fragmented, highly competitive, and in a period of significant transition.⁴ There is no agency or resource that conducts systematic surveillance on the characteristics and basic metrics among diverse and widely varied EA programs, models, and vendors. The scant literature that reviews the state of the field is dominated by claims and observations based on experience, expert consensus, and opinions among observers in the field.

The last known survey of the EAP field in the United States was done by *Open Minds* in 2004. This survey focused solely on numbers of covered employees and concluded that large insurance-based or managed behavioral health (MBH) vendors seem to dominate the EAP market, with the top largest six firms covering about 70% of the

cumulative market share.⁵ These firms offer EAP in addition to managed behavioral health care, work-life services, and emerging products in the health and wellness arena as a “one-stop shop” for employers and benefits purchasers. While useful, the *Open Minds* survey was not an empirical or scholarly survey that systematically described any detailed characteristics of EAP providers. The survey lacked a well-defined sampling frame or any description of a detailed sampling methodology or response rate. Thus, updated, more detailed and more clearly representative data on EAP are needed.

In this study, a cross-sectional survey will be conducted with a randomly selected sample of external EAP providers. As a descriptive study, the research seeks to examine the basic characteristics and metrics among external EAP providers in the U.S., and compare these findings by “type” of EAP provider. With no empirical research on the current state of the field, this survey will be an exploratory and descriptive examination of EA providers that could lead to subsequent studies in which hypothesized relationships are examined. This cross-sectional survey addresses the following two research questions:

- What are the basic metrics and characteristics that describe EA providers and the provision of EA services across the U.S.?
- How do these characteristics and metrics compare across varied types and models of EAP?

Significance. This survey is significant because it will provide valuable empirical data about what is going on in the EAP field, especially regarding basic metrics. Utilization rates, referral rates to treatment, use of short-term counseling within the EAP, average number of sessions, primary presenting problems, use by dependents, telephone versus face-to-face intervention, “no-show” rates, and integration with work-life are just a few examples of variables that we are currently unable to compare and contrast among different types and models of EAPs. Finally, the study will have broad and significant implications since the goal is to yield findings that generalize to

the universe of external EAP providers in the U.S.

Approach. Compiling a complete sampling frame that truly covers the entire universe of varied external EAP providers and models in the U.S. is challenging, as there is no identifiable resource that compiles and monitors a list of EAP firms. A working sampling frame will be constructed by combining lists of EAP firms as collected by numerous sources that maintain such lists, such as trade associations, suppliers of EAP software, and consultants and other suppliers who market specialized services to EAP firms. The goal is to create a near-comprehensive list of EAP providers that is reasonably representative of the entire working population of EAP providers, thus minimizing any obvious systematic biases in the sampling frame.

A stratified, random sample will be drawn from this sampling frame of EAP providers. Providers will be stratified by known “types” of EAP providers, such as a large, insurance-based; local/regional; hospital or university-based; internals; and internal/external hybrids. Identified leaders who represent these providers will be the sampling unit from whom information will be collected. The degree to which this proposed sampling frame and stratification approach matches the entire universe of U.S.-based EAP providers will depend on how well those identified in the sampling frame differ from those not in the frame.

It is estimated that a random sample of approximately 560 potential respondents will be contacted. A web-based, self-administered, structured questionnaire will be administered to the sample. The survey, currently in draft stage, has been constructed in such a fashion to meet the descriptive and exploratory aims of this survey. It will cover content including various utilization metrics for EAP, Work/Life and other related programs; EAP service modality such as telephone counseling as a primary intervention, and extent of management or human resources referrals.

The results of the study will be widely disseminated to the field through peer-reviewed publications, articles in trade magazines, and presentations at professional conferences.

For More Information on the Foundation

The Foundation's second grant cycle will be announced sometime this fall. Details of the proposal process and the deadline for submitting a brief abstract will be posted on the Foundation's website (<http://www.eapfoundation.org>).

Note

Members of the Public Awareness Committee of EARF include Jeff Christie, Dennis Derr, John Maynard, Bob McLean, and Dave Sharar.

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Suggested Citation: EARF (2011). Employee Assistance Research Foundation Announces Winners of Its First Grant Awards Program. *EASNA Research Notes, Vol. 2, No. 2*. Available from: <http://www.easnsa.org/publications>.