

May 06

## European Commission Green Paper on promoting Mental Health in the Population

### Submission by Employee Assistance European Forum (EAEF)

#### 1. Introduction

This submission focuses on employee assistance (EA) and its effectiveness as a management tool for use by employers when addressing mental ill health in their workplaces (Section 6 of the Green Paper).

EA work is in its earliest stages of development in most EU countries. It is, however, a rapidly developing field and one which has a significant role to play in the development of mentally healthier workplaces throughout the EU.

Its professional body is the EAEF. For more information [www.eap-eaef.org](http://www.eap-eaef.org)

In addition, EA professionals in the UK, Ireland and Greece are also represented by their national branches of the US based Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA), the largest EA professional body in the world with over 5000 members. Visit: [www.eap-association.org](http://www.eap-association.org)

#### 2. About the EAEF

The EAEF was formed in September 2002 to become the voice for EA professionals in Europe. Participation in the EAEF has grown rapidly and now involves over 60 EA professionals drawn from 23 countries.

Specifically the EAEF's aims are:

- To define the competencies and boundaries of EA provision
- To develop Standards of Practice, Codes of Ethics and enforceable policies and procedures
- To identify the accreditation needs of providers and adopt the most relevant and appropriate form of programme/provider accreditation
- To identify and implement market relevant research programmes
- To provide networking opportunities for EA professionals
- To develop communications programmes to create/raise and maintain awareness for the scope and benefits of quality driven, market relevant EA work
- To influence public policy in relation to EA work
- To identify and guide the development of EA training and development programmes for EA practitioners.

#### 3. What is Employee Assistance (EA)?

**Employee Assistance is a work based resource for the improvement of organisational performance through the provision of structured management and employee support services.**

Services typically consist of a combination of people performance consultancy services for managers and support services for employees.

- **Employee Assistance Consultancy Services** include policy development and implementation services for a range of performance management issues, including but not

restricted to:

- ▶ stress management
- ▶ absenteeism/presenteeism management
- ▶ substance abuse
- ▶ critical incident contingency planning
- ▶ worklife balance
- ▶ conflict resolution
- ▶ violence in the workplace
- ▶ health and wellness
- ▶ risk management
- ▶ change management

- **Employee Assistance Services for Employees** (and often their immediate families) include support for a wide range of issues that impact on performance. These include but are not restricted to:

- ▶ work stress
- ▶ absenteeism
- ▶ conflict in the workplace
- ▶ harassment and bullying
- ▶ substance abuse
- ▶ depression
- ▶ anxiety
- ▶ lack of confidence
- ▶ low self esteem
- ▶ anger
- ▶ abuse
- ▶ loneliness/isolation
- ▶ relationships
- ▶ marital and family issues
- ▶ childcare/eldercare
- ▶ legal/financial advice
- ▶ worklife balance
- ▶ disability
- ▶ health and wellness advice
- ▶ concierge/convenience services

A series of **case studies** from different European countries is included at the end of this submission. They outline how EA work can provide support for both managers and employees. The cases demonstrate how EA adds significant value to organisational performance, irrespective of the country in which the work takes place.

#### 4. EA developments around the world

- **US**

EAPs (Employee Assistance Programmes) have their origins in the US where, in the post war years, they grew out of the internal support recovering alcoholics were providing for their co-workers. Even as late as the 70s, EAP was an acronym for Employee Alcohol Programme.

Programmes were either provided internally or by external providers or a combination of both. By the late 80s and into the 90s, many internal services had been outsourced to external providers who, in turn, were absorbed by much larger managed care companies. This led to tension between their traditional role and the more hard nosed, profit driven policies of their new owners. For a time into the early part of this century, EAPs were struggling to define their role in a way that also provided profit. Today, more and more providers are responding to their customers' needs by re-focussing on the added values quality driven EAPs can bring to organisations.

Over 55% of all employees now have access to an EAP in the US, including over 85% of all Fortune 500 companies (Source: EAPA)

- **Outside North America**

It was not until the late 70s and into the 80s that EAPs began to develop in other countries, notably in English speaking countries such as the UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Towards the end of the 80s and into the 90s, EAPs were being established in other countries including Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, some countries in Europe, especially in northern Europe and pockets of activity in South and Central America.

This decade has seen an explosion of interest in EAP work in many more countries around the world, including China and India as well as in continental Europe.

## **5. EA developments in the EU**

- **UK**

The first external EAP provider was established in 1982, out of a former internal programme. The market grew very slowly for much of the 80s and 90s. However, by the early part of this decade, there were more than 15 external providers accounting for over 80% of the market and providing services for over 10% of the UK workforce (c. 3 million employees) (Source: UK EAPA). There has been more rapid growth in recent years. It is estimated that up to 15% of all employees now have access to a structured EA service.

- **Ireland**

There has been a long tradition of internal provision in Ireland, led by the public sector. Over the last 10 years, and particularly in the last 5 years, a number of external providers have emerged and are providing services for organisations, mainly in the private sector. Welfare officers in the Republic of Ireland in local and central government, as well as in larger private sector companies, anticipated this by focusing more and more on the delivery of structured EAPs. However, the external providers are now competing successfully for business in the public sector as the market switches from internal to external provision.

### **Northern Europe**

External EA service providers have been established for some years, especially in Scandinavia - see Case Study No1 for an overview on a large scale EA pilot study being undertaken in Finland with funding from a number of sources, including the European Social Fund – in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, France and in Greece. In addition, UK based EAP providers have become more active, in some cases setting up local offices in various different European countries.

### **Elsewhere in Europe**

Development is very patchy in most other EU countries. Where it does exist it mainly consists of locally organised services for the employees of US based multinationals.

## **Why is EA work in Europe less well developed than is some other parts of the world?**

EA work typically develops when one or more of five main pre-conditions exist:

### **5.1. Long established welfare/occupational social work tradition**

Although firmly based in the workplace, welfare/occupational social work often involves contact with employees outside the workplace, including home visits where the whole family can become involved. The work undertaken in the past by welfare officers and by occupational social workers currently has many of the characteristics more usually associated with structured internal EAPs. This is particularly true in Germany and, to a lesser extent, in France.

### **5.2. Leadership by multinationals**

In the mid 90s, a group of US multinationals formed the EAP Roundtable. Its members were typically internal EAP managers whose task was to resource EA support, initially for their expatriate families and, more recently, for local employees in their locations around the world. Members of the Roundtable worked on mutually beneficial ways of sharing existing external EA resources as well as encouraging the development of new resources to provide the skills necessary to meet their EA needs in each of their locations. More than any other influence, US and, more recently, other multinationals have been responsible for kick starting EAP development around the world.

The Roundtable has also been instrumental in the recent formation of the Asia-Pacific Employee Assistance Roundtable (APEAR) [www.apear.org](http://www.apear.org) Its members are primarily external EAP providers who share a common goal of providing quality driven EAP services for their client organisations.

In new markets around the world, early providers are typically either individual counsellors or groups of counsellors who then organise themselves into external providers. In some cases, they become part of mainly UK based multinational EAP providers. It has taken over 20 years for the EAP marketplace in the UK to reach a level of substance. As the world shrinks, it is unlikely to take as long in newer markets, though rapid expansion is unlikely.

### **5.3. The influence of public policy**

10 years ago in the UK, workplace stress was a disease denied by most employers. Since then, the watershed Walker vs Northumberland County Council case in 1996 has been followed by a subsequent and significant rise in successful stress-related claims against employers. As a result, stress is now part of risk management. In 2004, the Court of Appeal (Hatton vs Sutherland) indicated that if an employer provided access to counselling and treatment services for its employees, it was not likely to be found negligent in cases of work-related stress breakdown. These developments have led to a significant expansion of the EAP market in the UK, which is likely to continue into the foreseeable future. The Health and Safety Executive is also giving its long overdue attention to the "duty of care" obligations an employer has to provide a mentally healthy workplace.

In the US in the early 70s, the Federal government funded two alcohol counsellors per State. They became known as the "Thundering 100." In subsequent decades, the US has continued to lead the world in EAP penetration.

Over 20 years ago, individual Australian State Governments began giving tax breaks to organisations using a designated EAP provider in each State. This led to the rapid expansion of EAPs. Although the tax breaks are long gone, over 30% of all employees now have access to EAPs. In The Netherlands, the Government is encouraging its citizens to fund their health costs by taking out more insurance. Employers are often underwriting these costs. As in the US, they now have a vested interest in reducing expensive health claims. Increasingly, they are considering EAPs as a part of their overall health and disease management strategy.

The EU has also recognised the cost of stress related absenteeism to the European economy and has put in place a number of initiatives to raise awareness amongst employees for the need to address stress in the workplace. These include Guidelines on Work-Related Stress (2000), The Barcelona Declaration on Developing Good Workplace Health Practice (2002) and the recent Framework Agreement on Work-Related Stress (2004) which is sponsored by employers and employee organisations across Europe. The work done by the EU's Agency for Safety and Health at Work in Bilbao ([www.agency.osh.eu.int](http://www.agency.osh.eu.int)) and the European Network for Workplace Health Promotion (ENWHP) ([www.enwhp@bbk-by.de](mailto:www.enwhp@bbk-by.de)) re-enforces these initiatives.

The publication of the EU Green Paper on Mental Health marks another milestone in the development of public policy.

As a result of these and other initiatives, more attention is being given to mental health issues than ever before.

Employers, too, are becoming more aware of the risk to the bottom line and to their employees of ignoring mental health issues in the workplace. More are beginning to recognise the responsibilities they have to support their employees when they are in difficulty. Traditional sources of support, such as the family are no longer so readily available. Publicly provided support services, where they exist, are under funded and typically involve lengthy waiting times.

Irrespective of the source of the difficulty, be it at work or in their personal lives, employees are distracted from performing to their optimum. EA work is an ideal support vehicle for employers to use in achieving an earlier return to optimum performance than would otherwise be the case. It can also prevent such difficulties from arising in the future

#### **5.4. Growth economies**

Despite the fact that EAPs are increasingly accepted internationally, local attitudes towards seeking external professional support for personal or work related issues are key to the speed with which EAPs are accepted in the Boardroom. As economies develop to compete, it is equally clear that the training and retention of human resources and skills are critical to the future success of organisations. EAPs need a healthy economy to develop. In recession, money is spent on reducing headcounts, not on investing in the survivors. High levels of unemployment do not go hand in hand with the rapid development of EAPs.

#### **5.5 Local heroes**

The development of an EA marketplace almost always requires the vision, hard work and persistence of, typically, one or two individuals. Without these pioneers, it takes a lot longer to establish a growing marketplace.

#### **EAPs are a valued management tool**

Outside their traditional marketplaces, EAPs are poised to grow in virtually every country in the world. Nowhere are EAPs withdrawn. How soon they become widely available depends largely on the extent to which each country meets one or more of the five pre-conditions for growth.

#### **Support for the Green Paper**

The EAEF and its membership fully support the development of a mental health policy for the EU and particularly the role employers have in improving mental health in their workplaces.

## Case Studies

### Contributors to the case studies below are:

- EAR-Accor Services (UK)
- Axis Mundi (France)
- Bouygues Télécom (France)
- Corrente AG (Germany)
- Dovedale Counselling Ltd (Ireland/UK)
- Finland@Oy (Finland)
- Fortune 100 multinational (Ireland, The Netherlands)
- Phyleon EAS BV (The Netherlands)
- Schlumberger (UK)

N.B. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the individuals cited in the case studies.

## 1. A national programme for Finland

### Background

Finland is at the very beginning of broad-brush employee assistance work. An EAP conference was held in Helsinki in 1990, with expert knowledge provided by two organisations from the United States - Caron and Hazelden Foundations. The EAEF held its 2005 Conference in Helsinki.

### Problem

Since the early 90s, interest in the productivity and performance of the workforce, as well as the increasing tendency of workers to retire early, has prompted the creation of numerous national projects aimed at solving these problems. The problem of early retirement is especially severe. Even if the official retirement age is 65 years, the average age of retirement today is 59 years. Early retirement has been an active policy for years and during the economic recession at the end of the 1990s, retirement pensions were granted even to those of 55 years of age.

This policy is no longer attractive. There are real concerns about the cost of large-scale retirement for both national insurance organisations and companies. The baby boom generation of the 1940s is on the verge of retirement age. In 2005, more people are expected to have left the workforce than to have entered it. Today, there are four people of working age for every person over 65. In 2050, there will only be two. If this trend continues, there will be a considerable workforce shortage, causing problems for the welfare state.

There is a tendency - indeed, almost a tradition - to search for help for personal problems at a very late stage, and the borderline between work life and private life is very strict. Finnish people tend to take care of their own concerns.

Ageing populations, the growing cost of pensions, the shortage of labour and the growing need for mental health services – especially for work related stress, all make a new approach advisable. One such approach is EA.

### Solution

A national Finnish EAP programme was started in 2000 and will last at least until the end of 2006. It is financed by the European Social Fund, the Ministry of Social Affairs of Finland, UPM-Kymmene Corporation, Work Pension Insurance Company, Varma-Sampo and the Labour

Union of Salaried Employees. A non-profit organisation was selected to conduct the programme, together with the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health of Finland.

As the EAP concept was still quite unknown in Finland, there was a need to find ways of presenting employee assistance which were consistent with the welfare tradition of Finnish culture. At the same time, it had to be as cost-effective and economically successful as possible. The basic idea of the project was to create a model that would be suitable for Finnish workplaces.

### **Outcome**

This is being achieved in co-operation with businesses, government, insurance companies and labour unions. A feasibility study is being undertaken which, on completion, will enable the Finnish EAP to be defined and then extended, step by step, to cover the whole of Finnish society.

Preliminary results are most encouraging. Final results are due during 2006.

At its best, EA could offer solutions to:

- the public sector, which is struggling with how to maintain a high level of social security efficiently
- the entrepreneurial sector, which is struggling with the problems of workforce productivity
- private persons, struggling with mental health and work related stress.

## **2. Meeting the needs of employees and the organisation in the UK**

### **Background**

This company is a leading technology services provider, employing 80,000 people in 100 countries. Its two main businesses are oil and gas exploration and production and IT consulting. Its UK office has 8,000 employees. Improving productivity while improving employees' wellbeing and retaining key talents is a difficult challenge. Through a partnership with one of the leading EAP providers in the UK, the company implemented a creative solution.

### **Problem**

In 2001, the company was faced with several challenges. Competition for talents in the UK job market was at an all-time high. Finding and retaining high-quality personnel was becoming more and more difficult. These tensions were reinforced by two recent mergers, which were inflicting additional pressures on the company's talents. In addition, the legal context in the UK was becoming harsher on employers. Very high claims (up to €365,000) were being awarded to employees suing their employers for not respecting their "duty of care" obligations. Protection against this liability was difficult. Finally, the financial markets were also asking for an even better financial performance.

In short, the company was faced with the apparently impossible task of improving employees' benefits and wellbeing whilst, at the same time, improving productivity and profitability.

After a worldwide survey on future working conditions ("Workplace 21"), an EAP appeared as one of the most attractive solutions: it would help position the company as an attractive employer, while improving financial performance and reducing the liability risks.

An internal needs assessment showed that the ideal EAP provider would have to respect several restrictive criteria:

- Be a true specialist, with the relevant scope of service and quality guarantees
- Demonstrate a true service attitude, with both the organisation and its employees in mind
- Approach the relationship with company as a true partnership and work in full collaboration to design and implement a personalised programme
- Have the required staff and expertise to be responsive to employees and company needs
- Propose a programme whose benefits could clearly be measured and that could be easily maintained
- Be competitive in terms of price.

### **Solution**

After reviewing the offers of 14 different vendors, the organisation retained one of them.

According to company's Compensation and Benefits manager the EAP provider was chosen "for its customer focus, its sensitivity to the company's needs and culture as well as for its competitive pricing".

Together, the organisation and the EAP provider designed a personalised programme adapted to the company's specific needs and positioned it as an internal programme, performed by external expert providers.

The programme provides the following benefits:

- 24/7 confidential employee counselling through dedicated phone line
- Option for face to face counselling through a network of 800 professional counsellors
- Access to worklife experts (childcare, eldercare...)
- Management support (referrals, training)
- Trauma support through on-site counselling
- Employee information about the programme integrated to the organisation's Intranet
- Extensive communication support (promotional material customised for the company, wallet cards, road shows to business units ...)
- Quarterly reporting on re-occurring issues and trends, programme utilisation, effectiveness and financial return.

### **Outcome**

The programme was successfully implemented and brought benefits to all parties involved:

- Employees benefit from professional assistance to solve the personal problems that affect their productivity.
- Managers report a significant reduction in the time they lose because of employees' personal issues.
- The programme has a positive impact on the bottom line: absenteeism is lower and liability risk is significantly reduced. Since the provider is a specialist EAP provider, the company



gets all the benefits for a fraction of what such a programme would have cost to develop internally.

- The programme also contributes to employee retention. As an example, it was an incentive for employees from the merged companies to stay after the mergers. As one employee put it: "It will improve the personal feelings of employees towards their company and improve the relations with colleagues and management."
- Several articles have been published in the press about the organisation's experience with the EAP. The company gained an increased exposure and a reputation as a social innovator, proposing a cutting-edge programme to its employees.

"After a year of utilisation of the programme, our employees and our HR Department are very satisfied with the level of quality provided by the EAP. We are now looking at expanding our collaboration to other countries and other products, such as childcare vouchers"

*The company's Compensation and Benefits Manager*

### 3. Downsizing in The Netherlands

#### Background

A manufacturing company was required to downsize 300 employees, out of a total workforce of over 1000. A local EAP service had been in place for many years with a psychologist on-site one day per week.

#### Solution

##### EAP involvement in management plan

- EAP integrated into the Re-Organisation Management Team – also included Operations Management, Human Resources, Occupational Health and Health & Safety
- EAP worked closely with OH doctor and HR to identify susceptible people
- EAP key player in delivering training
- EAP involved in developing Social Plan – help available for affected employees included re-training, CV writing, financial help.

##### EAP's responsibilities

- EAP involved in communication process
- Training for managers – recognised that line managers needed a lot of support as their interface with the employees was very demanding. Training included how to give bad news, role-plays, how to identify signals that employees were not coping, what to do etc.
- Training for employees included those not leaving – coping with major change
- Prepared for an increase in the need for face-to-face counselling – from employees and managers
- "Stress" survey carried out half way through process.

#### Outcome

- EAP integral part of management of change
- Comprehensive EA available for all employees
- "Stress" survey showed employees coped well
- Employee morale, co-operation and productivity maintained throughout difficult business period.

## 4. Helping workers through job redundancy in France

### In conversation with a French clinical psychologist and EA professional

#### What is the psychological impact of the loss of one's job?

“The loss of a job creates a break in life and introduces changes in the relationship the person has with their professional, family and social environment. The event often sparks off, at least temporarily, a partial loss of meaning and sense of identity. Each individual reacts to the loss of their job in a very personal way, based on their life history, personality, the circumstances of the event as well as the quality of the social and family support available. The event can, in some cases, trigger a positive life change and a re-orientation of one's choices. Alternatively, the loss can be traumatic and precipitate a crisis in which the person loses their ability to function normally.”

#### What are the objectives of counselling through a job loss?

“The objective, first and foremost, is to support the person as they go through a process of acceptance of their loss, which can be more or less painful. This situation is characterised by the presence of a lot of confusing feelings and emotions which are useful to identify and acknowledge to help move on and to facilitate a positive change. The psychological assistance aims to provide a support framework to assist employees, alongside other initiatives such as outplacement. It is often the case that corporate re-structuring will awaken or amplify a pre-existing psychological vulnerability. Other employees who have not previously suffered from any major difficulties might also, when faced with the prospects of uncertainty and change, enter painful phases of doubt.”

#### How do you practically put such a support programme in place?

“The nature and models of these programmes vary, based on specific situations. Companies typically combine face to face and telephone assistance. During an initial evaluation session, the employee is helped in clarifying their situation, assessing their emotional and psychological state and, as appropriate, formulating a request for help. This first consultation is also helpful in providing an initial feedback, answering any questions there may be and informing the employee of the scope of the programme that is available to help them. As required, up to half a dozen sessions can be offered.

The sessions centre on active listening, the restoration of self-esteem, a needs evaluation and an agreement on a counselling strategy. In some more problematic cases and subject to the company's prior approval, additional sessions can be provided. Finally, in parallel with face to face consultations, a phone line can be made available on a 24/7 basis. If its use is difficult to forecast, its mere existence is helpful to employees who know that they can seek help in case of a crisis situation or an emergency.

Highest ethical principles apply in developing and implementing the programme, including confidentiality and respect for the person and their integrity.”

## 5. Critical incident support in Ireland

### Background

Construction work was being undertaken in a new manufacturing area when a cylinder exploded killing a contractor. The plant employed 600 people.

## **Solution**

### **EAP involvement in first few days**

- EAP was on-site within 2 hours of incident
- Assisted management and HR in drafting communications and planning EA services
- Participated in group briefings – discussed common reactions to critical incidents and coping strategies
- Individual counselling available on-site.

### **Longer term**

- Outreach to “high-risk” employees – those closely involved in the incident
- Ongoing individual counselling, as required
- De-brief with management team

## **Outcome**

- EAP was one of the few people on-site not contaminated by the incident
- Close collaboration with HR and managers
- Supported management in maintaining productivity, whilst caring and supporting employees through the traumatic experience.

## **6. Supporting a safe return to work for “new mothers” in France**

This telecom company’s initiative is unique in France in terms of fostering wellbeing and personal development in the workplace.

The company makes available to employees, in their free time, workshops on a number of topics of interest such as culture, assertiveness training, stress management, wealth management, nutrition, worklife balance, etc.

The workshop « Bébé, boulot: un numéro d’équilibre » (“work/raising a baby: a delicate balance”) is a good illustration. The purpose of the workshop is to welcome young mothers shortly after their return to work by enabling them to discuss questions relating to leaving their child with carers, determining proper feeding patterns, defining, with the father, a new split of home tasks, responsibilities and, generally, a new life balance. The workshop is supervised by a clinical psychologist who does not necessarily give ready-made answers but rather helps mothers find their own way and acquire the confidence they need in their new role. The group structure helps build a sense of solidarity and puts difficulties into perspective by showing how the experience of being a new mother and the feelings of inadequacy or guilt they experience can be shared.

## **Evaluation**

This therapeutic approach was initially devised by famous French psychoanalyst, Françoise Dolto, but its originality has been to bring this experience to the corporate world to people who would not, typically, have sought help from external professionals.

## 7. Mediation services in Ireland

### Background

Julia, the department head of a leading public sector organisation in Ireland, contacted the external EAP provider for help in resolving a dispute which had arisen between Anne, one of her team leaders and Maria, the team leader's deputy.

### Problem

Maria had been in the department for some time but had recently been moved to a new team. Within 2 weeks, she had begun experiencing personality clashes with Anne. Instead of feeling able to discuss her difficulties with Anne (or with her department head), Marie had put her concerns in writing to Julia. In turn, Julia put them to Anne, who did not accept them.

Julia had, for some time, been concerned about Anne's performance and wanted her to accept that there were problems, to face up to them and to address them.

Following these initial discussions, Julia decided to move Maria back to her original team, where she quickly re-established the good working relationships she had previously enjoyed with her team leader. Despite the move, both Anne and Maria still had some contact with each other, notably at weekly staff meetings, where their self-evident antagonism was having a detrimental effect on the meetings.

Julia was determined to find a way of resolving the dispute and move on.

### Solution

The EAP provider recommended the following:

- To continue reminding all parties to make use of the EAP on an individual basis, should they wish to do so
- To encourage Julia, as a manager, to make use of the EAP's performance management consultancy service for support on how to deal with Anne, both in the short term and on an ongoing basis.
- To make use of the EAP provider's mediation service to help resolve the dispute between Maria and Anne.

Use of the mediation service:

- A full briefing meeting took place between Julia and the EAP mediator
- A series of discussions then took place between Anne and Julia, with the support of the mediator. These resulted in Anne recognising that there was a problem and that the situation between herself and Maria needed to be resolved – a view also held by Maria
- The mediator met separately, off-site, with each of the individuals and then jointly.

### Outcome

It was clear that both parties held opposing and irreconcilable views on the details and each held the certainty of their own position. However, both agreed that Maria had experienced an unsatisfactory relationship with Anne and that they would both avoid clashes when they met in the future.

Julia also recognised that she needed to re-visit the grievance procedure to pre-empt rapid escalation of its use in the future.

Coaching services were also offered to Anne.

## **8. Conflict resolution in Germany**

### **Problem**

Mr. Mueller is an employee in the administration department of an industrial corporation. He suffers because he feels he is being criticised and pressured by his manager. He experiences increasing spells of anxiety. Following a particularly difficult meeting with his manager, Mr. Mueller develops stomach pains and goes home. His GP puts him on a sick leave for two weeks to recover. This is subsequently extended twice more as any thought of returning to work causes new pains.

### **Solution**

Eventually the company physician is involved and refers Mr. Mueller to the external EA provider who is contracted by the company to support employees who are experiencing personal problems. Mr. Mueller readily takes up the offer because he wants to resolve the situation. In discussion with his consultant, an experienced employee assistance practitioner, Mr. Mueller begins to realise how his body reacts to certain situations and what causes him to suffer at work. Whilst this helps him in some ways, his worries continue.

He wants to clarify the situation with his manager and asks for a meeting between himself and his manager to be facilitated by a neutral third party. The EA provider appoints one of its local consultants as the facilitator, who obtains Mr Mueller's consent to contact the manager. The manager readily agrees to the meeting as he, too, wants to find a solution.

### **Outcome**

The meeting takes place five days later with the external consultant present. The meeting offers a safe environment in which both parties are able to address the conflict with a reduced risk of further escalation. The facilitator encourages both to say 'what's needed to be said' and to do so in a constructive and respectful manner. Mr Mueller and his manager exchange thoughts and feelings about their difficulties and later negotiate and finally agree to some rules about how they want to communicate with each other in the future. The relief is mutual. The gap isn't as bad as both had anticipated.

Mr. Mueller returns to work the following Monday and is welcomed back by his manager.

In the following week, the manager contacts the EA service and requests an appointment for himself. The experience of the facilitated meeting has triggered his interest in improving his communication skills, last and not least, when he himself is under pressure and stressed.

## **9. Substantial improvements in shift work productivity in the Netherlands**

### **Background**

A large industrial production site, part of an international company, has had an EAP for some years. The EAP consists mainly of personal (face-to-face) counselling, managerial consultancy services, (human) risk-audits, critical incident stress management/ trauma-recovery services.

## **Problem**

Production is organised in continuous shifts. Absenteeism rates amongst several shifts in the plant have, for years, been higher than at comparable sites. The plant management is unable to find an underlying reason. One shift, especially, is notorious for its bad atmosphere, low productivity, continuous failures and production stoppages. It is often nicknamed the “black shift”.

## **Solution**

In discussion with the EAP consultant, the decision is made to conduct a stress audit throughout the organisation. The shifts and other teams fill in a questionnaire. The results of the questionnaire are discussed with the specific groups for more insight and a deeper understanding of the group dynamics.

The feedback session with the notorious “black shift” is initially difficult. There is, at first, no intention by the group to share any information about the very negative results of the questionnaire. However, the situation changes when the consultant draws attention to the highly negative results relating to stress in their private lives. Almost every member of the shift has had one or more difficulties in their private lives that have had a significant impact on their commitment to work. However, none of them had shared their difficulties with each other. They begin to realise that they are not alone in the problems they have. They also become aware of the group dynamics that arise when they keep the issues to themselves alone.

The shift supervisor makes an important decision to plan a specific shift meeting in which team members, if they wish, can share their problems. Parallel to this, the EAP consultant offers and/or arranges different forms of support for the workers to help them cope with the issues they are experiencing.

## **Outcome**

Some months after the audit, the shift has changed dramatically. Absenteeism has dropped almost to zero. Productivity has risen. Stoppages have become rare and, whereas once the shift was regarded as the “black shift”, it now shines as one of the top shifts in the plant. Equally, the atmosphere in the shift has improved and the workers support each other in the problems they have.

## **Evaluation**

- This case is a good example of how private life issues can influence organisational performance and how EA can add value beyond its “counselling only” role
- As the management was aware of the importance of healthy and balanced workforce and was worried when this was not being achieved, it was possible to intervene in a way that went beyond commonly accepted practice
- The working part of the intervention consisted of a combination of open exchange with the group about the issues they faced and the organisation offering assistance to them on a voluntary basis.

The total costs of the intervention and the follow-up EAP support were only a fraction of the value of the increased productivity.

## 10. Performance problems in a shipping department in Germany

### Problem

There is unease in the shipping section. One of the staff, Mr Wagner, seems very desperate. Quite suddenly, he bursts into tears. He is in despair because his wife has left him and he can't see how he would ever manage without her. His colleagues and manager try really hard to help him but nothing they do seems to make a difference.

When Mr Wagner starts saying that he doesn't want to live anymore, a colleague takes him home and, some days later, to a clinic. The team try to cover for both their colleagues as best as they can. When the HR department becomes aware of the situation, they contact the external EA service provider.

### Solution

It is agreed that the EA consultant will first contact Mr Wagner's manager to assess the team situation and develop a plan with him for Mr Wagner's return to work. The manager agrees to refer Mr. Wagner to the external EA service provider.

Mr Wagner subsequently contacts the EA provider, taking the opportunity to see a psychologist. Over several sessions, his grieving and suicidal tendencies are put into a new perspective and, before his return to work, other issues, including safety in the workplace, are addressed.

When Mr Wagner returns to work, his recent behavioural pattern of 'crying and soothing' starts all over again. Clearly, Mr Wagner is not yet emotionally stable enough to get through the day without extra support from his colleagues.

As a result, Mr Wagner's manager is briefed by the EA provider to advise Mr Wagner to call the EA service when he feels low, instead of using his colleagues as a sounding board. The manager, as well as Mr Wagner, recognise that his behaviour not only interrupts production but also puts a strain on his colleagues which will, in the longer run, make him unpopular with his team members.

It is agreed that Mr Wagner's manager will also help improve team performance by briefing his staff on the situation and provide further professional support for Mr Wagner. This enables him to learn to self-manage his depressive episodes, without having to rely on his team colleagues. All those taking part in the consultation process are also reminded that, in case of further need, the EA provider can be contacted again.

### Outcome

Following 5 further weeks of support from the EA provider, Mr Wagner's condition stabilises and his performance returns to normal.

*Important for performance-oriented EA services:*

- *Confidentiality is crucial for all users of the service*
- *In the same case, each client needs to be seen by a different consultant/counsellor*
- *Any information being shared needs the written consent of the client*
- *Consultants must have work-experience with/in organisations and a sound systemic background. A good basic knowledge of the economy is also desirable*
- *Complex cases require a case manager*

## 11. Helping harassed employees in France

### Problem

Marie, 38, is a manager in a bank. Juliette, her superior, manages her team in a very authoritarian fashion. Following a departmental restructuring, Marie finds herself working very closely with Juliette. She finds the situation so painful that, from time to time, she takes sick leave to protect herself from depression. She puts herself down, feels inadequate and believes herself unable to change the situation.

### Solution

Marie decides to call the company's EAP to seek help. The therapist comes to a clear conclusion that there is a danger for Marie. It seems problematical for her to stay in the department; the effort required to adapt to the new environment is very high and detrimental to her psychological health. Furthermore, sick leaves are not a satisfactory way of dealing with the problem for an employee who has always been highly involved in her work.

The first step is to convince Marie to talk to the company doctor, who then advises her to discuss the situation with the Head of Human Resources. She is able to do so and also gives the EAP professional permission to share her assessment of the situation with the Head of HR.

### Outcome

With a similar diagnosis from the company doctor, the Head of Human Resources quickly agrees to organise Marie's transfer to another department.

## 12. Overcoming "fear of heights" leads to an early return to work in The Netherlands

### Background

A large chemical plant, part of an international (US based) company has had an EAP for several years. It consists mainly of personal (face-to-face) counselling, managerial consultancy services, (human) risk audits and critical incident stress management/trauma recovery services.

### Problem

Mr Groote, an employee of the firm, phones his manager to report that he won't be in for work. From the call, it is not very clear what the issue is and his manager asks him to visit the site's physician.

The consultant cannot find any physical problems but, during the course of the consultation, he comes to the view that Mr Groote has a psychological problem. The physician refers him to the site's EAP therapist.

### Solution

During counselling, it emerges that some time ago Mr Groote experienced a traumatic incident. As a result, he has developed an instant "fear of heights". This has a direct effect on his work in the plant as it involves a daily climb into high production towers. When his fear had become so great that he could not handle it anymore, he decided to stay at home, anxious and ashamed to talk about why.



## Outcome

The EAP therapist recognises the symptoms of anxiety disorder and immediately starts working with the Mr Groote, using a cognitive behavioural approach. They have two on-site sessions a week during which the counsellor very pragmatically and step-by-step lets him get used to heights again. First, barely a metre, then building up to two, three etc. Three weeks and six sessions later, Mr Groote is able to return and work fully again.

## Evaluation

- The case is a good example of a multi-disciplinary approach involving interventions by a manager, doctor and EAP therapist
- The case was addressed very quickly and effectively. If the manager or doctor had decided that the issue was vague or unclear and had not responded as they did, Mr Groote could have been absent for months or longer
- Its effectiveness lies in the “next day” on-site availability of an EAP counsellor, avoiding referrals to regular therapists with long waiting lists.
- Effective training of management and site medical staff created an empathetic understanding of the psychological issues arising out of absenteeism.

The recovery of Mr Groote within three weeks saved the company far more than the annual cost of the EAP.

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For more information about the EAEF visit [www.eaef.org](http://www.eaef.org) or email Richard Hopkins, EAEF President on [richardh@dovedale.co.uk](mailto:richardh@dovedale.co.uk)

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