

ADVANCEMENT THROUGH EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

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More often than not, when assorting a puzzle there is the general idea of what the resulting image should be. However, and some human resource practitioners may agree, this is not the case when it comes to the puzzle around employees, their behavior and performance.

Upon speaking to various employers, the choir rendition becomes even more concurrent; absenteeism and punctuality are having a significant impact on the company's productivity. When one takes a look at the absenteeism rates compiled by the Productivity Council in their National Survey of Productivity 2014 and 2015, the message is saddening. In efforts to reinforce the point, mention is only made to three sectors. One is the manufacturing sector which reported an absenteeism rate of 18.4 in 2013 and 9.6 in 2014. Another example is the construction sector which reported a rate of 16.1 in 2013 and 10.2 in 2014. What was interesting is the data gathered in the financial services sector which saw an absenteeism rate of 16.5 in 2013 and 17.9 in 2014. In some instances this data appears relevant only on a need-to-know basis with its resourcefulness being lost in management's efforts to increase productivity.

The harsh reality of the above data causes one to consider whether enough is being done considering attempts thus far reflect that efforts have failed. An optimist may say there are two benefits to failure. First, if you do fail you learn what doesn't work; and second, the failure gives you the opportunity to try a new approach. We are not contending efforts made by companies or other relevant parties to deal with issues such as absenteeism, however, we are simply highlighting what is an emerging tool within the workforce that has proven helpful; employee assistance programs.

Employee Assistance Programs are simply work-based programs and/or resources which are designed to benefit both employers and employees. They help businesses and organizations address issues in the areas of productivity and absenteeism by identifying and resolving personal concerns that affect job performance.

EAPs provide services at the individual and the organizational level. Some of the benefits of such programs include and are not limited to:

- Improving productivity and employee engagement;
- Improving employees' and dependents' abilities to successfully respond to challenges;
- Developing employee and manager competencies in managing workplace stress;
- Reducing workplace absenteeism and unplanned absences;
- Supporting employees and managers during workforce restructuring;
- Reducing workplace accidents;
- Reducing the likelihood of workplace violence or other safety risks;
- Supporting disaster and emergency preparedness;
- Reducing employee turnover and related replacement costs

So what are some examples of EAPs? Confidential programs that assist employees with challenges such as alcohol abuse, emotional distress, depression, child or elder care issues or financial difficulties are considered EAPs. A familiar example of an EAP may be seen where organizations invite health experts to deliver health and wellness seminars or conduct health assessments on the staff that volunteer. As simple as this may seem, educating the staff on the ramifications to unhealthy lifestyles can have a direct effect on the number of genuine sick days taken or even on the number of medical claims filed. Another example may also be issuing 'staff loans'. Having such options aid in creating an environment where employees feel comfortable and appreciated resulting in an increase in employee morale.

For those companies who are unionized, these EAPs can also be joint efforts between your company and the employees' representative. It is no secret that cost issues are major concerns for employers; especially when looking at employee benefits. While many resolve to reduce the

workforce or raise prices, research has shown that one effective way to cut costs is to identify at risk employees and provide interventions that encourage lifestyle changes that reduce those risks.

Be this as it may, effective management of EAPs as well as adequate communication are essential. Engaging employees and having an open line of communication allows for valuable information sharing that should prove beneficial to both parties. It is imperative that employees understand this is not necessarily an entitlement and may be case sensitive. Management on the other hand should also bear in mind that employees must volunteer; unless an EAP is recommended as a condition to an employee to maintain their role in a company after being disciplined. In fact, in some cases this approach has been taken and the employers have received support from the employees' representatives. Also be reminded that EAPs are confidential but should be easily accessible.

In summary, it is fair to state that through prevention, identification and resolution of some workplace issues, EAPs do enhance employee and workplace effectiveness; and, are vital for maintaining and improving worker health and productivity, retaining valued employees, and assisting returning employees to the workforce after recovery from illnesses or injuries.

It is often said, work is where employees and employers spend majority of their day, and with the current signs of transition to a 24 hour economy even their night. As such, both parties involved in the operations of any business should see to it that all efforts are placed into fostering an environment that exemplifies trust, dedication, innovation, loyalty, team work and productivity. In essence, make every effort to fit the pieces to the puzzle; after all, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Have a productive day!