

Employee Assistance Programs and Substance Abuse

Researchers have spent years investigating the causes of drinking and drug problems among workers. Concerns about substance abuse are well founded, at least from management's point of view, as substance abuse impairs job performance, jeopardizes safety and diminishes the quality of work life.

Management Focus in this issue contributes to our knowledge of substance abuse and its effects on the workplace by presenting new research findings on the topic.

Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), generally thought of as substance-abuse programs, in recent years have expanded their mandate to assist workers with a broad range of personal problems - marital, family, stress, legal, financial, health, and substance-abuse.

This current approach to EAPs is commonly called the "broadbrush approach," no longer focusing exclusively on substance abuse. Substance abuse does, however, remain a major issue. Substance abusers tend to be more easily recognizable in the workplace than persons with other personal problems, and perhaps for this reason EAP is readily associated with substance-abuse issues.

Employee Assistance Programs in the federal public service are a relatively recent innovation. In 1977, the Treasury Board of Canada gave government departments the mandate to establish EAPs. In the Correctional Service of Canada, as in other government departments, early attempts to introduce the program were somewhat unsuccessful. Misconceptions about its objectives and a lack of understanding by management and labour about this relatively new area led to only sporadic use of the EAP.

In June 1989, the Executive Committee of the Correctional Service of Canada mandated the revitalization of the Employee Assistance Program in support of Core Value 3 of its Mission: "We believe that our strength and our major resource in achieving our objectives is our staff and that human relationships are the cornerstone of our endeavour." The Correctional Service of Canada now has a broadbrush program that is supported by both management and labour and that makes use of the Peer Referral Agent concept.

Under the Peer Referral Agent concept, which does not provide for on-site, full-time professional counsellors, employees have access to peer referral agents who assure confidentiality in discussing personal situations and work concerns.

Peer referral agents are normally selected by management and unions, with the support of employees, on the basis of their credibility among their peers. It is very important for them to be highly respected in order to be effective. Once selected, peer referral agents must undergo EAP training, which focuses on situational analysis and interviewing skills. They are then better prepared to act as a link with professional resources in the community.

Some organizations make employee referrals to the EAP mandatory. While many others have made EAP voluntary, formal referrals do remain part of their program. The EAP of the Correctional Service of Canada is voluntary and functions through self-referrals, coupled with an approach of constructive

confrontation. This emphasis on employees' free choice is in keeping with the current literature on EAPs, which reports that punitive disciplinary measures do not encourage employees to accept help and improve their situation and hence performance.

Self-referrals to the EAP remain the method used by most employees seeking assistance, including those of the Correctional Service of Canada. Self-referral is based on the premise that the EAP is well known to the user population and is seen as legitimate and as an acceptable or "normal" approach to seeking assistance to solve a personal problem.

The constructive confrontation approach, which proceeds in progressive stages, stems from industrial and labour-relations practices -employees with difficulties are identified through the monitoring of job performance and are confronted in a positive manner about performance changes. EAP may be suggested to the employee if the source of difficulty is a personal situation. While EAP remains totally voluntary, the consequences of continued poor performance form part of the discussion in this approach. Constructive confrontation is not confined to the supervisor-employee relationship, but may also involve peers.

In deciding to use the EAP or another form of counselling, a person generally progresses through three stages. In the first stage, the person recognizes, either through reflection or through interaction with family members, co-workers, or supervisors, that he or she has a problem. Usually, the person tries to manage the problem so that it does not disrupt work or relationships. The second stage begins when the person discovers that he or she can no longer handle the problem and must take some action. Several factors usually prompt the decision to seek help. Some individuals reflect on their own behaviour and conclude that they need help. Others seek help after being encouraged to do so by their supervisors, co-workers, friends, family or medical specialists. In the third stage, the person consults an EAP or another resource.

With the adoption of more broadbrush EAPs, the focus on substance abuse has been toned down to remove the stigma associated with this issue among the work force. Hopefully, this approach will encourage employees in need to seek help without hesitation or apprehension. Perspectives on Substance Abuse Substance abuse in the workplace has been attributed to several factors, the most common of which are workplace culture, social control, alienation and stress.

The workplace culture perspective emphasizes that drinking norms may be developed within a particular workplace. Some types of occupation appear to promote heavy drinking and to influence the development of alcoholism. Occupational subcultures can dictate when and why drinking is appropriate. Furthermore, research shows that employees who socialize with co-workers outside the workplace are more likely than those who do not to consume alcohol before arriving at work.

The social control perspective posits that a lack of constraints in the workplace may lead to alcohol abuse and dependence. High-risk occupations encompass work roles with little or no supervision or interdependence with others and work roles with low visibility and frequent changes in schedules or supervisors.

The alienation perspective purports that modern organizations create a sense of powerlessness or strain in their members, who may seek relief through excessive drinking. This sense of powerlessness might arise because of work that lacks creativity, variety and independent judgment.

Finally, the stress perspective considers a number of conditions, including physical properties of the working environment, as possible "stressors." Other stressors might be monotony, role conflicts, too much or not enough work and pay inequality.

Each perspective suggests that alcohol abuse and dependence are related to both the work environment and the work itself. Research Findings Interesting and important research is being conducted on substance abuse, the workplace and Employee Assistance Programs. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* has published a special issue on the topic. Of particular interest is Harris and Fennell's study of how employees' attitudes and beliefs about EAPs affect their willingness to participate in the programs.(1)

The authors obtained data from highly structured interviews with 150 employees of a large financial institution in a metropolitan area of the American Midwest. The sample consisted of 100 randomly selected employees and 50 supervisors.

Of the combined sample of respondents, 60% were men and 51% were classified as managerial, 25% as technical or professional, and 23% as clerical. The average education level was two years of college, and the average age was 34.

The organization in question had an established, widely known EAP that had existed for more than 20 years.

Employees' perceptions of EAPs were compared with their perceptions of other alcohol-abuse and -dependency treatment resources. When asked to rate 10 resources on a 10-point scale, respondents referred to the following attitudes and perceptions: familiarity, embarrassment and attention caused by the resource, effectiveness, trust, and control over behaviour.

Compared with other alcohol-abuse and -dependency treatment resources, the EAP received average scores for embarrassment and high scores for familiarity with the program.

In assessing employees' willingness to make use of assistance programs, the study asked respondents to rate their attitudes and perceptions on a scale of 1 to 10 with respect to their willingness to seek help from each of the resources. Results showed that employees' familiarity with the program was a major predictor of their willingness to participate.

The study also wanted to examine gender differences in opinions of the various resources and in employee willingness to participate in assistance programs.

According to the results, men and women have similar perceptions of resources for help with drinking problems. However, women's willingness to use these resources seemed to be related to their familiarity with the programs, whereas men's willingness was linked to their perceptions of program effectiveness,

degree of program control and individual attention offered to clients.

Women and men appear equally willing to use EAPs and other sources of help for drinking problems. Although their reasons differ somewhat, perceptions of trust, attention, and familiarity appear to be highly important to both men and women.

Hollinger's study, which examines factors predictive of work attendance under the influence of alcohol or drugs, is another noteworthy piece of research profiled in *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*. The study highlights the importance of age, gender, job satisfaction and social interaction outside work.(2)

Hollinger examined 47 organizations representing three work sectors: retail, manufacturing and hospital. Questionnaires were mailed to a random sample of employees at all levels.

Of the total sample of 9,175 respondents, 6.5% reported substance abuse at work. The lowest percentage of alcohol and drug consumption while at work was reported by the hospital employees (3.2%), followed by the retail employees (7.6%) and the manufacturing employees (12.8%).

The results also indicated that respondents under 30 years of age were almost four times as likely as their older co-workers to arrive at work intoxicated; male respondents were almost three times as likely as female workers to arrive at work intoxicated; employees who were dissatisfied with their current jobs were almost 75% more likely than their more contented peers to report to work intoxicated; and respondents who socialized with their fellow employees outside the workplace at least monthly were almost twice as likely as their less sociable peers to report for work under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. Future Directions for Research Future research should consider innovative ways to assess employees' needs in a humane manner that assures confidentiality. Agencies and institutions, including the Correctional Service of Canada, need to develop approaches for seeking data to better address the needs of employees.

To facilitate the study of workplace interventions and their impact on alcohol abuse and dependency, several avenues of research must be pursued. Data need to be gathered on workplace factors that may increase the likelihood of employees' substance abuse. Future research might also examine the similarities and differences between the prevalence of substance-abuse problems in the workplace and in society at large.

(1) Harris, M., & Fennell, M. (1988). "Perceptions of an Employee Assistance Program and Employees' Willingness to Participate," *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science (Special Issue on Substance Abuse and the Workplace: Special Attention to Employee Assistance Programs)* 24, no.4, 423-438.

(2) Hollinger, R. (1988). "Working Under the Influence (WUI): Correlates of Employees' Use of Alcohol and Other Drugs," *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science (Special Issue on Substance Abuse and the Workplace: Special Attention to Employee Assistance Programs)* 24, no.4, 439-454.