

# Work-Home Stress: Impacts & EAP Usefulness

*By Allon Bross, M.S.W.*

More and more, there are many of us that struggle to find a balance between the growing demands of the workplace and the everyday challenges we face at home. Efforts to streamline the workplace, ongoing corporate mergers and acquisitions and the increasing need for companies to be more competitive in the global marketplace are all elements that contribute to the workplace as a growing source of stress. And once employees leave their place of work to return home, the need to be effective parents, to respond to their own elderly parents and to work at maintaining a healthy marriage incurs increased demands. The good news is that with the right programs in place, employees can get the support they need to live healthier, happier and more productive lives. Employee Assistance Programs, traditionally proven to have a positive impact on an organization's bottom line, are even more valuable today for companies as their employees' face heightened pressure both in the workplace and in their personal and family lives.

While companies understand the hidden costs of employee problems, they often challenge the usefulness of programs that address the problems and present solutions. This is particularly true during times of fiscal constraints, when employers tend to question the success of such programs, their value and the financial return. In response, a survey was done with a large group of corporate client employees from a major Canadian company about their perceptions of the impact of work-home stress on productivity, and the usefulness of an EAP to address – and provide support for – employee issues. The reasons for gathering the data were to determine:

- a) The contributing impact of work on the personal and relationship problems for which employees seek counselling services;
- b) The impact of both work and personal problems on the productivity of employees seeking counselling services;
- c) Whether EAPs were perceived as useful in resolving work-related issues at the end of counselling and at a three-month follow-up; and
- d) Whether an organization's return-on-investment was validated.

More than 125 participants who have accessed EAP counselling services on their own initiative cooperated by responding to survey questions a) and b) at the beginning of their counselling. Three months later they answered questions c) and d), which coincided with the termination of their counselling.

### **Finding 1: Work Stress Makes a Difference**

To measure the impact of work stress, the survey asked: “Do you feel that any aspect of work either directly or indirectly contributed to the personal, marital, family and/or mental health problems that brought you to counselling?” The vast majority of employees – 66.4 percent, responded “yes”. Of this group, 44.6 percent reported that *work contributed to their problems from 50 to 100 percent!* This finding indicates that, for the study group, job stress at work is high. The message is clear: workplace issues are significant and can impact the personal lives of many individuals. The negative repercussion for organizations shows up in decreased productivity, employee morale and employee retention issues.

### **Finding 2: Everything Affects Productivity**

The survey next asked: “Do you believe that your problems (work-related and/or personal) impact your productivity?” *The overwhelming majority – 85.6 percent – replied yes.* This clearly illustrates to employers the necessity of responding to those individuals that may be experiencing problems. By putting an EAP program in place, organizations will be able to effectively manage their most valuable human resource assets – their employees.





### **Finding 3: Follow-Up: The Positive Effects of EAPs**

A number of advantages are evident for the employee who interacts with qualified and effective EAP counsellors. First, employees are given an opportunity to communicate with an objective and experienced professional in privacy and confidence. Next, this forum encourages unhurried, open discussion, which seeks to *prevent* whatever is causing distress from developing into a more serious, complex – and ultimately costly – situation, with the clearly defined goal of problem resolution. Three months after the conclusion of counselling, participants in the study were asked: “Did the EAP help you resolve your problems?” Not surprisingly, *93.7 percent said “yes”.* This finding offers employees, employers and EAP providers sound reassurance that EAP programs can provide valuable assistance.

### **Finding 4: Validating Return-on-Investment**

An EAP does not only help the employee under treatment; it also benefits the organization financially, while at the same time allowing managers the opportunity to demonstrate concern and compassion. Hopefully, that effort will bring positive results that can include improved morale, stronger commitment to the organization, better attendance, as well as improved interaction with coworkers, managers and customers. While these are positive expectations, organizations still prefer concrete financial outcomes. One of these factors – productivity – was part of the study. When asked, “Did resolving your problems lead to increased productivity at work? – *three quarters of the study participants replied “yes”.*

A number of quantifiable factors are useful in representing the benefits of an EAP in terms of cost and time:

-  Increased productivity suggests a positive return on the organization's investment in the EAP as part of the medical benefits package.
-  Managers spend roughly nine additional hours per troubled employee, providing closer supervision, dealing with coworker conflict, correcting errors, eliminating production lag, and so forth. A decrease in excess supervisory time for those staff with troubled employees provides evidence of organizational savings.
-  When employees feel supported, it fosters longevity and reduces turnover. A further advantage is that company expenses are favorably affected in a number of related areas: recruiting fees, training time, downtime until the new hire learns the job, and overtime for existing coworkers who need to make up for production loss.
-  Lowered disability claims illustrate, among other things, that employers are paying closer attention to the job at hand.

The research conducted illustrates that employees do perceive EAPs as a valuable resource. There is also clear evidence that work impacts employees' personal lives and, regardless of the source of the problem, the workplace inevitably suffers to some degree. Although managers are not responsible for solving their employees' personal problems, they can offer the counselling services of an EAP and perhaps, within reasonable limits, be more understanding and tolerant. For job-related pressure that employees take home, managers should consider a number of proactive steps, such as being aware of the signs of a troubled employee (ie. sickness and absenteeism, reduction in productivity, change in attitude, etc.), and step in to help as needed. Implementing mentor programs to keep closer contact with employees is another method of allowing managers the opportunity to prevent problems from starting.

An organization that provides support for employees and their managers, rather than dismissing the problems out of hand, is taking a positive step in aiding troubled staff. Support should include engaging in meaningful dialogue with employees that involves open discussion, positive action, and genuine follow through. When employees describe legitimate work-related issues and concerns, the employer should provide solutions wherever possible. Overall, while the employee's ongoing struggle to find a balance between work and home challenges is to be commended, there is

## **much to be said for the usefulness and value of implementing an EAP within the organization.**

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