

Mining EAP data can boost prevention efforts

EAP data, employee surveys can give organizations a powerful arsenal to battle mental health issues

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Location, location, location. Anybody who has ever bought property knows the old adage about the three most important things in real estate. A similar philosophy is emerging around employee health and wellness, but it's "prevention, prevention, prevention" that's the key to success.

Most employers understand the best way to manage employee health costs is to prevent problems from emerging in the first place. There are still a few employers, however, that haven't embraced the concept. They don't feel it is their responsibility to prevent employee health problems. But the reality is that Canadians spend the majority of their waking hours at work. Like it or not, their health problems are manifested in the workplace. Employers need to recognize that employee health is organizational health. It either expands or erodes the bottom line.

EAPs can help set a prevention agenda by analyzing employee data and identifying groups that are at risk

The WarrenShepell Research Group recently identified which employee groups within a particular organization were at risk for emotional problems. It also wanted to know whether work or non-work issues had a greater impact on employee stress levels. To an-

swer these questions, it looked at EAP reports of depression, anxiety and stress as a group of related emotional problems. Work and non-work stressors were similarly bundled.

It found workers aged 20 to 29 were significantly more likely to report emotional problems than other age groups. Also, stress was more associated with work stressors than non-work stressors. Employees under 20 and over 50, in particular, were more likely to report work stressors as opposed to non-work stressors.

So what's the value of this from a prevention perspective? Using employee surveys, the employer in this case could then pinpoint reasons why workers under 20 and over 50 are more likely to report work stressors. The survey results might reveal younger workers are disenfranchised by false promises about what their job entails or inadequate orientation. Older workers, on the other hand, may be unhappy with a lack of flexibility and meaningful work. HR could then revisit the company's orientation program and how jobs are advertised to alleviate stress among young workers. They could also implement programs to keep the older workers happy

There are other examples of where analyzing EAP data could be useful. What kinds of employees are most at risk for relationship problems at home? Using a sample of 150,000 EAP clients

from multiple industries, the data showed full-time, female supervisors and managers, between 30 and 49 years of age, and with less tenure, access EAPs for relationship problems at a significantly higher rate than an average employee. It's possible this employee group is socially tapped out from managing others during the work day and lack the organizational supports that come with greater tenure. These problems, in turn, influence their personal relationships.

Armed with this information, HR could then compile a list of employees that match the above criteria. It could then conduct a targeted survey of these workers to find out what difficulties they're having and what steps the employer could take to help this important demographic thrive in the workplace.

But surely the puzzle of prevention can't be solved merely by mining EAP access data. This is why researchers must examine other sources of employee data to uncover health and benefit cost drivers. Two other sources of such data are benefit and insurance claims — such as medication, short- and long-term disability and extended health — as well as employee surveys.

EAP providers, in partnership with their clients' benefit and insurance providers, can profile claims and map them back to probable demographic and psy-

chosocial drivers. In doing so, EAPs are educating employers about the root causes of employee health costs. They are also helping develop targeted health and wellness programs to stimulate changes in employee attitudes and behaviours to prevent things that could have been inevitable, such as heart disease and diabetes.

Employee surveys can also support prevention efforts. If, for example, an organization wants to prevent high anti-depressant and anti-anxiety drug costs, it needs to know what job and workplace factors are driving depression and anxiety symptoms among employees. Employees bring emotional problems to work, but they can also develop in response to the work environment.

If the survey revealed lack of autonomy to make decisions and role ambiguity were driving depression and anxiety, the organization could then take steps to alleviate those problems by delegating more decision-making authority and clearly defining roles and responsibilities.

Research is an essential ingredient in a prevention-focused EAP. It informs the specific content, timing and channeling of prevention strategies. Sophisticated analysis can be used to uncover patterns and trends that are impossible to detect on the basis of a few means and correlations. Attaching statistical significance to the findings also lends confidence to prevention-related decisions.

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