Utilizing Utilization Rates in Canadian EAPs: The Folly of Comparing Cumquats to Tangerines

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ABSTRACT. *Utilization rate is one of the fundamental calculations of Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). It is used in assessing program impact, program promotion, internal staffing and in determining vendor rates. Two national studies, (2001, N =154; 2011, N = 142) conducted a decade apart examined the nature and structure of how a case was defined and how utilization rates were actually determined by Canadian work organizations with EAPs. What was discovered was a broad range of calculations and conceptualizations that did not become any more precise between the two study periods nor consistently follow any recommended standards such as those developed by the Employee Assistance Society of North America (EASNA). This result continues to bring into question the utility of using this metric as an evaluative tool or in any type of comparison such as internal versus external program success or EAP vendor performance within the Canadian context.*

Introduction

The Employee Assistance field has grown substantively from its 19th century beginnings in Welfare Capitalism to its contemporary rebirth as Occupational Alcoholism Programming in the 1940s to the expansion to EAP beginning in the 1970s. Vital to any field is to demonstrate its credibility in the capacity to quantify outcomes. At the core of EAPs is how many people actually use a program and what percentage of those eligible are doing so. Utilization rate is one of the fundamental program calculations used in assessing program impact, program promotion, internal staffing, in determining vendor rates, requesting additional services and determining the extent to which to provide additional program promotion.[1]

Korr and Ruez (1986) were the first to examine EAP utilization in depth.[2] They stated that to be able to evaluate a program and to compare outcomes of different programs properly one must know how many people actually use the service. Despite the efforts by the two prominent voluntary professional international EAP work organizations (EAPA and EASNA), there remain no mandated applied standards in the Canadian context that apply to utilization rates. That is not to say that there has not been presentation of aggregate utilization data. A Canadian secondary data analysis[3] using information collected from the groundbreaking National Behavioral Consortium industry profile of external EAP vendors[4] was able to provide baseline data on cases, sessions and organizational services (Table 1).

Table 1: Service Provision Utilization Rates by External EAP Vendors

Measure	n	mean	median	range
Annual utilization rate per 100 employees per year				
Total EAP counsellor cases	7	4.8	4.6	1.7-8.0
Total EAP counselling sessions	7	13.3	10.7	4.0-21.6
Total EAP organizational services	7	0.2	0.2	0.05-0.4
Combined total EAP services*	7	13.5	10.8	4.1-22.1
Total work/life services	4	1.0	1.0	0.06-1.9
Combination of all three services **	4	16.1	14.9	10.8-24.0
Annual utilization rate per 1,000 covered lives per year				
Total EAP counsellor cases	7	20.2	18.6	6.8-33.0
Total EAP counselling sessions	7	55.4	42.7	16.0-103.4
Total EAP organizational services	7	0.9	0.9	0.2-2.0
Combined total EAP services *	7	56.4	43.1	16.2-105.1
Total work/life services	4	4.3	3.9	0.24-9.1
Combination of all three services**	4	69.1	59.7	43.0-114.1
Average ratio of covered lives to covered employees = 2.46. * combination of total EAP counselling sessions and total EAP organizational services ** combination of total EAP counselling sessions, total EAP organizational services and total work/life services (when vendor provided all three types of services)				

While the study provided detailed information, what remains uncertain is how each vendor conceptualized the concepts of case, session and service.

EASNA has attempted to address inconsistencies in conceptualization of utilization by developing three distinct metrics:

Clinical Case Use Rate - the number of people or cases (employees and family members) who received a clinical assessment and have one or more counselling sessions from the EAP during the reporting period. Cases are then divided by total number of employees (note that family members are not part of the denominator) who are eligible to use EAP.

People Use Rate - the total number of people who used the EAP for any reason. This includes individual counselling, group counselling, critical incident stress debriefings, management consultations, educational workshops, and information about and referrals to other resources.

Total Activity Use Rate - this provides the largest utilization number for the scope of EAP activity within an organization as it takes people use rate and adds to it any phone contact with the EAP provider and website hits as well, though the latter cannot be linked to individuals.[1]

Csiernik (2003) had likewise developed a broader conceptualization in his scorecard for measuring EAP utilization (Table 2) that is closest to EASNA's total activity use rate.[5] However, when you examine Table 2, the time necessary and difficulty in calculating Csiernik's values highlights what a complex concept utilization rate truly is.

Table 2: EAP Utilization Scorecard

Total number of employees =	Ne
Total number of persons eligible to use EAP =	Np
Total number of employees using EAP counselling services =	E
Total number of employee face-to-face counselling sessions =	E1
Total number of employee telephone counselling sessions =	E2
Total number of employee e-counselling sessions =	E3
Average number of individual sessions/employee =	Ea = (E1 + E2 + E3)/E
Total number of retirees using EAP counselling services =	RE
Total number of retiree counselling sessions =	RE1
Total number of retiree telephone counselling sessions =	RE2
Total number of retiree e-counselling sessions =	RE3
Average number of sessions/retired employees =	REa = (RE1 + RE2 + RE3)/RE
Total number of family members using EAP counselling services =	F
Total number of family member counselling sessions =	F1
Total number of family member telephone counselling sessions =	F2
Total number of family member e-counselling sessions =	F3
Average number of sessions/family member =	Fa = (F1 + F2 + F3)/F
Total number of persons participating in group sessions =	G
Total number of group counselling sessions =	Ga
Average number per group =	Ga = G/Gs
Total number of debriefing participants =	D
Total number of debriefing sessions =	Ds
Average number of participants per debriefing =	Da = D/Ds
Total number of employees involved in consultations/mediations =	CM
Total number of employee consultation/mediation sessions =	CMs
Average number of employees per consultation/mediation =	CMa = CM/CMs
Total number of participants in educational workshops/seminars =	W
Total number of educational workshops/seminars =	Ws
Average number of participants per educational workshop/seminar =	Wa = W/Ws
Total number of employees making referral agents contacts =	RA
Total number of referral agent contacts =	Rac
Average contacts per referral agent =	Raa = RA/Rac
Total number of telephone inquiries =	T
Total EAP Utilization Rate =	TUR = E+R+F/Ne
Employee EAP Utilization Rate =	EUR = E/Ne
EAP Penetration Rate =	PR = E+RE+F+G+D+CM+W+RA+T/Ne

Methods

In 2001, a national study of the EAP field to discover the nature of programming in Canada[6] was undertaken with a follow-up study a decade later to ascertain what if any changes had occurred.[7] A four-page survey was developed in cooperation with a 21 person advisory panel consisting of labour, management and EAP service providers in 2001 and slightly modified in 2011 though none of the changes pertained to the determination of utilization rate. In the 2002 study, 400 surveys were mailed to a random sample of Canadian work organizations with 100 or more employers who had established an EAP. A total of 154 surveys were returned, a response rate of 38.5%. In the 2012 study, 400 work organizations were again randomly selected and surveys were distributed, 200 via post mail and 200 through e-mail. Ninety-one (45.5%) of the mailed surveys were returned while 51 (25.5%) of the e-mailed surveys were returned for an overall response rate of 35.5%. Due to the anonymous nature of the responses it is not possible to ascertain how many work organizations participated in both studies, but by examining Table 3 and 4 it is evident from location of organization and sector that there were at least some different work organizations at the two points in time. Both studies asked what the organization's utilization rate was in the year prior to the questionnaire being received (2001 and 2011), how it was calculated, and how each organization defined what constituted a case.

Table 3: Location of Work Organizations (% of total)

	2001	2011
National	14 (9.1%)	13 (9.2%)
British Colombia	5 (3.2%)	12 (8.5%)
Alberta	14 (9.1%)	9 (6.3%)
Saskatchewan	9 (5.8%)	15 (10.6%)
Manitoba	11 (7.1%)	2 (1.4%)
Ontario	62 (40.3%)	61 (43.0%)
Quebec	3 (1.9%)	9 (6.3%)
New Brunswick	12 (7.8%)	6 (4.2%)
Nova Scotia	9 (5.8%)	4 (2.8%)
Prince Edward Island	1 (0.7%)	2 (1.9%)
Newfoundland	11 (7.1%)	6 (4.2%)
Northwest/Yukon	3 (1.9%)	3 (2.1%)
Territories		
Total	154	142

Table 4: Sector of Work Organizations (% of total)

	2001	2011
Government	40 (26.0%)	33 (23.2%)
Manufacturing	24 (15.6%)	20 (14.1%)
Education	20 (13.0%)	32 (22.5%)
Health Care	20 (13.0%)	18 (12.7%)
Mining/Forestry	12 (7.8%)	3 (2.1%)
Law Enforcement	9 (5.8%)	5 (3.5%)
Energy & Utilities	7 (4.5%)	8 (5.6%)
Transportation	5 (3.2%)	7 (4.9%)
Social Services	4 (2.6%)	8 (5.6%)
Other*	13 (8.4%)	8 (5.6%)
Total	154	142
* other includes construction, hospitality, insurance media and retail		

Results

In the 2001 study, 102 (66.2%) companies provided information regarding the utilization rate of their programs whereas 10 years later 121 (85.2%) did so. Table 5 compares utilization rates between the two studies. Across all measures of central tendency utilization rate had increased between 2001 and 2011. Overall utilization rate of EAP services was up nearly 25% as was the median rate of the reporting work organizations. While this could be perceived as a positive development, this comparison is the first between the task of comparing cumquats and tangerines – as the differences in the definitions of the utilization metric is not the same in the different work organizations at either time period. Moreover, when we examine the study findings regarding how utilization rates were actually calculated and upon what variables, it becomes even more apparent that utilization rate cannot be used in any meaningful way in comparing different programs.

Table 5: Utilization Rate Comparison (%)

	2001 (n=102)	2011 (n=121)
mean	9.2	12.2
median	8.4	11.0
mode	10.0	8.0; 18.0
range	1.0-30.0	1.2- 47.5

The first step in calculating utilization rate is to determine what an actual case is. In the 2001 study there were three prominent conceptualizations that were related:

- One new family member or one new employee in person visit (20.8%)
- One phone call or one visit regardless of initiator (20.1%)
- Face-to-face counselling session (more than assessment) (11.7%).

In each example, either a family member or an employee constituted a case. The fact that family members and employees are of equal status is crucial as EAPs in Canada are often designated Employee and Family Assistance Programs (EFAP), to emphasize their inclusiveness. One point of interest worth noting, for it is crucial when moving to the next step of calculating utilization rate, was that three (2.9%) work organizations specifically indicated that while they provided service to family members none of these contacts were counted as a case if the employee also used the program in the same year.

While distinct, the differences between the three prominent calculations are relatively minor. Some work organizations only counted a contact as a case once a person moved beyond assessment whereas others counted a phone call as a case even if it did not progress to the assessment stage. Thus in terms of contacts, a 10 minute conversation within one program was considered the equivalent to a face-to-face one hour counselling session in another. However, in terms of outcome they may both lead to a successful resolution of a presenting concern and so in some instances could be equivalent in terms of meeting an EAP/EFAP's goals, but more importantly in meeting the employee's needs. Other variations of what constituted a case included an organization where once a phone contact reached 45 minutes it became a case while another indicated four phone contacts were equivalent to a single case due to the time allocated.

Another interesting distinction entailed how families were counted by different programs. If a couple attended EAP together they would be counted as two cases and if they brought their child it would be three cases. This was the protocol employed by seven (6.9%) work organizations. Five (4.9%) work organizations reported that if an employee presented with two separate issues in a calendar year that the individual would be counted as two distinct cases. These definitions may have arisen as a means to circumvent the artificial counselling limits placed upon some counsellors by EAP

vendors.[8]

The follow-up study, conducted a decade later, showed no more clarity than the original. Twenty-one distinct conceptualizations of what was a case were reported by the 121 work organizations that responded to the question. Definitions of a case ranged from any time the program coordinator was directly contacted be it in person, by phone or through e-mail to a counsellor's discretion to only when a person has a formal one hour counselling session. The significance of these findings is that even before the formula for determining utilization is established by the different work organizations there is little regulation or consistency in the numerator of the calculation.

The situation only worsens unfortunately when we examine how utilization, itself, is calculated. In the original study, there were very honest responses from individuals reporting on behalf of their work organization. Six (3.9%) stated they did not know how utilization was calculated. Another 10 (6.5%) reported that they did not calculate a rate, which makes the discussion regarding the limits of defining a case moot for them. While 15 (9.7%) indicated their service provider was solely responsible for determining the actual number, but that they were unaware of what factors were considered in calculating the rate.

Of those who were aware of how the value was computed, the most common response was:

- Number of new files/total employees (*n* = 39, 25.3%)

This was interesting given the second and third most common responses were:

- Family + employee/employee (*n* = 21, 13.6%)
- Employees using/total employees (*n* = 14, 9.1%)

Calculation one and calculation two are essentially the same, except the second one formally acknowledges family members are part of the numerator but not the denominator. The third calculation realizes that the first two are skewed too high and thus does not count family members but still provides them with counselling. After reviewing just these three without considering which definition of case they each used (for using some case definitions could have the same employee count as two in some years and if they came with their family count as three), it becomes evident why the range in utilization is from 1.0% - 47.5% (see Table 5).

While the 2011 study reported 19 distinct calculations, several of which were distinct from what was being used a decade earlier, the calculations had become more precise:

- Total clients/full-time equivalent staff
- Weighted average number of employees per quarter
- Referrals/employees

However, there was still a range:

- Individual contacts + phone contacts/ employees
- Number of employees + wage/ cost/employees
- New cases + workshop participants/ employees.

What should be noted for each of these prominent and lesser utilization formulas is that in not one instance is family in the denominator, while in five of the six, family members do not appear to be excluded from the calculation.

Discussion

EAP is a highly developed realm of practice in Canada even if we are not able to always accurately compare program outcomes. It is evident based upon the findings presented that comparing utilization rates between work organizations and different EAP vendors should be done with great care or perhaps simply not done at all given the range of limitations

discovered in the course of conducting two national studies. It is evident that the recommended conceptualizations from EASNA are not in place regardless of what national baseline database studies purport. This does not mean that the rates that work organizations use cannot be employed for internal purposes, though it should still be clearly stated exactly how the counting is being done. Also of importance to note before drawing final conclusions are the low response rates of the two studies (38.5% and 35.5%), bringing into question the representativeness of the findings used in this study in general, as the majority of work organizations did not respond to the surveys.

EAP remains a voluntarily regulated field in Canada. It is also a highly competitive field among the narrowing number of national and international EAP vendors. Thus if a utilization metric is being used to illustrate provider superiority it is vitally important to understand how the number is being determined and limits with the calculation. Moreover, if this number is being used for outcome and evaluation purposes the way it is calculated is also vital to understand. If it is used to bring legitimacy to a field in any empirical manner it is likewise vitally important. If it is vitally important than we need all who are using this value to be very cognizant if they are in fact comparing cumquats or tangerines for in terms of mathematics the actual utilization rate of EAPs is far lower than believed and these programs are not reaching nearly as broadly as we have been assuming. However, these issues should not preclude us from ongoing efforts to enhance our empirical understanding of the field.

So what can be done? The simplest would be through a process instituted by a third party such as the Employee Assistance Research Foundation to bring together the major stakeholder groups, vendors, and EASNA and EAPA leaders to agree upon and use a common utilization criteria which would discern between a telephone inquiry, a referral, and counselling either face-to-face, via phone or via another form of electronic communication (Skype, Facetime). This common standard would then be utilized not only in reporting utilization but in request for proposal contracts to create a true level playing field for both research and practice. However, the reality is that there is more to utilization than simply the number of employees plus eligible family members using the program, thus in an ideal situation utilization would be not only program use by individuals but also separate values indicating group counselling, critical incident debriefings, manager and department consultations and mediations, educational seminars and workshops, and peer referral contacts.

In the interim, what knowledge of current practices must do is make us both cognizant and wary in how we present data, compare programs, and ascertain success. However, while it is vital to understand numbers it is even more important to know what the numbers actually mean - or in the case of utilization - do not mean.

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