

Workplace Wellness Program

Employees' Perceptions and Expectations toward an Internal Employee Assistance Services

[Nurhafizah Yaacob, Sapora Sipon]

Abstract— Personal problems inside and outside of the workplace might effect on the employee performance. Employee Assistance Services (EAS) not only provide confidential, short-term counseling and longer-term referrals for employees and their family members but also prevention courses as well as online assistance services. This paper reports the analysis of the educational service employees' perceptions toward help-seeking through counseling services and their expectations toward the development of an internal Employee Assistance Services at their workplace. Data collection included reviews of internal reports, employee surveys and focus group discussions with the administrative stakeholders. A total of 583 questionnaires were collected from the employees in the educational institutes in Gombak District, Selangor State. The findings indicated that employees' perceptions toward help-seeking through counseling services were at the moderate level and their expectations toward Employee Assistance Services as a workplace wellness program were rated highly agreed. The administrative stakeholders also agreed and showed high level of endorsement toward the program. They hope to meet or exceed the original start-up goals and that employees will be satisfied with the services. Administrative stakeholders also perceived the EAS as “having a good return-on-investment value”, and the Employee Assistance Services development will be compared favorably to a benchmark organization.

Keywords— Employee Assistance Program, Employee Assistance Service, Workplace Wellness Program

I. Introduction

The greatest asset an organization should have is not just its financial capital but also its employees. Employees are the intellectual capital of an organization. They are not only offering their skills and talents; they also bring ideas, commitment, creativity, and innovation. However, employees are only human. Sometimes their personal problems can affect their job at the workplace. It also can be the other way around which means the workplace problems might follow them back into their personal life.

This study was driven by the pre-analysis' findings that has been conducted among the educational service employees in Gombak District, Selangor.

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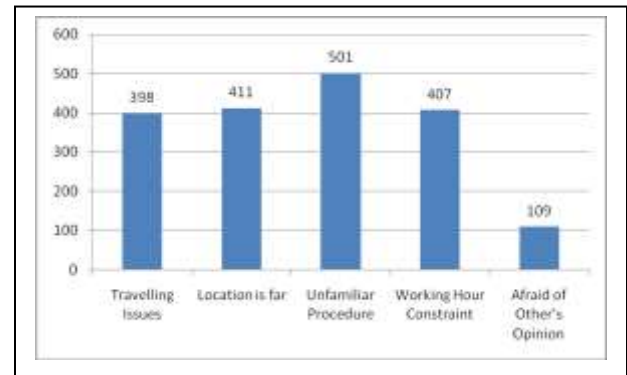


Figure 1. Pre-Analysis' Findings

Based on Figure 1 above, the pre-analysis' findings showed that most of the employees in the educational institutes are unfamiliar with the current counseling services procedure. This has happened due to the lack of guidelines and there are no module explaining the procedures to join in as client. The employees also said to be unfamiliar with the consent letters and forms that need to be filled up, basis of confidentiality as well as the types of services provided. Other than that, they are also reported to be having the travelling issues, locations to meet up with the counselors are far from their working and residential area, working hour constraint as well as being afraid of other's opinion.

A. Employee Assistance Services

The Employee Assistance Services (EAS) also known as the Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are employee benefit programs that has been offered by many employers around the world nowadays. The services are designated and intended to help employees whom dealing with problems that might adversely impact their work performance and also their health well-being. EAS has been used as a tool in managing the occupational stress in diverse working field [1-2]. Generally, it includes assessment, short-term counseling and referral services for employees and their household members.

Additional to the face-to-face and group counseling, EAS also suggests online counseling and consultation through the Internet and toll free telephone services 24 hours a day as part of its main component. The suggested services can be offered depending on the employees need.

The use of EAS and EAPs is rising in the workplace [3]. The programs appear in all types of work settings regardless of workplace size, personnel or type of employment [4]. The significance of such widespread application is that there is an accompanying desire for determining the type of EAS in each type of workplace and a mean of assessing whether the EAS meet the needs of the stakeholders [4].

Today, the majority of EAS in Malaysia are internal programs provided by the employers and the employees' organizations [5]. However, there are evidences that external programs are also provided to the employer organization through outside contracting EAS vendors [6]. This findings are supported by other researcher[7], that these EAS firms have many cases, also been integrated into other behavioral health delivery systems such as behavioral health Managed Care Organization (MCOs).

B. Inhibits Factors toward Counseling

Reference [13] had discovered that several factors were posited for this general trend in getting professional help through counseling. The factors are including fear of being stereotyped, mistrust in counseling professionals, shame, embarrassment and fear of being perceived as weak. As psychotherapy been perceived as 'a potentially difficult, embarrassing, and overall risky enterprise', it often cultivates fear and avoidance of mental health services. As the result, seeking professional counseling is viewed only as the last resort [14].

Reviews of the literature also reveal several variables which are related to impact one's perception towards seeking professional counseling. Some of the variables are fear of disclosing distressing information [15], anticipated risks and social stigma attached to mental health services [14], avoidance of painful emotions [8], religiosity [15] as well as fear of embarrassment [9].

In order to acculturate trust in seeking help through counseling, many countries have taken another step to improve the counseling services to another dimension. According to previous study [10], Employee Assistance Services (EAS) have become very important and a popular institutional mechanism in many enterprises for promoting health and emotional well-being, reducing absenteeism and improving performance. Other studies [11-12] also showed that EAS has significant impact on improving workers productivity and adversely impact their work performance, health and well-being.

II. Methodology

This study applied a mixed method approach as it combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches. A mixed method by definition is a procedure incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data in order to more fully understand a problem or issue. Reference [16] suggested that, "a mixed method research design is a procedure for collecting, analyzing and 'mixing' both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study to understand a research problem". Study methods included a review of the existing program's performance in other workplaces, surveys administered to employees, comparison of program data with benchmarks, and focus group discussions with stakeholders.

The research employed a pragmatic, intermethod (or mixed-method) approach, in which both quantitative and qualitative questioning techniques were used to collect data [16-17]. The study utilized a survey with both closed-ended (quantitative) and open-ended (exploratory, qualitative) items to form complementary data [17]. The mixed-method design was an equivalent status design, thereby providing approximately equal and parallel data types through the quantizing of the qualitative portions of the survey data. This method was selected because it provides complementary data to elaborate and clarify results from the quantitative portions of the selected survey instrument while serving to reduce biases and assumptions of the inquirer that may result from quantitative data analysis and to strengthen interpretability [17].

A simple random sampling technique has been applied in the first phase of this research; in order to collect the questionnaires from the potential respondents which should be consisted of 770 employees. However, only 583 questionnaires were returned and collected from the total samples. The 583 respondents were 108 male and 495 female employees that involved in all units at the educational institutes in Gombak District, Selangor.

In the second phase, this research applied qualitative method to gather data from the stakeholders through focus group discussions. Focus group is a small structured group with selected participants and normally led by a moderator [24]. According to Reference [25], 'Focus groups emerged in behavioral science research as a distinctive member of a qualitative research family, which also includes individual depth interviewing, ethnographic participant observation and projective methods'. The stakeholders were consisted of the representatives of the human resources (HR), the counseling unit (CU), the employees' supervisors (Sup) and the educational institutes administrators (Adm).

III. Results

A. Perceptions toward Help-seeking through Counseling Services

There are numerals of research that have been conducted to examine the relationship between one's perceptions towards seeking help through counseling services and the utilization of mental health services. Identifying those factors which influence one's attitude towards seeking professional counseling can assist mental health professionals and other service providers in designing interventions aimed at attracting those who are in need of these services [7]. Professional counseling is perceived as a difficult, embarrassing and risky process by many. Such perceptions instill fear and avoidance of mental health services in many who need professional counseling services. Based on the pre-analysis among the employees of the educational institutes, they have shown moderate perceptions toward the Employee Assistance Services as part as the workplace wellness program.

TABLE I
PERCEPTIONS TOWARD HELP SEEKING THROUGH
COUNSELING SERVICES

	Mean	Perception Level
a. Self-Stigma	3.04	Moderate
b. Social Stigma	3.38	Moderate
c. Emotional Openness	3.06	Moderate
d. Anticipated Risk & Utility	2.95	Moderate

*PERCEPTION LEVEL (Mean): 1.00-1.80 (Very bad), 1.81-2.60 (Bad), 2.61-3.40 (Moderate), 3.41-4.20 (Good), 4.21-5.00 (Very Good).

Based on Table I, the employees ($n: 583$) have shown moderate perceptions level toward help seeking through counseling services. As in the result, the perception on anticipated risk and utility attached to seeking professional counseling has been identified as a major deterrent to seeking counseling among the employees in the educational institutes. Anticipated risk and utility is "an individual's perception of the consequences associated with self-disclosing to someone" [23]. The fear of disclosing painful experiences and personal information directly might lead to negative attitudes toward the suggested internal EAS. It might be the wall in delivering the services whenever one's fear about the consequences of disclosing personal experience and information in counseling arise. It is also said that one's with this perception has the most influential barrier to seeking counseling [23].

Self stigma has been identified has the second perception that comes after the employees' perception on the anticipated risk and utility. Self stigma is a reduction in an individual's self-esteem or self-worth as a consequence of that individual's

self-identification as being someone in need of mental health services [18]. Self-stigma can be a thought of as "what members of a stigmatized group may do to themselves if they internalize public stigma" [19]. This has shown that people do internalize negative perceptions when dealing with mental health concerns [20]. Help seeking is often viewed as a threat to one's self-esteem because seeking help from another is often internalized by the individuals as being inadequate or inferior and may lead the person to decide not to seek help, even when experiencing psychological distress [18]. Self-stigma uniquely predicts attitudes toward seeking psychological help and willingness to seek counseling [19].

The social stigma resulted as the third perception that also showed moderately perceived among the employees in the educational institutes. The impact that social stigma has on individuals who need professional counseling is evident in the finding that many prefer to forgo mental health benefits, which are provided by their employers and instead opt to pay for psychological services on their own to prevent the risk of disclosure in the workplace[21]. Reference [22] has agreed that, "stigma associated with mental health services is the perception that a person who seeks psychological treatment is undesirable or socially unacceptable". This means, that social stigma can also barricade the need for help seeking through counseling services.

The emotional openness refers to the level of comfort to disclose personal information to others. A high level of emotional openness indicates a strong ability and level of comfort with disclosing personal information with others, and more specifically with strangers [7]. A low level of emotional openness has been linked to negative attitudes towards professional counseling and consequently avoidance of mental health services. A low level of emotional openness is also associated with instigating several treatment fears in individuals who need professional counseling services [7].

As the employees shown moderate level of perceptions toward help seeking through counseling services, it is likely a good sign of acceptance of the program; however it also has the potential to be negatively accepted. Further studies on the effectiveness of the services are suggested to be implemented after the development of the EAS among the educational services employees.

B. Expectations toward Employee Assistance Services

The objective of analyzing the employees' expectations toward the suggested internal Employee Assistance Services was to ensure that the implementation of the services will be an important part of the employees health well-being. Therefore, the survey has included the suggested types of

services, the procedures, the location as well as the referral system of the EAS. According to [14], the overall perception of these local companies is that EAS only involves employee counseling or crisis management. It means, they might not understand the preventive component of EAS. Many of these companies are also not aware of the actual impact of stress, absenteeism, medical leaves, workplace injuries and troubling behaviors of employees on the overall productivity of their workforce. This ignorance stems from the unavailability of local research data on EASs’ return on investment [14].

Table II have shown that the employees (*n*:583) agreed on the suggested procedures of the internal EAS, the location of the procedures of services and the suggested referral system for the internal EAS. While for the suggested types of services had marked the level of strongly agree.

Based on these findings, the administrative stakeholders had agree to implement a pilot program of the internal EAS as it has become a very important and popular institutional mechanism in many enterprises for promoting health and emotional well-being, reducing absenteeism, and improving performance [10]. Moreover, the rapid growth of these programs and services in certain companies might because of the phenomenon of workplace stress as well as the increasing awareness of the importance of a systematic workplace wellness program for its employees.

TABLE II
EXPECTATIONS TOWARD HELP SEEKING THROUGH
EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE SERVICES

	Mean	Expectation Level
a. Types of Services	4.23	Strongly Agree
b. Procedures	4.04	Agree
c. Location	4.10	Agree
d. Referral System	3.89	Agree

*EXPECTATION LEVEL (Mean): 1.00-1.80 (Strongly Disagree), 1.81-2.60 (Disagree), 2.61-3.40 (Not Sure), 3.41-4.20 (Agree), 4.21-5.00 (Strongly Agree).

C. Stakeholders’ Opinion toward Employee Assistance Services

During the focus group discussions, the primary stakeholders were asked on how effective might the EAS can benefit the employees; whether the goal of return-on-investment can be achieved; whether the EAS will help to improve the quality of work and life of the employees; and what they (stakeholders) recommend for the implementation of the pilot internal EAS. The stakeholders were from the human resources (HR), the counseling unit (CU), the employees’ supervisors (Sup) and the educational institutes’ administrators (Adm).

All stakeholders from differing perspectives agreed that the implementation of the suggested EAS can be beneficial to the educational institutes as a whole. Comments included: “We can act more proactively when dealing with employee problems if the Employee Assistance Services is implemented in the workplace” (HR). “It is a more systematic platform of a workplace counseling compared to that we have implemented before”(HR).

Whether the goal of return-on-investment can be achieved: “The employees motivation in work and life must be boosted up by letting them experience the services that will be provided in the EAS” (HR). “We might lower down the disciplinary issues among the employees” (Sup). “This is one way to reduce the turnover rate” (HR). “We need to act by providing them the services to show that we care about their problems, so that their loyalty to the institutes will last long” (Sup).

Whether the EAS will help to improve the quality of work and life of the employees: “We need to inculcate the culture of believing in getting help through counseling and joining the services offered in the suggested EAS to those in need to be better” (Adm). “We hope to reduce the problems they (employees) carry between their work life and home life as well” (Adm).

Recommendations on the implementation of the pilot internal Employee Assistance Services: “EAS will provide updated services, not just counseling alone as part of the program” (HR). “It includes the services that also consist of the preventive measure such as the health seminar and also-how to manage personal issues such as the monetary debts” (HR). “Employees will have the power to choose the types of services they need and can be referred by their supervisors as well” (Sup).

Stakeholders also reported that Employee Assistance Services procedures will also emphasis the confidentiality of the counseling programs. They said: “The chosen location is conducive and offers confidentiality to all the employees (clients). Nobody can enter the space easily; the files will be kept systematically” (CU). “The suggested location is very conducive and it is spacious enough for any kind of activities; including the group activities and seminar. With the chosen location, employees will not have to travel out to get help, it is definitely offers some cost saving” (Adm). “The appointed staff will act as the EAS consultants. They will be sent for professional courses and getting prepared to promote and organize the services” (HR). “The EAS consultants will be the mediators between the employees and the whole components in the services.”(HR).



iv. Conclusion

Based on the employees' perceptions and expectations toward the internal Employee Assistance Services (EAS) as well as the stakeholders' opinions through the focus group discussion, the implementation of the pilot Employee Assistance Services might provide new findings in the aim to enhance the current practices of the counseling services and self-development programs provided to the employees in the educational institutes.

Comparing the internal EAS to the existing counseling services offers to the employees, the stakeholders felt that, the internal EAS seemed to be more convenient for both administration and employees. Based on these findings, the research will lead to the development of the internal Employee Assistance Services module for the educational institutes' employees and the module will be tested to identify its effectiveness during the implementation of Phase 3 and 4 of this research.

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"The proposed Internal Employee Assistance Services among the educational service employees through this research aim to enhance the current practices of face-to-face & group counseling methods that are offered to the employees".

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"Based on the focus group discussions, the administrative stakeholders have perceived the proposed EAS as "having a good return-on-investment value" and shall help to improve the employees' motivation toward their work-life as well as home-life".

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