Do employee assistance programmes really serve their intended purpose? Views of social workers

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Abstract: The study explored social workers' perspectives on the utilisation of employee assistance programmes (EAPs) as intended for the beneficiaries of the service. A qualitative approach was adopted for the data collection and analysis. Thematic analysis was applied to the data acquired from a sample of social workers employed by the Department of Social Development in the Gauteng province of South Africa. The study revealed that EAPs were regarded as intervention programmes rather than holistic wellness programmes, which resulted in the loss of its primary role as a supportive structure. The study also revealed fear of stigmatisation and poor marketing of the programmes as some of the hindrances to the utilisation of the programmes. The study further revealed that decentralisation, improved marketing, visibility of EAP staff, and a structured and specialised EAP service would be beneficial for improving the functioning of the programme.

Keywords: Employee Assistance Programmes, Social Workers, Employees

Introduction

Employee wellness programmes are increasingly recognised as crucial components of a healthy and productive work environment. These programmes focus on promoting and maintaining the well-being of employees, both physically and mentally. There are several reasons for highlighting the importance of employee wellness programmes. An employee assistance programme (EAP) is as a workplace-based programme that is designed to help the management to identify and resolve productivity problems emerging from employees' personal concerns (including health, marital, family, financial, alcohol, drug, legal and mental health issues) that may adversely affect their job performance (Martin & Ledimo, 2018:15; Masi, 2011:5). The Employee Assistance Professional Association of South Africa (EAPA-SA, 2013) defines an EAP as the work organisation's resource based on core technologies to enhance employee and workplace effectiveness through the prevention, identification, and resolution of personal and productivity issues.

The utilisation of EAPs in government departments is hampered by numerous obstacles, which are raised in existing literature (Maseko, 2014; Maiden & Sharar, 2017; Manganyi, 2015). Maseko (2014) investigated the implementation of an EAP in the Department of Labour. The findings of this study revealed that despite a rise in awareness about the EAP, there were still challenges in the implementation of the EAP policy. This was mainly because employees in the Department of Labour had a limited understanding of the EAP programme. This lack of awareness was attributed to the lack of training for managers and supervisors who were the immediate points of contact for employees (Maseko, 2014:5). Manganyi (2015) investigated the utilisation of EAP services by employees at

Polokwane Tertiary Hospital. The study established that the utilisation rate was very low, mainly because of the lack of awareness and difficulties in accessing the services. Factors such as accessibility, awareness, marketing, and promotion of the programme contribute to the lack of implementation and utilisation of EAP services in South Africa (Maseko, 2014; Manganyi, 2015; Public Service Commission, 2016; Maiden & Sharar, 2017).

Social workers are routinely exposed to multiple events when working with vulnerable groups and families, and are at an increased risk of burnout, work stress and secondary trauma (Mordue, Waston & Hunter, 2020; Miller, Lianekhammy, Pope, Lee & Grise-Owens, 2017:5). EAPs are among the available services meant to help address mental health challenges faced by social workers. The EAPA-SA describes an EAP as a voluntary work-based intervention programme offered by employers as an employee benefit. EAPs are intended to help employees who are dealing with personal problems that affect their psychosocial functioning and productivity at work (EAPA-SA, 2015).

However, an EAP goes beyond assisting just the employee with work-related issues to assisting the employee and their family members with personal and family issues too. The main objective of implementing an EAP in the workplace is to increase productivity and improve employees' social functioning. EAPs are implemented by organisations with a specific goal in mind. The organisation's programme objectives include adhering to the commitment and sharing the responsibility of caring, retaining and improving employees' productivity, as well as humanising the workplace and supporting employees' well-being (Manganyi & Mogorosi, 2021:13793).

Theoretical framework

The researcher applied utilisation theory. Utilisation evaluation provides programmes with data on who is using which services and to what extent. Such data are significant in determining whether the targeted beneficiaries benefit from the programme. It also shows how the different services are utilised, to determine whether they are over- or underutilised (Richard, 2014). Manganyi (2016) describes this approach as a utilisation-focused approach where the assessor identifies the intended users, does an assessment, and then selects inquiry methods to match those users. Success in this approach is explicitly defined by whether the intended utilisation takes place. The EAP is viewed as an essential practice despite overwhelming evidence of inefficient or inadequate means of evaluation (Maiden & Sharar, 2017).

Research Approach and Methodologies

The researcher opted for a qualitative research approach for this study. This decision was informed by Creswell's suggestion to follow a qualitative research approach when an issue such as employees' perspectives on the functioning of employee health and wellness is studied (Creswell, 2016:88). In addition, as the aim of this study was to explore and understand the participants' perspectives and obtain suggestions from them, the qualitative lens seemed appropriate (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2020:10; Nye, Melendez-Torres, & Bonell, 2016). The researcher consequently used a phenomenological study design together with an explorative, descriptive, and contextual strategy of inquiry.

Explorative research is conducted when there is a need to generate knowledge about a relatively understudied topic, such as the current study (Flick, 2012:111; D'Cruz &

Gillingham, 2017). Descriptive research entails comprehensively observing the issue being investigated and then providing a detailed description of the outcome(s) of such exploration (Babbie & Mouton, 2011:80–81; Marshall & Rossman, 2011:69). Qualitative research is contextually situated. For this reason, it is important to explain the context of the research topic and its findings (Babbie & Mouton, 2011:272). This will be provided before the presentation of the first theme below.

Participant recruitment in qualitative research concerns the population and sampling procedures to recruit participants for the study. A prerequisite to participant recruitment is clearly defining the study's population (Hennink et al., 2011:85), with this concept denoting the total number of people concerned with the issue being investigated from which a sample is drawn to obtain the information required (Grinnell & Unrau, 2010:552). The population for this study was social workers who were employed by the Department of Social Development (DSD) in the Sedibeng region of Gauteng.

As Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (in Punch, 2016:82) rightly point out, "you cannot study everyone, everywhere, doing everything" – a sample must be drawn. In qualitative research, purposive sampling is the best strategy to obtain "information-rich" cases from which one can learn a great deal about the issues that are central to the purpose of the study, obtaining in-depth insight into the topic under investigation (Creswell, 2014:189; Maxwell, 2021:97; Reybold, Lammert & Stribling, 2012:700). The researcher applied the following selection criteria in purposively selecting information-rich participants: social workers who are employed by the DSD in Sedibeng, who are registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professions, and who are aware of the existence or have utilised employee wellness services.

Especially where human subjects are involved, obtaining ethical clearance and permission to conduct a research project is essential and non-negotiable (Hennink et al., 2011:66). Prior to embarking on this research, the researcher sought ethical clearance and permission from the Ethics Review Committee of the Department of Social Work at the University of South Africa (ethical clearance number Rec-240816-052) to conduct this study. In addition, he formally applied for permission to conduct the study among the social workers in the DSD. This was requested from the national DSD and once this was granted, he requested permission from the respective provincial offices of the DSD.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews consisting of open-ended questions in an interview guide to focus the conversations with the participants allowed for the required data to be collected. The researcher used the six-phase outline of Braun and Clarke (2006:87) to analyse the data thematically. This entailed immersing himself in the data that had been generated; developing codes for topical segments of data and coding them; turning codes into themes and grouping together the data belonging to a specific theme; scrutinising the data grouped under each theme for any mismatches; consolidating the theme names, ensuring that they were clear, descriptive and self-explanatory; and then reporting the research findings under the established themes.

Concerning the trustworthiness of the study and the findings being reported, Creswell (2016:191–194) proposes lenses for use by the researcher, the participants, and the readers and reviewers of a report to assess and ensure that the research process and findings are logically and factually sound. Accordingly, the researcher performed triangulation of the data sources and data methods, using different and multiple data-collection methods and various participants to enhance the legitimacy of the study

(Thomas, 2017:153; Creswell, 2016:191; Lietz & Zayas, 2010:193; Shenton, 2004:66). The participants' perspectives and suggestions established, informed and substantiated the themes presented in this article. He also employed the strategy of member checking by requesting some of the participants to check their responses to some of the questions for further elaboration and clarification. To allow for the reviewers and readers of this article to assess the transferability or fittingness of the findings to other contexts and the credibility of the research findings (Creswell, 2016:194; Lietz & Zayas, 2010:195), the researcher endeavored to provide a detailed, thick description of the research methodology he used, the research setting, the participants and the themes, with supporting storylines.

Discussion of the Findings

The research findings presented in the next part of this article resulted from the analysis of the eleven semi-structured interviews, the researcher analysed the transcribed interviews. The discussion of the research findings is presented in two sections: (i) the biographical information of the participants and (ii) a discussion of the themes (and sub-themes) that emerged from the data analysis. The discussion is supported by narratives from the transcribed interviews and complemented by a literature control.

The table below provides the biographical particulars of the participants.

Table 1: Biographical details of the participants

No.	Age	Gender	Marital status	Highest qualification	Experience	Designation	Ethnic group
1	34 years	Female	Married	BSW	9 years	SW	Sesotho
2	29 years	Male	Single	BSW	4 years	SW	Sesotho
3	46 years	Female	Widowed	BSW	8 years	SW	Sesotho
4	43 years	Female	Married	BA SW	15 years	SW	IsiZulu
5	44 years	Female	Divorced	BSW	12 years	SW	siSwati
6	34 years	Female	Single	BA SW	12 years	SW	IsiZulu
7	39 years	Female	Married	BA SW	12 years	SW	isiXhosa
8	53 years	Female	Divorced	MA SW	29 years	SW	Sepedi
9	36 years	Female	Married	BSW	6 years	SW	Sesotho
10	30 years	Female	Single	BSW	6 years	SW	IsiZulu
11	33 years	Male	Married	BSW	8 years	SW	Setswana

BA-SW= Bachelor of Arts in Social Work

BSW= Batchelor of social work

SW= Social Worker

The study had 11 participants, who were all qualified social workers employed by the DSD in the Sedibeng region. Social work is an intergenerational profession. Steward (2023:3) describes social work as a programme involving youth/young adults and older adults. Looking at the participants' ages and years of experience, most of them started working as youth and gained experience while transitioning into adulthood. Steward (2023:3) argues that the integration of the youth and adults in the workspace has a positive impact on service delivery, as it addresses feelings of isolation and increases life satisfaction due to a sense of fulfilment in helping others and transferring valued knowledge and experience to the younger generation. However, there was a noticeable difference between the participants in terms of age. The combination of age and years of

experience indicated that longer serving social workers in senior positions had a better understanding of the EAP. This was also indicated by participants.

From the data analysis, three major themes and their sub-themes emerged.

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme
Employees' perceptions on the EAP	Wellness programme versus intervention programme EAP is reactive rather than proactive EAP as a gatekeeping tool rather than a support structure Limited outreach to meet the needs of employees
Accessibility	Location of the EAP Visibility of EAP staff Awareness of the EAP
Suggestions for improving the EAP	Decentralisation Improved marketing

Theme 1: Employees' perceptions on the EAP

Participant social workers had some understanding of the EAP and their perceptions on the EAP differed from the perceptions of other employees (Mphothi, 2020:7). A client satisfaction assessment is an assessment that is based on the clients' opinions regarding the extent to which they are satisfied with the EAP services. The clients may be surveyed regarding their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the programme's goals and objectives, adequacy, and effectiveness, as well as attitudes and interest in the programme. Assessment involves soliciting the opinions of clients regarding the adequacy and quality of services received, and their suggestions regarding programme improvement. An assessment in this area should include the clients' opinions regarding the overall strength and weakness of the programme as well as areas that require improvement and modification. Thus, a client satisfaction assessment contributes effectively towards programme improvements when the sources of client dissatisfaction are identified and the EAP is modified accordingly.

Sub-theme 1: Wellness programme versus intervention programme
Considering the nature of a social worker's job, it is imperative to have them debrief regularly because they are exposed to trauma, challenges and social ills daily (Miller et al., 2017:4). Social workers in South Africa have reported negative working conditions such as burnout, concerns about safety and security, poor working conditions, poor salaries, staff shortages and high staff turnover, high caseloads, limited office space, and problems with working equipment and vehicles. Irrespective of all these challenges, social workers often do not make use of the EAP meant to provide support to employees who are experiencing work and life issues that may impact their psychosocial functioning and productivity in the workplace (Chauke, 2018:24). Instead, they use the EAP as an intervention tool and not as a wellness component. The participants voiced their perceptions on what the programme was supposed to be. This theme did not emerge from one specific question; it reappeared as participants narrated their perceptions.

Participant 2 reported: "I believe EAP should be something we are able to use even when we are not faced with dire situations. It's something that we should be actively using, and it should not be something…cause now I believe in the opinion of most if not all bad people who are employed by the department, if you must attend this big trouble, like you're not coping at all, or you need to move from one section to the next. It's not about everyday coping, dealing with your personal issues sometimes."

Participants 7 said: "I didn't know but from what I see, I don't think they are very much supportive. They do share information about it; hence, I said EAP is taken as an ambulance, something that comes up only when there's issues. It's not share that you can go even when you are planning to do 1, 2, 3; you can access EAP if maybe you feel, I'm going to put it that way, if maybe you like feel there's no source in your marriage anymore, sometimes you are just drifting about apart even when there no fighting, you are just drifting apart, then you can use the EAP. But then you wait up until its bad, then when it's bad it's that when people can start saying but you and your husband can make use of EAP whereas had you known the information before, I believe you would proper use of the services."

Participant 5emphasised the need for wellness programmes to be seen in terms of what they are created for, which is to support employees and serve as a visible intervention structure: "I think it could have played a huge role in terms of being a support structure for employees who are going through struggle or who just need even guidance, especially in terms of finance or you know and if you need someone to talk to you know, so if it was more visible per se, then I think it would go a long way in order for employees to be able to be in a stable eh environment in terms of mentality, especially if you understand, so it can play a huge role."

Participants proffered that there was a need to take initiative in terms of the EAP, but beneficiaries were only referred when the problem was "deep". Some participants indicated that if the EAP was part of the department's key performance areas, the employer would be certain that social workers would get the opportunity to debrief and get the necessary work–life balance support. They believed that through enough awareness and reaching out to beneficiaries, the EAP could become more popular and could be utilised better. Miller et al. (2017:20) emphasise the significance of social workers' self-care as an ongoing culture, which should help in providing quality care to clients.

Sub-theme 2: EAP is reactive rather than proactive
Mental health support is necessary for employees due to the high level of stress, anxiety and depression experienced in some industries, for example social workers (Ishikawa, Kohara & Nushimoto, 2021). Mental health and counselling services have been shown to reduce clinical symptoms and improve workplace functioning across various settings (Ling & Ho, 2020:11). Langlieb, Langlieb and Xiong (2021:700) state that early detection of/intervention in mental health issues can contribute significantly to improving employees' quality of life and the number of days they work. Reaching out to employees through the EAP will make the programme responsive and reactive. Assessing the mental health of employees is critical for programme planning and evaluation. Alongside determining the incidence of mental health stress in the workplace, employee health tracking can help employers to be better equipped to support employees who are at a high

risk of mental stress. Early detection and successful treatment of mental issues depends to a large extent on the ability of individuals to monitor themselves.

However, awareness of risk factors, early recognition of symptoms and the ability to intervene require knowledge and training (Langlieb et al., 2021:701). Langlieb et al. explain the proactive role of EAPs in restoring employees to full productivity by identifying employees who are abusing alcohol and drugs and have emotional or behavioural problems resulting in a pattern of deficient work performance, and motivating them to seek help, providing short-term counselling assistance and referral, directing them to the best assistance available, and providing continuing support and guidance throughout the problem-solving period. One of the core technologies of the EAP is that consultation with managers, union leaders and employees addresses several issues, including identifying mental health issues and educating employees on how to identify an employee, subordinate or colleague with mental health, work-related or personal problems (EAP-SA, 2015:2). The participants provided the following responses.

Participant 6: "Ahh not as so much, it can be, as I was saying maybe there's some disasters that happened then they will say, no; if let's say, there was COVID then they would say they are services that can be provided this is a programme but you don't often get to those programmes even during the year, only get to know about them maybe they want to address issues or distresses that happened to the employees, they do not provide prevention programmes."

Participant 9: "Um we have statistics of social workers that are in mental facilities as out-patients, some are in-patients for a particular time, with so many statistics, I have not seen any coming here. We also have social workers that are battling, they are struggling, they are failing to handle their caseloads, and I've heard anyone mentioning EAP in terms of their helping with a motivating for a social worker to be moved or for a social worker to have a workload that is manageable for their capacity."

Participant 9: "Do they know my needs, do they know what will contribute to my well- being without talking to me, because in social work for instance you cannot help a client by giving them advice you have to know what the client is it's an expect of their own life, you need to speak to the client and know the client and treat every client from their own perspective everyone is unique. So, the point I'm making is Sedibeng is unique, do they know our needs here."

Participant 6 noted the reactive element of the EAP office in the DSD. The participants did not say anything about the EAP's preventative measures. Initiatives like wellness days would promote awareness, allow a platform to share information and show proactiveness. While Participant 6 believed communication occurred after the effects, Participant 9 thought that social workers already had preventable mental health problems that were not addressed by the EAP (Langlieb et al., 2021:701).

Sub-theme 3: EAP as a gatekeeping tool rather than a support structure

The support and information provided to clients through assessments, education and referrals are intended to help employees to cope with stress and employers to identify distress and respond appropriately (Bouzikos, Afsharian, Dollard & Brecht, 2022:3). Smith and Hanna (2021:56) argue that organisational support is the key element of self-care and creating a workplace culture that acknowledges the benefits of incorporating and using self-care approaches and resources like EAP. Participants in the study indicated how they

valued the support they received from the organisation, which included accessing the EAP as a way of identifying, acknowledging and preventing the impacts of vicarious trauma in their practice. However, the EAP of the DSD in the Sedibeng region was not seen as a service created to help employees, even by the social workers who knew the purpose of the EAP. Wills (2018:17) observes that employees see the EAP as a support tool for supervisors and managers, and it is used to satisfy legal and legislative measures. In the employees' view, the EAP is non-beneficial to them. The employer was known for referring employees to the EAP to protect their own interests and, as a result, trust in the EAP was compromised.

Participant 6: "I was saying that the EAP is misused by the department in such a way that if let's say you went to your own psychiatrist, and he has admitted you and then gave you motivation to be moved by the department for another section, that will start saying no undergo their EAP so that it can scrutinise that motivation of your psychiatrist. So, in that way, I feel that they are misusing it, it just that don't know."

Participant 8: "People are forced because if they if, if now EAP is against whatever or if they have a different opinion, they won't move you. And the time to find out if the person who is scrutinising that motivation is underqualified compared to your own psychiatrist."

Sub-theme 4: Limited outreach to meet the needs of employees

The EAP was not used to try to meet the needs of the employees. Some of the participants in the study had not used the EAP services and a few who had used the services expressed dissatisfaction with the services received. However, Bouzikos et al. (2022:4) note that clients found the counselling sessions helpful and supportive in improving their psychological well-being. After receiving the service, it was expected that employees would have a better understanding of the EAP. On the contrary, they would just dive straight into counselling without any information about the process (Ng & Luk, 2018:793). Hence, because of a lack of understanding the services offered by the EAP, Participant 5 had requested the EAP to assist with transport. Even after consulting the EAP, they still failed to educate her about their service offering. Participant 5 felt that no effort had been made to meet her needs.

Participant 5: "And it's like, like for example me, I requested the health and wellness people to help me to find a transport in the department as a visually impaired employee to be transported to come to work so it's where I requested help from the EAP office."

Theme 2: Accessibility

Accessibility refers to the quality of being able to be reached or used. It also refers to being easily understood or appreciated (Oxford English dictionary, 2021). According to Manganyi (2015:81), accessibility entails being able to reach the EAP in a convenient manner. An accessible service excludes no one (that is, no employee should find it an inconvenience to use the EAP due to their situation). Gillispie, Britt, Burnette and McFadden (2016:3) identify inaccessibility as a barrier that discourages an individual from seeking mental health treatment. The EAP core technologies (including the training and development of stakeholders, marketing consultation, stakeholder management, monitoring and evaluation) are all linked to the accessibility of the EAP. Constant contact, interaction and involvement of employees ensure confidence in the programme and process (EAPA-SA,

2015). The EAP in the DSD was located at the head office. Other regions could reach the office by email or through a 24-hour telephone line. The process of getting help was not as straightforward as dialling a number and getting immediate assistance. Social workers and other employees were just informed to contact the head office for the EAP. Some of these employees had to travel about 70 km to Johannesburg to access the EAP services.

Sub-theme 2.1: Location of the EAP

Accessibility means one should be able to easily make use of the EAP and not feel inconvenienced when doing so. Only a few participants understood that sessions were scheduled with local therapists. However, even those who knew and understood the process were worried and dreaded approaching the head office for assistance. The participants stated that they relied on the telephone hotline and had to communicate with one person at the head office to access EAP services. The DSD was contracted to an external service provider. The EAP office liaised with the service provider if/when contacted by an employee who required EAP services. Otherwise, the employees could contact the service provider's director for intervention. Martin and Ledimo (2018:45) describe the advantages of an external EAP model, such as improved accountability, decreased legal liability, ease of start-up and implementation, and that confidentiality is often maintained as opposed to the in-house model. The participants revealed that the physical location of the department's coordinator was an inconvenience and thus made the EAP inaccessible. The participants said the following.

Participant 1: "You always have to, to travel to get to them. They are not accessible and maybe it's because [of] they deal with other professionals."

According to Harper (2000:319), various EAP models suggest that the location of the EAP influences accessibility. Participant 7: "Yoh! You have to arrange with them; I think you have to travel to them."

Participant 9: "Yah, how can they assist when they are not here? We don't have one who can have an office in this budling so that we can just you know any time have access to services, so you always have to plan and drive to the location where they are."

Employees felt that contacting the head office to schedule an appointment and travelling to Johannesburg were essentially the same as using one's own employee assistance practitioner. They found it demotivating that they had to travel to Johannesburg to see an employee assistance practitioner while facing challenges that could even make it dangerous to drive a vehicle.

Participant 1 added: "Sometimes we want to speak to [a] professional immediately after experiencing trauma, especially work trauma. It would not be ideal to have to travel after being shaken by a traumatic event."

Most of the participants mentioned the need to have a local or regional EAP for immediate availability and visibility. The participants were not so much concerned about whether the EAP was in-house or external; they only wanted the EAP office to be as close to them as possible, which would help with accessibility and encourage utilisation. The researcher opines that a cornerstone for the EAP strategy is to reach the targeted employees, and that is achievable through the removal of various access barriers. Lawrence, Boxer & Tarakeshwar (2002) indicate that easy access to EAP has been identified as one of the aspects that can enhance the employees' utilisation of the programme. Moreover, Panszczkyk (2014) states that the physical location of the EAP office can also be crucial in the utilisation of EAP services. Therefore, an organisation needs to be strategic in

situating or locating the EAP office. Clearly, the location of the EAP office plays a major role in influencing employees to access and utilise the EAP services.

Sub-theme 2.2: Visibility of EAP staff

Avrin (2016) explains that visibility is about being noticeable to prospective customers and clients. This enables the customers to see the EAP, engage with the EAP, hear the EAP and access the EAP. Two questions can be asked about this aspect of visibility: What are people seeing, hearing and learning about the EAP? How many people are the EAP reaching? There is a serious concern about being "out of sight, out of mind". It is natural for people to stop thinking about something when they do not see it for a period of time. The visibility process must be studied, planned and implemented so that it can be shared to exponentially build awareness. Visibility is one of the most important yet often ignored aspects of marketing. Fortunately, today visibility has numerous forms (Avrin, 2016). Visibility can be achieved through media visuals and physical presence. Leonard and Oelschlägel (2017:9) emphasise the importance of events that educate the intended user about the product or service to increase visibility. It creates a platform for stakeholders to interact and give in-depth information for posters and brochures to make sense when clients see them.

Participant 1: "So, if [the] EAP professional can actually, just be more visible I don't know maybe campaign or do whatever just come out come out of your offices go to your clients, yeah."

Participant 2: "Things such as social media can be used things such as internal communications can be used, where on Soc Dev you get messages to say there's a workshop on this there's a week, for argument's sake there's mental health week, which we are supposed to as social workers we are supposed to be rendering services, but we could be made aware."

Over the years, there has been a great shift from traditional marketing and visibility to the digital space, which according to Basaran and Oraman (2022:4) reaches a more accurate audience and is faster and more effective. Content, email, and social media are other types of marketing. The innovation brought by technology and the internet has not only changed the way of communication, but also the speed, impact, cost, needs and expectations of customers. A newsletter that is issued twice per academic year in a university in Canada proved to make a significant impact in increasing visibility after a committee comprising representatives from employee groups and management was formed and educated about the EAP. Brief information sent by email, on posters and in brochures is recognisable if there is an understanding of the EAP. Committees and stakeholder relationships can also be used to increase visibility (Reuter, 2020:10). Participant 1 did not think there was no visibility; her concern was the limited online visibility, which could still be effective if everyone knew and understood what the EAP and wellness emails were about. The visibility of the EAP can have a positive impact on employee awareness, which in turn relates to the utilisation of an EAP (Nair & Xavier, 2012). This implies that poor visibility may result in poor utilisation, which may in turn result in poor effectiveness.

Sub-theme 2.3: Awareness of the EAP

Employees would have to be well informed to have an interest in the EAP. Although some participants acknowledged that there was some effort from the EAP office to create awareness, it was evident that the effort was very limited. Some participants said that they

had never been made aware of the EAP by the EAP office. Visibility does not only have to be in terms of everyday presence but can also be created through awareness campaigns and marketing material. Waiting for an email to come through occasionally to seek help for a mental health issue might be a problem. If there are posters on all the noticeboards, regular desk drops, and constant reminders from supervisors and managers for social workers to seek help, even if it is just to debrief, the utilisation of the EAP will increase. However, the participants were not made aware of the EAP, EAP processes and how the EAP could help them. The word "roadshows" came up several times during the interviews. Roadshows go just beyond an email with contact details. It is an information-sharing event where employees can ask questions, be taught how to identify the need for professional intervention and be encouraged to converse about the EAP. Reuter (2010:10) refers to a grand opening as a marketing tool. A popular word in South Africa is "launching". Launching programmes creates an opportunity for potential clients to ask questions and interact with the service provider. The participants also said the following.

Participant 1: "They must bring roadshows to us. Have a physical presence even if it's just a small office at the regions, then it would go a long way in terms of assisting us, the employees."

Participant 6: "They can have I can say what, events, roadshows, also invite other professionals."

Roadshows were suggested as one of the strategies that can be used to raise awareness about the EAP. Group information-sharing events and sessions were also suggested. Presenting the EAP to employees as a collective and allowing an exchange of information and concerns could raise awareness of the EAP. Participant 9 thought that the suggested sessions could be beneficial to employee assistance practitioners by helping them to develop rapport with the employees and collect information about issues to address in this region.

Participant 2: "I believe the sessions such as a general meeting, sessions such as trainings that could be incorporated there to make people aware this is a programme that is there and it could be put in a light where it's not always the negative, responding to issues, it could be about saying, it's healthy to just debrief from now and then."

Participant 9: "They've never been to the department, not even to come and present to us the services as a collective. Never have they taken our database to call us, perhaps, maybe even call one per programme if there's something like that. Um, we have statistics of social workers that are in mental facilities as out-patients, some are in-patients for a particular time, with so many statistics, I have not seen any coming here."

Awareness campaigns are for educating employees about the EAP. Campaign activities include media, marketing/advertisements, print material distribution, displays, presentations, a website and social media posts. Larsen (2022:6) argues that awareness campaigns have an extremely positive impact, as they intrigue people and arouse their interest in a subject matter. The participants reported that there was neither physical interaction nor educational sessions about the EAP in the department. A contact session would allow time and opportunity for employees to learn, have inputs and ultimately understand the EAP.

Theme 3: Suggestions for improving the EAP.

The participants in the study were asked how they thought the EAP could be improved. Several suggestions were made, including the decentralisation of the EAP office, improved marketing of the EAP, visibility of EAP staff, and structured or specialised services.

Sub-theme 3.1: Decentralisation

The DSD's EAP was found to be a hybrid programme. The department has an EAP office that deals with the reporting, awareness, accountability and referrals (Govender & Radhi, 2018:3). The EAP office is responsible for referring employees to the service provider, which in turn has affiliates in different areas to attend to employees and their needs. The EAP coordinator of the department physically sits at the Gauteng head office of the DSD, in Johannesburg. Mphothi (2020:23) proffers that due to delivering the EAP to many sites, standardised services might not be suitable for all the sites. A common concern was that driving and struggling to get hold of the employee assistance practitioners was not something that an employee should worry about, especially during or after experiencing trauma. Even though confidentiality and stigmatisation are noted as concerns in the literature, they seem to be outweighed by convenience in this study. The office can be positioned in such a way that people walking in and out are not observed or seen. Participants believed that there was a need for the decentralisation of the EAP office.

Participant 1: "In my view, okay, then programme is visible online number one. Number two, physically we haven't had roadshows, if they could bring the roadshows the service provider and labour relations. They must come to their regions to say here we are known as we are here to help you."

Participant 9: "Umm, I think they are reluctant, and their services are in dire need and [as] much as they are probably in the head office what are they doing for regions? Where are they? Do they know the statistics of this region? Even do they know what is going on in this region. Do they know what we need in terms of well-being? If they're going to talk about my well-being as a social worker in Sedibeng, nothing about me without me. Do they know my needs, do they know what will contribute to my well-being without talking to me? Because in social work for instance you cannot help a client by giving them advice; you must know what the client is it's an expect of their own life, you need to speak to the client and know the client and treat every client from their own perspective everyone is unique. So, the point I'm making is Sedibeng is unique. Do they know our needs here? It's simple, they can just come down here, one must have an office here, to know the context of this place and just know the statistics of this place. What are we dealing with?"

Sub-theme 3.2: Improved marketing

One of the reasons why employees do not utilise the EAP is because they are not even aware that the programme exists or how to access it (Mphothi, 2020:27). As one of the EAP core technologies, the EAPA-SA (2015:1) emphasises the promotion and "selling" of EAPs, services and interventions to stakeholders, providing the necessary information on the programme's details and content, accessibility, and confidentiality, as well as encouraging participation and utilisation. Monama (2015:44) agrees that the rationale behind the development of promotional marketing and promotional material is to provide employees with relevant information about different EAP services, benefits, and accessibility with the intention of creating awareness about the programme. The same author highlights the

importance of the internal EAP office in collaboration with the communications team to develop promotional material that is in line with the organisation's communication and information management policies to ensure compliance with standardisation and prevent any external contamination of electronic data. The participants made the following suggestions.

Participant 2: "So, things such as social media can be used things such as internal communications can be used, where on Soc Dev you get messages to say there's a workshop on this there's a week, for argument's sake there's mental health week, which we are supposed to as social workers we are supposed to be rendering services but we could be made aware, to say in this week as your week as social workers or all department employees, come and access these services, you can get your day off, you can get your half days, you can get permission from your superiors, just to attend."

Participant 3: "I think they should do better, to market their business. Just to come to our office, just make it aware, they must make sure that their service is accessible."

Participant 4: "Marketing, hmm marketing and awareness that all, all, all employees of DSD become aware of the services and what it entails, you know."

It is vital to have good marketing strategies. Regular and ongoing marketing of the EAP within the organisation is important because some of the employees get to use the services after being referred to it by other users in the organisation. This means the flow of information and the internal referral system should be included in the marketing. The most common concern of the participants was the limited marketing conducted by the EAP office. Marketing platforms and constant interaction with employees and managers/supervisors shape the EAP's success. Dipela and Sithole (2021) conducted a study at the Lephalale South African Police Service in Limpopo Province and established that sometimes employees were aware and could attest to seeing a marketing effort by the EAP office, but they still did not use the services. Many of the participants who were aware that the EAP had been marketed were stationed 5 to 15 km from the EAP office. The employees who believed there was no marketing of the EAP to them were found to be based between 50 and 100 km from the EAP office. This implies that the physical appearance and visibility of the EAP have an impact on marketing.

Visibility is a big part of awareness and marketing because being seen often reminds employees of the existence of the EAP, EAP services and how to gain access to the EAP should the need arise. Friedman (2015:125) says that visibility is one of the barriers to utilising the EAP. As noted by Nakani (2015:52), high visibility helps employees to connect with the EAP earlier for help, before a problem becomes a crisis. Physical visibility and interaction can lead to an improved understanding of the EAP. The participants shared their opinions about the EAP being visible to improve utilisation. Close physical proximity and efforts to make constant physical contact with employees make it easy to establish rapport with the users of the EAP (Dipela & Sithole, 2021).

EAPs are created to address many of the problems that modern employees face and that have a negative impact on their productivity and health. An example of such an issue is the need to deal with the rapid technological change in the workplace that has led to the emergence of new and different stressors and mental health crises. Even though EAPs are primarily designed to address work-related issues, they now offer a wide range of services that can help with issues that are not related to work. Mphothi (2020:23) says that standardisation of the structure becomes almost impossible for an EAP office which

services different regions, like the provincial office that serviced five different regions in Gauteng (including Sedibeng). Even though the policy is the same, work cultures and problems may not be same.

Concluding Remarks

The EAP is a great initiative that is designed to take care of the employees; however, without the employees' involvement, it will remain a great concept on paper. In this study, the participants/employees' perceptions on the EAP were generally negative because they had a limited understanding of the EAP. They had received poor communication from the EAP office. The small number of those who utilised the EAP were not entirely satisfied with the service they received. For instance, they felt the EAP was not accessible due to its location, there was no visibility of EAP staff and there were no awareness efforts about the EAP. The success of a programme is largely determined by utilisation and positive results. The EAP office and staff have a big responsibility to ensure that employees know about the programme, its purpose and services, the office, the referral process and if it makes a difference in the employees' lives.

Recommendations

It is important that the employer promotes regular employee engagement within the organisation. EAP engagement should be more than just showing up at a health screening or other activity to receive an incentive or avoid a financial penalty. Although participation is necessary to be engaged, employees do have to be engaged to participate. Engagement involves creating and maintaining a sincere interest and involvement in living a healthy life at home and at work. EAPs are only as effective as the proportion of employees who are truly engaged in them. Active participation in these offerings results in employees making healthy decisions (e.g., choosing healthy foods, quitting using tobacco, exercising regularly, and managing stress). Engagement also includes employee input and involvement in the design and execution of the programme.

It is further recommended that the DSD should prioritise creating a culture of well-being by providing managers with the right tools for a holistic, multifaceted approach. The DSD can develop a comprehensive culture of health and well-being for their employees. They should not only address individuals' health risk factors, but also organisational factors such as the work environment, training and leadership, and corporate values.

Moreover, they should tailor programme offerings to create value for the participants and the department. Surveys on needs and interests, interviews and focus groups are good ways to understand what is important to employees. Employers can also learn what kinds of rewards may be good incentives for employees to attend an event or take a survey. They can gain insight into what motivates employees to make changes for a healthier lifestyle. In line with the findings of this study, employers and implementers may consider the following to improve the EAP within the organisation.

Step 1: Design and analyse.
Seek and support employees' input and participation in:

- Creating a wellness committee
- Developing an employee needs and interest survey.

- Using interviews and focus groups.
- Completing an employee needs and interests survey.
- Developing a strategic communications plan
- Reviewing and designing a benefits plan
- Conducting an organisational policy review

Step 2: Implement

Work with employees to:

- Create a programme that is accessible to employees and family members – on site, online and by phone.
- Provide programmes that are low cost and affordable to the workers.
- Communicate the programme offerings through numerous channels (e.g., email, posters, website, newsletters, and postcards).
- Create a healthy environment (e.g., tobacco-free workplace and healthy meeting and vending policies, walking trails and on-site physical activity options).
- Offer team and individual programming (e.g., challenges and education sessions).
- Connect with a health coach, team leader or others.
- Demonstrate leadership support and encouragement in wellness opportunities.

Step 3: Evaluate success.

Work with and support managers and senior leaders to:

- Communicate the benefits of the programme and success stories.
- Provide recognition to individuals and specific units, departments, and locations.
- Survey participants to capture feedback on programmes, including satisfaction and suggestions.
- Generate participation reports specific to units, departments, or locations.
- Complete impact measures and reporting to include changes in health behaviour and clinical parameters.

The implication of employees' non-participation in the EAP may result in organisations spending resources without a meaningful return on investment, especially when employees are not familiar with the benefits of the programme.

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