

Employee Assistance Programme: The Case of a Local Municipality in South Africa

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ABSTRACT This paper focuses on the implementation of an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) in the Makhado local municipality in Limpopo. It interrogates the challenges encountered in implementing the programme by examining the employees' views and opinions. A self-administered, semi-structured questionnaire and face-to-face interviews were used to gather data. A key contribution of this paper is a model of an ideal EAP, which the researchers named Platinum, which should be comprehensive in terms of coverage; accessible in terms of distance; approachable in terms of staff manning the unit; adopt a macro-micro approach; have a dedicated contingent of qualified staff and required resources; meet the needs of both the employers and employees; and undergo regular review. The paper revealed that there is a general level of awareness and positive attitude towards the EAP on the part of employees. It is accessible and adequate, although not perceived to be comprehensive enough. Many employees were generally happy and perceived the EAP as addressing their challenges. However, the majority of the employees were not aware of the EAP policy within the municipality and did not participate in its formulation. The paper recommends the development of innovative marketing strategies that take into cognisance the literacy levels of employees within the municipality for effective implementation.

INTRODUCTION

The modern workplace is an extremely stressful, demanding, and competitive environment which adversely affects the health and well-being of individual employees and the productivity of the institution (Bickford 2005). Employers can improve employee performance and consequently institutional productivity by promoting both healthier individuals and healthier work environments. Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) are designed to help employees with a wide range of problems that affect their well-being as well as promote the productivity of institutions (Kleynhans et al. 2006). EAPs were implemented in the South African public sector long before the HIV and AIDS pan-

dem and before transformation imperatives generated a broader range of workplace problems, to deal with (RSA 2000) issues such as substance abuse and/or substance dependency; adjusting to the public service workplace environment; mental and personal relationship problems; employee conflict in the workplace and so forth. EAPs provide counselling and advisory services such as personal legal and financial services, child and elderly care referrals, adoption assistance, mental health counselling and life-event planning (Dessler et al. 2011).

According to Maiden (1992) EAPs emerged in South Africa in the early 1980s. They are modelled on programmes designed in the United States (US) and were introduced to South Africa by social workers and psychologists who had studied them there. According to Ivancevich et al. (1999), EAPs are designed to deal with a wide range of stress related problems, including behavioural and emotional difficulties, substance abuse, family and marital discord, and other personal problems. EAPs have increased in popularity as they have proven to be effective in enhancing institutional productivity by reducing absenteeism, turnover, tardiness, accidents and medical claims (Grobler et al. 2011).

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The concept of EAPs as workplace interventions is relatively new in the public sector. They were originally established to assist employees with socio-economic problems. The stresses of the modern working environment, the many changes in the South African working environment and especially the advent of HIV and AIDS have drastically changed the profile of the EAP in the public sector. EAPs benefit all spheres of government by improving performance and productivity. According to Perry et al. (1992), the typical EAP deals with any problem which interferes with employees' productivity at the work place. However, Rapeka et al. (2013) argue that the commitment and leadership of top management is critical for the success of the programme.

This paper focuses on the implementation of an EAP in the Makhado Municipality in the Vhembe District of South Africa. As a case study, it examines the challenges encountered in implementing the programme, whether employees are aware of the existence of the programme within the municipality and whether they utilise it or not. The focus is also on how effective the programme is. The discussion ends with recommendations for improving the implementation of the EAP in the municipality.

Literature

EAPs have their origins 40 years ago in the US, when they were primarily a response to work-related problems associated with alcohol abuse. As the programmes developed, their focus broadened to address personal and/or family concerns that interfered with employees' work performance (Grobler et al. 2011; Rajin 2012). The first formally-structured EAP in South Africa was introduced by the Social Services Department of the Chamber of Mines in 1986. In their initial stages, EAPs were associated with certain industries, but the concept filtered through to almost every industry, as well as the public service. Since then, the number of EAPs has shown substantial growth (EAPA-SA 2010). Today, they have a much broader and more comprehensive approach to helping employees identify and solve their personal problems (Grobler et al. 2011: 454).

Modern EAPs are comprehensive management tools that address behavioural risks in the workplace by extending professional counselling and medical services to all "troubled em-

ployees" (Cascio 1995). Cascio (1995) states that the objective of wellness programmes, is not to eliminate symptoms and diseases; rather, it is to help employees build lifestyles that will enable them to achieve their full physical and mental potential through health awareness. Gomez-Mejia et al. (1998) point out that EAPs can be as simple and inexpensive as providing information on the hazards of smoking or how to lose weight, or comprehensive and expensive, such as providing professional health screening and offering top of the range fitness facilities. Globler et al. (2011) observed that in South Africa the costs of ill-health costs are one of the most significant expenses that firms incur. This is why it is imperative that employers be concerned with employee health and safety. Other reasons include various legal requirements, employer-employee goodwill and the increased productivity and morale that result from health programmes, smoking cessation programmes and substance abuse programmes. Problems at home or in the community, as well as financial troubles, are transferred to the working environment and generally impact negatively upon it (Nel et al. 2011).

In South Africa, the Constitution and the Labour Relations Act (Act 106 of 1995) provide for the implementation of EAPs. The Makhado Municipality in the Vhembe District established an EAP in 2007, with implementation beginning in 2008. The EAP was established to provide Makhado Municipality employees with effective employee assistance services following the identification of problems such as stress, burn-out, substance abuse, ill-health and absenteeism. Generally, the purpose of implementing an EAP is to ensure that institutions receive value for money (which requires that the service is run efficiently and to a high standard) and that the EAP is designed in such a way that it meets the needs of the institution and its employees (Highley et al. 1994). Since its implementation, the Makhado Municipality EAP has not been assessed or evaluated.

EAP Models

Maiden (1992) states in South Africa, EAPs have come to represent the social conscience of institutions. He further argues that in South Africa, the EAP is viewed by employees for the most part as an agent to change social conditions in the work environment. The confidential

nature of the EAP provides employees with an avenue to discuss problems and air concerns that affect them. In this sense, the EAP assumes the role of an ombudsman. Maiden (1992) adds that these problems differ somewhat from those tackled by labour unions, that bargain for improved working conditions, leave, remuneration and the like. Matlala (1999) states that institutions can promote wellness by incorporating employee wellness and health promotion into the overall institutional strategy and by encouraging involvement and support on the part of all role players such as labour representatives, management and others. He further indicates that wellness can be promoted through developing and implementing health promotion policies, such as EAPs, a non-smoking policy and an HIV and AIDS policy and programme.

Du Plessis (in Maiden 1992) states that EAPs in South Africa are best characterised as macro model, as opposed to the US micro model EAP. She further argues that although EAPs in South Africa were initially modelled on US programmes, they have evolved into something quite different. Maiden (1992) observes that EAPs present personal and/or family problems that affect a majority of the workforce to management. These problems have the potential to cause significant human resource management problems for the employer. Du Plessis (in Maiden 1992) argues that it is both desirable and natural that EAPs evolve, over time, to embrace macro practice. Micro practice is understood largely as one-on-one or one-on-family clinical counselling or case-work, the focus of which is personal problems, or an emphasis on the "employee-as-person". Macro practice, on the other hand, involves collective and institutional problems which have a workplace and/or systematic orientation – a focus on "the person-as employee".

Du Plessis (in Maiden 1992) is of the view that micro practice should not be abandoned; rather, good EAP practice will include both the micro and the macro. Du Plessis (in Maiden 1992) posits that there are special peculiarities in the South African workplace, which highlight the need to have a macro perspective. These relate to the systematic and environmental issues that impact on workers and thus come to the attention of EAP practitioners. The objectives of this study included assessing the implementation of EAP services in the Makhado local municipality in Vhembe District with a focus on employees'

awareness of the EAP and how the employees utilise the programme, as well as assessing the adequacy/effectiveness of the programme in meeting their needs.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

According to Bless et al. (2006), a research design has two meanings: firstly, it can refer to the planning in any research, the gathering of data, and the analysis and interpretation of the obtained data and, secondly, it can refer to the road map of the research project. In terms of research design, the study adopted a mixed methods approach in which both quantitative and qualitative data were obtained. This informed the research techniques that were used. Quantitative data was gathered for purposes of description and explanation of the implementation of the EAP in terms of numbers/percentages, while qualitative data was collected in order to examine the employees' views and opinions regarding their level of utilisation of the EAP and satisfaction with its implementation from an 'insider's' perspective.

Population

Makhado Municipality is located in the northern part of the Limpopo Province in Vhembe District and is a local sphere of government, with its headquarters in the town of Makhado. The municipality has a workforce of about 800, and more than 90% of the employees are Black Africans. Employees are located in four centres, namely, Waterval, Dzanani, Vuwani and Makhado. Information for this study was gathered in all centres.

Sampling

The researchers used stratified random sampling. A total of fifty-two (52) employees were identified to participate in the study. All the employees at different levels or ranks within the municipal staff establishment had an equal chance of being drawn into the sample. The subjects were categorised in terms of employee levels, because lower level staff are most vulnerable to socio-economic challenges which reflected in their absenteeism and personal financial management problems. Thus, the required num-

ber of participants was randomly selected from the employees based on their rank in the municipality.

Eventually, a total of forty-two (42) employees of different ranks in the municipality participated in the study. The sample was drawn from employees who were deemed competent to respond to the issues being researched. To ensure that participation in the study was on a voluntary basis, participants signed consent forms prior to the administration of the questionnaire. Their privacy and confidentiality were assured.

Data Collection

A self-administered, semi-structured questionnaire was used, which was translated and explained in Tshivenda and Xitsonga in order to ensure that respondents clearly understand its contents, since some employees did not understand English. Face-to-face interviews were also used as some of the lower category employees were illiterate. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Human Resources section at the Makhado Local Municipality. Data were collected in the head office and in the regional offices. The questionnaires were administered over a period of three working days from 29 July to 2 August 2010. Fifty-two questionnaires were distributed to the respondents and 42 questionnaires were returned, which represents an 81% response rate. A thematic approach was used to analyse the qualitative responses while Statistical Programme for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for quantitative data manipulation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A high percentage (81%) of the employees knew of the existence of an EAP within the municipality. Thirty-eight percent said that they became aware of the EAP through meetings, followed by workshops (19%) and supervisors (19%). This is consistent with what Maiden's (1992) advocacy that the involvement of management, supervisors and the whole labour force is a necessary ingredient for the successful functioning of an EAP and for raising awareness. Beidel (in Oher 1991) argues that to maximise EAP visibility and effectiveness, an EAP needs to be marketed to employees. Eighty-three per-

cent of the respondents were positive about the EAP, while the rest were ambivalent; this points to the usefulness of the services being provided by the EAP. The EAP was viewed as readily accessible by the majority of employees (76%). Only 12% did not share this viewpoint.

However, the utilisation rate of the EAP in the municipality was very low; only 17% of the respondents indicated that they had utilised the service. While the Employee Assistance Professional Association of South Africa (EAPA-SA) (1992) states that the goal of supervisory training is to equip supervisors to fulfil their roles in early recognition, intervention and appropriate referral to the EAP, data from this paper show that only 21% of referrals were made by supervisors, and 9% were self-referrals. The majority of respondents did not answer this question, implying a lack of information or poor knowledge about referral to the programme.

Supervisors felt a sense of fulfilment on observing changes after referring an employee to the EAP. The excerpt below encapsulates the general sentiments of managerial and supervisory staff:

'We indeed, observe changed behaviour after an employee has visited the EAP. That is gratifying.' (Manager)

The majority of employees did not respond to the question on whether they were satisfied with the EAP within the municipality. This could be due to low knowledge of and information about the programme. Thirty-six percent of the respondents said that they are satisfied with the EAP and 2.4% were dissatisfied.

Knowledge about the location of the programme is important as it facilitates access. The majority (69%) of the respondents knew that the EAP was provided in the Head Office. Wright (2002) maintains that the guarantee of confidentiality is crucial to ensure a high level of employee participation, which in turn makes the programme more successful. The majority of the respondents felt that the EAP respects confidentiality and the level of trust in the EAP staff was high. Seventy-four percent reported that they feel safe to discuss their problems with EAP staff. This has the effect of enhancing the use of the EAP. Forty-three percent of the respondents were of the view that the offices in which the EAP services were provided were conducive to privacy.

The majority (55%) of employees were not aware of the EAP policy within the municipality and did not participate in its formulation. This is an undesirable situation which is indicative of exclusion. Policy is important. Cohen (1985) indicates that once an EAP policy has been outlined and the roles of those within the organization have been defined, a means of promoting managerial and supervisory expertise in operationalising the process is essential to ensure an effective roll out.

The majority of employees felt that the EAP services were useful; the dissemination of proper information about the services offered might encourage more employees to use them. In terms of responsiveness to their needs, 52% of the respondents were of the view that the EAP responded to their personal problems and this attests in some measure to its adequacy in meeting their needs.

Most of the respondents suggested that regular dissemination of information to employees through meetings, workshops and other contact sessions could enhance the EAP in the municipality. This would encourage employees to step forward when necessary and proactively seek to help themselves (Mnisi 2005) by making use of the services. Regarding additional services that the EAP could provide, respondents offered a variety of suggestions. These ranged from counselling both employees and their families; to legal services; extending EAP services to former employees; and 'providing services covering loss and grief; and work and career issues'.

As such, it is recommended that more effort needs to be made by the municipality to continuously market the EAP in order to enhance employee awareness and utilisation. Innovative marketing strategies should be developed that should take into cognisance the literacy levels of all employees. Promotional material such as brochures, leaflets, and posters that are user-friendly and presented in languages that are accessible and understandable by all employees would enhance awareness, as would outreach programmes. It is recommended that the EAP unit visit all the municipality's regional offices on a regular basis in order to intensify information sharing with employees. There is a need to decentralise EAP workshops to other offices in order to reach as many employees as possible, improve working relationships and build trust.

These measures could serve as effective strategies in promoting and maximising the visibility of the EAP, and may close the information gap and increase participation.

It is also recommended that the EAP intensifies programmes on the promotion of healthy lifestyles and financial management including investments and pre-pension programmes. These programmes can be outsourced from external service providers, and/or relevant departments within other spheres of government. All employees should be encouraged to participate in policy development and review processes. The policy document should form part of the marketing activities so that all employees are aware of its contents.

Evaluation of the implementation of the programme could be facilitated by suggestion boxes, focus groups and benchmarking with other institutions. Encouraging employees to submit suggestions, input and feedback will promote improvement in the programme and increase buy-in. Awareness sessions should be conducted at least quarterly and involve all regions, and the EAP Advisory Committee should meet at least bi-monthly to discuss ways of improving and enhancing EAP services in the municipality. It is also recommended that additional EAP personnel, with qualifications in Social Work and/or Psychology, or other relevant qualifications and experience in EAP be appointed to run the programme on a full-time basis.

Implications

The paper has evaluated the EAP services currently provided in Makhado Local Municipality. On a positive note, there is a general level of awareness and a positive attitude towards the EAP on the part of employees. It is regarded as accessible and adequate, although it is not perceived to be comprehensive enough. However, on the negative side, many respondents claimed that they had never seen the EAP policy document and most had not participated in its formulation. Sonnenstuhl et al. (1995) argue that at least a minimum of employees should know about an institution's EAP's policy and understand what the programme can and cannot do for them.

In order to enhance the programme, employees and their unions should be afforded the space to engage in dialogue with management

at all levels, including policy, in a democratic fashion. Involving the unions could increase the penetration rate. This would enhance the prospects of reaching troubled workers who need help (Dickman et al. 2003). Raising awareness through meetings, workshops and supervisors has proven effective. However, new channels to promote awareness need to be explored. It is therefore recommended that the formulation of the EAP policy should be participatory and that it should be widely disseminated. This would encourage utilisation of the EAP services and ultimately enhance productivity and morale in the workplace.

The researchers posit the following EAP model:

An ideal EAP should be:

- ♦ Comprehensive in terms of coverage;
- ♦ Accessible in terms of distance;
- ♦ Approachable in terms of the staff manning the unit.

In addition, it should:

- ♦ Adopt a macro-micro approach;
- ♦ Have a dedicated contingent of qualified staff and required resources;
- ♦ Meet the needs of both the employer and employees;
- ♦ Undergo regular review.

As such an ideal EAP should be in the upper right hand quadrant of the Perceptual Map (Fig. 1), which we term the Platinum type characterised by a high level of awareness among employees and comprehensive coverage. An EAP with low levels of awareness, but high level of adequacy/comprehensiveness is of the Gold type; hence its location in the lower right hand quadrant of the diagram. A Silver EAP has high levels of awareness but low levels of adequacy/comprehensiveness and is therefore located in the upper left hand quadrant of the diagram. Bronze type EAPs are low in both awareness and adequacy/comprehensiveness and are located in the lower left quadrant.

Effective implementation of an EAP programme is important if the programme is to achieve its objective of assisting employees. Regular evaluation of the implementation process facilitates improvements in the programme. Evaluations serve as historical reference points, approximate current base cases, or a means of setting future goals. Without baseline or benchmark data EAP evaluation will only describe practices without tracking improvements or making comparisons (Potter 1999). It has also been recommended that dedicated staff be appointed to spearhead the EAP cause. In terms of rethinking the current

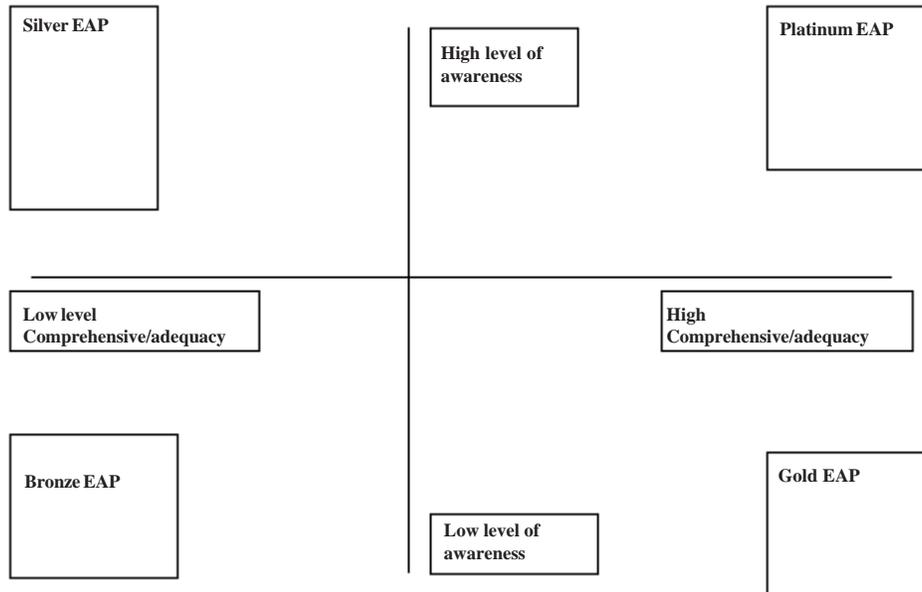


Fig. 1. Perceptual Map of EAPs*

model, the decision on whether it should be internal/in-house or external may be the subject of further research, taking into account costs and benefits thereof.

The unique problems that South Africa workers are confronted with, including crime, domestic violence, the HIV and AIDS pandemic, post traumatic stress syndromes, the migrant labour system and alcohol and drug abuse suggest the need for EAPs to continue the macro practice approach for the foreseeable future. However, Mbana (2005) states that these problems, although addressed through the micro approach, nonetheless require EAP practitioners to apply a broader and hence macro approach. It should be noted that EAP services are delivered through a variety of programme models. This diversity arises from variation in the size of institutions, the availability of the necessary resources to devote to employee assistance services and the willingness of the institution to expend these resources.

CONCLUSION

This study found out that employees who participated in this study do utilise the municipality's EAP services and feel that it is somewhat effective in addressing their needs. However, not all employees are aware of the EAP services which are available in their municipality partly because the penetration rate of the EAP is low. The EAP as it is currently constituted is not comprehensive enough to meet the needs of the employees. EAP policy formulation and review are the prerogative of a few; the large majority of the employees are excluded. This does not bode well for the effectiveness of the EAP and hence the new model posited in this paper provides valuable insights and therefore should prevail.

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