

EVALUATION OF EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMMES: THEORETICAL GUIDELINES FOR PRACTICE

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of evaluating an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) cannot be overestimated. An EAP must be evaluated to justify its existence and to ascertain the extent to which it is reaching its objectives and to find ways to improve its performance (Highley & Cooper, 1994:1; Perry & Cayer, 1992:1; Weiss, 1998:20). The evaluation of an EAP should be built in from the beginning (that is at the needs assessment phase), because it is essential for organisations to determine whether or not those objectives of the programme will be met.

THE PURPOSE OF EVALUATION

EAPs (as well as service providers to a limited extent) are mushrooming in South Africa. Almost every company has one, but whether these programmes deliver what they should is an open question, hence the need for evaluation. Weiss (1998:3) notes that “evaluation” is an elastic word that stretches to cover judgements of many kinds. What all the uses of the word have in common is the notion of judging merit. Someone is examining and weighing a phenomenon (a person, a thing, an idea) against some explicit or implicit yardstick. The yardsticks can vary widely. The criteria could cover aesthetic, effectiveness or efficiency factors.

This then suggests that evaluation theory is essential. Sheafor, Horejsi and Horejsi (2000:571) identify two types of evaluation, namely direct practice evaluation and programme evaluation. Direct practice evaluation covers outcome evaluation, which asks whether the intended outcome was achieved. Outcome evaluation has a limited objective and it is relatively easy to conduct. It requires the minimal methodological know-how and it does not impose rigid requirements on practice (Zastrow, 2003:253).

Programme evaluation, on the other hand, falls within the field of evaluative research (Zastrow, 2003) in that it attempts to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of a programme serving a large number of clients or perhaps even a whole community.

Evaluative research asks whether the outcome was achieved, but in addition it seeks to determine if the outcome can be attributed to one’s own intervention. Evaluative research is similar to traditional experimental research in that causal relationships are the focus of the study (Sheafor *et al.*, 2000:571; Zastrow, 2003:253).

Yamatani (1993:65-82) identified ten types of evaluative studies for an employee assistance programme:

- Service needs;
- Compliance/legality;
- Programme adequacy;
- External resources;
- Programme effort;
- Programme effectiveness;
- Programme benefit equity;
- Client satisfaction;

- Cost/benefit;
- Programme constraint analysis; and
- Programme utilisation.

SERVICE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

A service needs assessment refers to the determination of the number of employees in need of the EAP service in a company or work environment. Yamatani (1993:67) is of the opinion that a major objective of a service needs assessment is to establish the potential number of workers needing various EAP services. There are four components in needs assessment studies:

- Identification of the seriousness of the problems of the workers;
- Specification of selected problems and service needs;
- Assessment of service gaps in the work setting; and
- Development or modification of EAP goals and objectives.

These aspects are important in evaluation, since they may assist in determining the types of problems encountered by employees, whether available programmes and resources are meeting the various needs of the employees, and they might also help in identifying current gaps in available services.

COMPLIANCE/LEGALITY ASSESSMENT

Compliance and legality assessment entail obedience to a rule, agreement or demand. Employee assistance practitioners should comply with the laws and regulations as well as policies regarding EAP operations. Yamatani (1993:68) further contends that employers and EAP counsellors should be informed about potential legal disputes and preventative approaches.

Programme adequacy

The programme adequacy assessment examines the appropriateness of the EAP services, their availability and usage, as well as penetration rates. Yamatani (1993:70) further posited that there are two concerns addressed in determining the adequacy of an EAP service system. They are the extent to which an EAP offers the needed services and the extent to which those services are provided to those who need them most. Generally, a higher usage rate of the programme may be an indication that the EAP is successfully meeting the employees' needs.

Perry and Cayer (1992:8) are of the opinion that the adequacy of performance is a feature that attempts to address the output of a programme relative to the needs that the programme is projected to serve. Thus, it represents an assessment of the ability of the programme to deal with the prevailing problems. In effect, one is estimating the power of the EAP to deliver EAP versus the need for assistance in the organisation.

The following are the factors associated with the determination of the programme adequacy:

- Comprehensiveness of service needs;
- EAP service acceptance by employees as well as the employer; and
- Allocation of resources for meeting the employees' needs.

External resources assessment

The assessment of external resources includes an examination of the type of outside agencies and services used, and the extent of usage and client satisfaction with these services (Yamatani,

1993:72). EAPs frequently rely on outside resources for delivering the necessary services to clients. An EAP may contract an outside service provider for reasons such as the unavailability of such services within the programme, clients' case loads, service gaps, and inadequate EAP staff knowledge and skills. This evaluation will help in identifying the types of cases referred to an outside practitioner and their outcomes.

Programme effort

The assessment of programme effort is based on a number of questions regarding the programme initiation, utilisation and implementation. Other pertinent information regarding programme effort may include activities devoted to finding resources that could increase the service utilisation rate (Yamatani, 1993:73). Perry and Cayer (1992:9) report that most evaluation records are so concerned with the specific aspects of the components of an EAP that they tend to lose sight of the totality, context or framework of the evaluation.

A programme effort assessment includes a measure of the extent to which time and staff resources are devoted to review service objectives and activities, the procurement of follow-up information from programme beneficiaries, and alternative programme strategies used if the programme efforts did not appear sufficient to achieve the service goals. The programme effort assessment is generally useful for further strengthening of the EAP system by identifying potential areas in need of process improvement. It is also useful for EAPs experiencing programme failure or suffering from lawsuits as a consequence of unanticipated outcomes (Yamatani, 1993:74).

Programme effectiveness

Programme effectiveness can be evaluated by measuring the extent of changes associated with programme intervention in the areas identified by the programme goals and objectives. The anticipated changes include two major categories, normally work behaviour (e.g. changes in work attendance, performance and attitude) and reductions in the costs of health insurance and other related benefits (Yamatani, 1993:74).

Balgopal and Patchner (1988:83) state that performance in the workplace differs from one department to another, while organisations' programmes may differ in their effectiveness – that is, in the extent to which pre-established objectives are attained as a result of the activity. EAPs have received great exposure, but there is little evidence of the effectiveness of these programmes. It is, therefore, important that EAPs be evaluated in order to determine their effectiveness.

Benefit equity

The major question to be examined for the assessment of programme equity is: "Are all service benefits distributed evenly among the different population groups?" In this instance the major reference factor consists of demographic attributes such as age, gender, race and types of personal problems among EAP service users as well as non-users who can benefit from EAP interventions. An EAP may be superior in its effectiveness, but it may be considered as discriminatory on the grounds that it has produced an inequitable distribution of EAP benefits among the different groups of workers (Yamatani, 1993:76). As such, it is important that the EAP caters for the needs of all employees and their families.

Client satisfaction

Client satisfaction is an assessment based on the clients' opinions regarding the extent to which they are satisfied with the EAP service. The clients may be surveyed regarding their

satisfaction and dissatisfaction related to the programme goals and objectives, adequacy, effectiveness and attitude as well as interest. Assessment involves solicitation of opinions of clients regarding the adequacy and quality of services received and their suggestions regarding programme improvement. An assessment in this area should also include clients' opinions regarding the overall strengths and weaknesses of the programme as well as areas requiring improvement and modification. Thus, client satisfaction evaluation contributes towards programme improvements when the EAP identifies the sources of client dissatisfaction and modifies its operation accordingly (Ligon & Yegidis in Emener, Hutchison & Richard, 2003:131; Yamatani, 1993:78).

Cost/benefit assessment

Yamatani (1993:78) and Ligon and Yegidis (in Emener *et al.*, 2003:132) are of the opinion that cost/benefit assessment calls for comparisons between the cost of the programme operation and the estimated amount of benefits (or savings) it has generated. The total direct costs of the programme can be categorised into two major groups: fixed costs and variable costs. The fixed costs are items that are unlikely to change annually during the EAP operation (e.g. the administrator's salary, malpractice insurance premiums and overhead costs). The variable costs are costs that more than likely will change according to the change in number of EAP clients as well as other factors.

The total benefits attributable to an EAP can be divided into two major categories, namely tangible and intangible benefits. The tangible benefit is represented by measurable positive effects of the EAP that are directly related to its programme objectives: for example, savings effected by EAP as a result of changes in the work behaviour of the employees or decrease in costs of health insurance and other related benefits. More specifically, the following five major areas are often considered in EAP benefit calculations: work performance, absenteeism, paid health insurance claims, workmen's compensation payments, and sickness and accidents payments. The intangible benefits associated with an EAP include clients' psychological and attitudinal changes, and impacts upon individuals and groups who are interpersonally associated with clients. Based on the cost and benefit data, the EAP will also be capable of determining a break-even point: a balance between the total cost of operating the EAP and the total benefit generated by the employee served by the EAP.

Programme constraints analysis

A programme constraints analysis is the examination of aspects that limit or restrict the programme's freedom of action such as legal and/or financial constraints. According to Yamatani (1993:79), programme adequacy, compliance/legality, effectiveness and benefit equity are not only related to the implementation effort, but may also be related to various limitations and obstacles that stand in the way of achieving successful outcomes. The organisational constraints (e.g. political fragmentation, excessive centralisation, poor management/supervision and training, and low morale) as well as physical constraints (e.g. the lack of needed equipment and facilities) may also be responsible for a partially successful or unsuccessful EAP system.

The constraints analysis can be conducted in order to improve EAP cost efficiency, programme effectiveness, client satisfaction, and for the maximisation of EAP benefits to employees and to the employer. Programme constraints may be obviated by ensuring that the EAP has all the essential components.

Programme utilisation

According to Ligon and Yegidis (in Emener *et al.*, 2003:131), utilisation evaluation provides programmes with data concerning who is using what services and to what extent. These authors indicate that addition of staff, outreach programmes and an off-site location have been found to enhance the EAP utilisation rate. A utilisation evaluation of an EAP helps in determining if the target populations of the programme have been reached and whether different aspects of the EAP are over- or under-utilised.

Lawrence, Boxer and Tarakeshwar (2002:3) identified issues that appear to mediate EAP utilisation, including employees' trust in the confidentiality of services provided, administrative support of the programme, ease of access, positive feedback from previous users of the service and perceived efficacy of the service. Misperception and a lack of understanding about EAPs have been found to inhibit utilisation (Csiernik, 2003:45; Frost, 1990:45; Temple & Honig, 1997:15).

Essential to a successful EAP is the ability to communicate to employees what services are available through the company's EAP and what steps employees need to take to access these services. It is therefore important that the EAP be marketed in order to enhance employees' utilisation of the programme.

A utilisation analysis is a very informative and useful evaluative tool. Its usefulness can be shown if utilisation rates are compared to some predetermined measure of need. One can then sensibly ask if a programme is being successful in meeting the needs of a particular organisation's employees. Coshan (1991:43) states that the high utilisation rate of an EAP can be an indication of the programme's success. However, lower utilisation, on the other hand, may cause companies to ask whether the programme is worth the costs.

EAP CORE TECHNOLOGY

The EAPA Standards document (2003); Roman and Blum (1985:8-19) as well as Sithole (2001:83) have identified the following six aspects of an EAP Core technology:

- The early identification of employees with behavioural problems occasioned by job performance issues. Emphasis is placed on the specific job-related stressors rather than the symptoms related to alcoholism or other problems;
- The provision of expert consultation to supervisors, managers and union stewards on how to take appropriate steps in utilising employee assistance policy and procedures;
- The availability and appropriate use of constructive confrontation. The supervisor, having observed impaired job performance, gives the employee the alternatives of disciplinary action and potential termination, or the option of seeking assistance through the company's employee assistance programme (Googins & Godfrey, 1987:140);
- Micro linkages with counselling, treatment and other community resources are developed. This component focuses on the individual, determining what fit of community resources is available;
- The creation and maintenance of macro linkages between the work organisation and counselling other community resources. While the fourth core technology focuses on the individual, emphasis here is directed towards service providers. This core technology operates as a gatekeeper, balancing the needs of the client, service provider and organisation;

- The centrality of the employee's alcohol problems as the programme focus with the most significant promise for producing recovery and genuine cost savings for the organisation in terms of future performance and reduced benefit usage. It is hoped that through the adoption and implementation of employees' assistance, the organisation can effectively, successfully and constructively address substance-abuse problems.

To evaluate an EAP it is necessary to identify data that will enable the employer to determine how a programme is doing in relation to future decisions about its continuation, modification and improvement.

CONCLUSION

The evaluation of an EAP is the only mechanism to determine if the programme is reaching its objectives. EAPs should be designed to include specific evaluation plans in which the progress of the programme needs to be monitored. Evaluation can assist in improving the programme where necessary.

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