

Employee Assistance Programs Reimagined: Overcoming Barriers and Fostering Mental Health at Work

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Introduction

Employee assistance programs (EAPs) have a long history of workplace-based attempts to reduce the influence and impact of personal and work-related issues on job performance (Richmond, et al. 2017). EAPs offer counselling, consulting, and holistic wellbeing services (Kirk & Brown, 2003), focusing on the prevention and remediation of personal problems (Chellam & Divya, 2022). Modern EAPs are defined and devised to assist employees in avoiding 'adversely affecting the employee's performance' (Society for Human Resource Management, 2020).

Research indicates that EAPs can significantly reduce absenteeism, improve mental health outcomes, and are perceived as valuable workplace resources (Richmond et al., 2017; Kirk & Brown, 2003). EAPs have evolved from primarily addressing alcoholism in the 1940s to encompassing a wide range of psychosocial issues (Ghosh, 2020). While some criticize EAPs for focusing on individual rather than organizational interventions (Arthur, 2000), they remain an important tool for stress management and workplace performance improvement (Berridge & Cooper, 1993). The economic benefits of EAPs, including potential cost savings from reduced absenteeism and turnover, make them attractive to employers (Kemp, 1985; Attridge, 2009). There was also a concurrent evolution of programme positioning from exclusive to inclusive human resource management (HR) strategy when organizations were seriously looking for ways to retain and develop their people rather than simply aiming to eliminate or lessen them (Bennett et al., 1994).

An employee assistance program (EAP) is a workplace benefit program designed to provide confidential and professional assistance to employees who are dealing with personal or work-related problems that could affect their well-being and job performance (Baskar et al., 2021) The

contemporary perspective of EAPs involves supporting employees' mental health, emotional well-being, and overall productivity. Increasing digital transformation, and new work modes, namely Flexible working', 'telework' and 'remote work' are creating new challenges for employee wellbeing (Sharma et al., 2024; Friedrich, 2022). However, the biggest challenge associated with adopting EAPs is the stigma associated with it. Limited efforts have been paid to mobilize the resources of supervisors, leaders, and peer colleagues to facilitate employees' use of EAPs (Reynolds & Lehman, 2003; Long & Cooke, 2022; Long, 2024).

The study attempts to answer the following research questions :

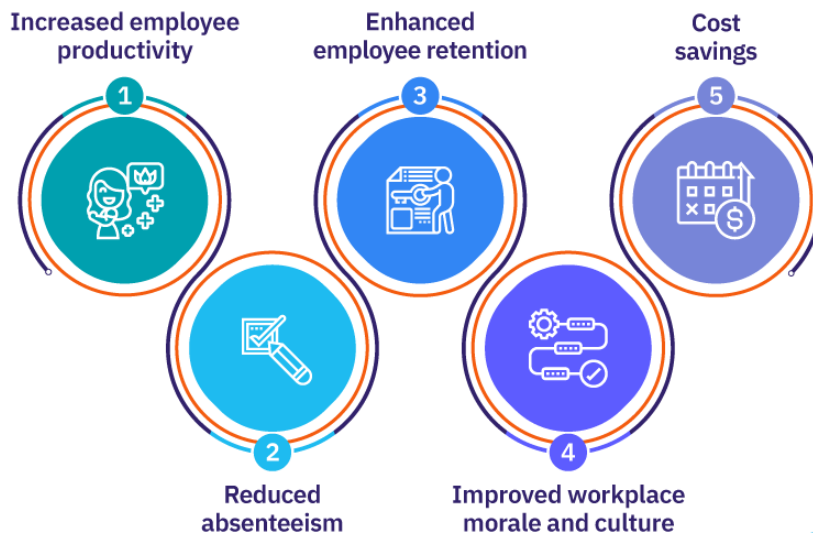
RQ1: How have digital technologies impacted the mental well-being of employees?

RQ2: What strategies should organizations undertake to increase uptake of outsourced EAP services?

RQ3: How can modern outsourced EAP providers redefine the service offering?

The study makes a theoretical and practical contribution based on a literature review and the findings analyzed based on a survey on the perception of EAP. The study draws attention to the important role of employee assistance programs in attracting, retaining, and motivating employees.

Benefits of Employee Assistance Programs



Source AIHR

Review of Literature

Digital Technologies: How we work and its impact on mental wellbeing

The World Health Organization (2007) defines mental health as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her potential, can cope with the everyday stresses of life, produces work productively, and contributes to their community.

The widespread integration of technology in the workplace has led to more screen time and sedentary behavior (Yang et al., 2017), which are associated with negative physical health outcomes such as a higher risk of diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, musculoskeletal issues, and obesity, often accompanied by mental health problems (Duncan et al., 2012; Ford and Caspersen, 2012). Prolonged screen time and sedentary behaviour, for example, have been linked with both depressive symptoms (Machav et al., 2017).

Automation and advanced technology are transforming work environments, impacting employee mental health in both positive and negative ways. While these technologies can increase efficiency and accuracy and reduce physical strain, they also present challenges such as system incompatibility and data interpretation difficulties (Lunner-Kolstrup et al., 2018). Working in automatable jobs is associated with an increased risk of mental disorders (Blasco et al., 2024), with fears of job loss and skill obsolescence being potential factors (Abeliansky et al., 2021). The concept of "technostress" has emerged, suggesting that certain types of technology-related stress may adversely affect mental health (Dragano et al., 2021). The changing work environment and the evolution of technology with automation have been a blessing in disguise. However, somewhere, it may have adversely affected the mental health of a specific workforce.

Digital technologies have both positive and negative impacts on employee mental health. While they can enhance communication, collaboration, and productivity (Marsh et al., 2022), they may also lead to technostress, information overload, and work-life imbalance (Dragano et al., 2021; Dragano & Lunau, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital solutions for remote work and mental health interventions. These technologies can improve accessibility to mental health support and enable better work organization. However, excessive screen time and social media use may negatively impact mental well-being. There is a need to develop evidence-based digital interventions that could address the digital divide, and examine the long-term effects of technology use on workplace mental health (Johnson et al., 2020; Dragano et al., 2021; Giusino et al., 2021; Ogugua et al., 2024).

Digital Technologies: *Where and when we work* and its impact on mental wellbeing

Flexible working, telework and remote work are all categories of what is known as 'outside the office' (Spreitzer et al., 2017), i.e. work from home or elsewhere with information technology. How Working from Home Positively and Negatively Affects Employee Mental Health.

Pros include more flexible hours, controlling your destiny and achieving a more excellent work-life balance (Sharma et al., 2024; Friedrich and Vicari, 2023). However, challenges such as social isolation, blurring work-life boundaries, and the pressure to always be available can impact well-being (Liu et al., 2021). In some cases, remote work, especially in the country you were born (where jobs are scarce and your grad degree is not yet recognized), might lead to poor sleep quality or insomnia because of anxiety due to distress such as job insecurity at night — keeping one up for hours thinking about how it will be impossible getting a position with no experience on local resume. According to the Monash survey, children are also suffering from physical health issues like musculoskeletal disorders and sedentary lifestyle problems (Tomasina & Pisani, 2022).

Employers should implement strategies to support employee well-being, such as clear communication, regular check-ins, and promoting work-life integration (Sharma et al., 2024). Overall, the success of remote work depends on individual factors, organizational support, and the ability to manage potential risks (Elshaiekh et al., 2018; Zalmunin, 2021; Estherita & Vasantha, 2023; Sarangi et al., 2022).

Factors influencing uptake of EAPs

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) can have trouble being used by employees. They are still largely on the periphery, suffering from low utilization rates and siloed strategies. Although they are associated with management and not both workers and management, their underuse is another important feature explaining why (Long, 2024).

This stigma around EAPs has served as a brake for two elements around using those services, Firstly, by making a focused area for drug and alcohol problems, the kind of therapeutic labelling inherent in employee assistance programs has served a cross purpose to its goals (Gullekson et al., 2014; Long & Cooke, 2023). Secondly, concerns about how others might react to the news that EAP may be being used (Hu et al., 2012) and fears of damage to one's career in other areas lead to preferred disengagement from driving engagement with EAPS. The perceived managerial engagement and control through EAPs have caused a crisis of trust (Reynolds & Lehman, 2003; Weiss, 2005), manifesting in fear of confidentiality breaches and the consequential perceived trustworthiness. Organisational support plays an important role in promote the EAPs among employees (Joseph et al., 2018).

Limited adopting of EAPs is also attributed to the lack of appropriate positioning of the program within the organization. EAP not aligned with internal HR functions would fail to achieve the desired objectives (Long & Cooke, 2023).

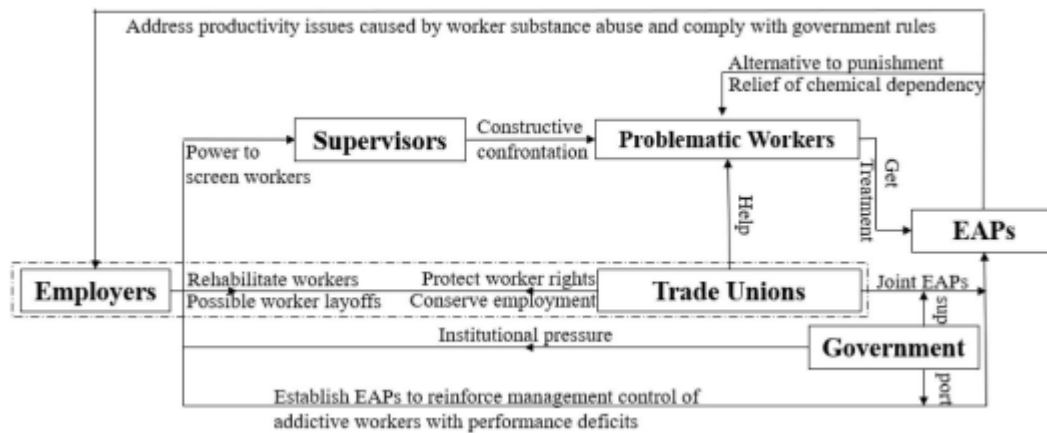


Figure 1 : A framework on the bridging role of Early EAP among multiple stakeholders.

Source Long (2024)

Based on Figure 1 Long (2024) presented a framework which depicts relevant stakeholders that are involved in an EAPs comprising of employees, managers and supervisors, employers, trade unions, and even governments and conflicts that arise among them. EAP can enable employers, address productivity issues and comply with government rules, at the same time, EAPs can rehabilitate workers. By involving Trade Unions, and joint EAP, worker rights can be protected and at the same time through supervisors, problematic workers can be dealt with effectively.

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) in SMEs

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) have gained a significant attention when it comes to SME initiatives of promoting employee wellbeing and productivity. Research has found that a comprehensive range of personal and professional difficulties can affect employees in SMEs, which employers frequently do not have sufficient resources to manage efficaciously (Leonard & Terblanche, 2020).

The use of an EAP by SMEs could be exacerbated by owner/manager psychological distress and recent stressful workplace events (Dawkins et al. 2018). As promising as EAPs can be on paper, however they are also perpetually challenged in that few employees access them and the programs too easily fall into third- or even fourth-tier status within organizations (Long, 2024).

Mugari et al (2014) have also suggested several strategies, such as developing perusable programs and ensuring access to the innovative marketing approach in order to make EAP effectivity. Moreover, more coherently aligning EAPs with employee needs and organizational goals can strengthen their strategic value (Kirk 2006; Matlhape 2003). In this light EAPs are perhaps the most critical gateway to more widespread mental health care for workers (Hartwell et al., 1996), as they increase in frequency of utilization.

Findings and Results

Strategies to increase uptake

Strategies for increasing uptake include efforts to combat stigma or misinformation related to mental illness (McRee, 2017), creating employer-specific supportive environments that promote adoption of the services by coworkers and supervisors as well changing comprehensive EAP rationales including integration with other strategic initiatives in order increase utilization rates (Delaney et al., 1998; Kirk, 2006).

EAPs can be more effective by aligning closely with employee needs rather than management (Long, 2024), and by considering academic culture in university settings (Franz, 2007).

While EAPs have shown positive impacts on employee outcomes, particularly in reducing presenteeism (Joseph et al., 2018), there is a need for broader evaluation measures and clearer information for organizational decision-makers to assess EAP effectiveness (Roman et al., 1987). Based on the research of Zarkin et al., (2001); Kirk, (2006); Joseph et al., (2018); Long (2024) the following strategies can encourage EAP uptakes :

Table 1 : Strategies in encourage EAP uptake

Sr.	Underlying factor	Strategies
1	Increase credibility of EAP and improve engagement from labour	Include more diverse inputs from relevant stakeholders. Setting up joint EAP committees with trade unions Conduct regular meetings to explain the transparent and confidential visits of EAP providers

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Sr.	Underlying factor	Strategies
2	Reduce perceived stigma of EAPs impacting employee career path	<p>Clarify the independent role of EAP</p> <p>Emphasize on the confidentiality of EAP services</p> <p>Encourage voluntary sharing of EAP uptakes to all employees</p> <p>Encourage help-seeking behaviour</p>
3	Perceived bureaucratic and disciplinary control in EAPs	<p>Abolishing mandatory referrals or supervisor referrals.</p> <p>Encouraging peer support and referrals to EAP</p>
4	Putting focus on well-being at the core of EAP	<p>Having internal name of EAP to emphasize focus on well-being</p> <p>Taking employee ratings of EAPs and their satisfaction as an important indicator</p> <p>Monitoring the changes in employee work satisfaction, work well-being, and other organisational behavioural outcomes</p>
5	Reestablishing employee trust in EAPs	<p>Fostering more constructive collaborations</p> <p>Highlighting the prioritised focus of EAPs on employee well-being</p> <p>Communicate the breadth of additional services provided through the EAP</p>
6.	Establish an inclusive and accessible service delivery model	<p>Ensure simple and easy access of the EAP services to employees and eligible family members</p> <p>Offer a range of service delivery modes</p> <p>Disseminate information about the EAP programs through multiple channels.</p> <p>Address accessibility needs, including for persons with disabilities</p>
7.	Implement a structured approach	<p>Outline key features and boundaries of the EAP program</p> <p>Outline improvement plans based on maturity stage of the EAP program</p> <p>Collaborate with organisations to develop a policy for the EAP program.</p>
8.	Promote key metrics in support of EAP quality	<p>Publish EAP activities in annual review and reports.</p> <p>Establish performance and process indicators to support continuous improvement</p>

Sr.	Underlying factor	Strategies
		Utilisation rates of EAP services

Improving trustworthiness of the EAPs by adopting a comprehensive outreach service and inclusive approach for diverse employee groups can significantly boost EAP usage (Zarkin et al., 2001). Integrating team-oriented training with informational sessions can improve help-seeking behaviors and EAP trust (Bennett & Lehman, 2001). Familiarity with the program, perceived accessibility, and managerial support are crucial for building employee confidence in EAPs. At individual level they must be able to improve overall physical and mental health, wellbeing and quality of life of employees. At organisation level, EAPs can help in improved retention (e.g. turnover rates), workplace functioning and productivity (e.g. job performance, absenteeism, presenteeism or morale) employee engagement and overall wellbeing.

Perception on Employee Assistance Programs

To assess the perception of HR professionals on Employee Assistance Programs and factors that influence acceptance a structured questionnaire was designed to collect responses. The objective was to gain insights on the expectations on the EAP service offering in the current context to address the third research question.

Respondent Profile

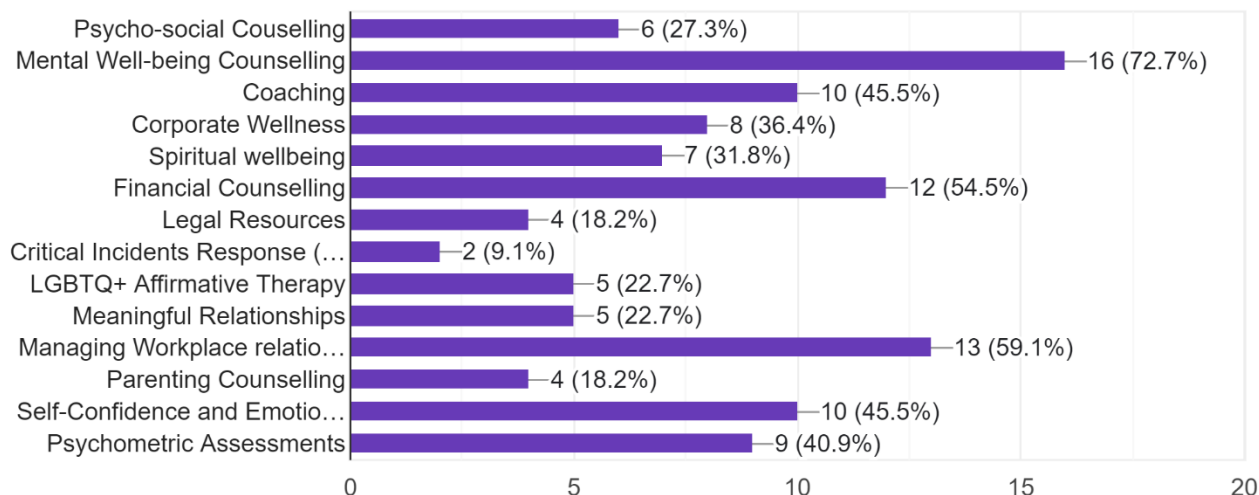
18 to 25 years	45.50%
26 to 32 years	13.60%
33 to 40 years	13.60%
41 to 48 years	18.6%
48 years to 55	9.1%

The respondents were from different sectors with 36.40% service sector.

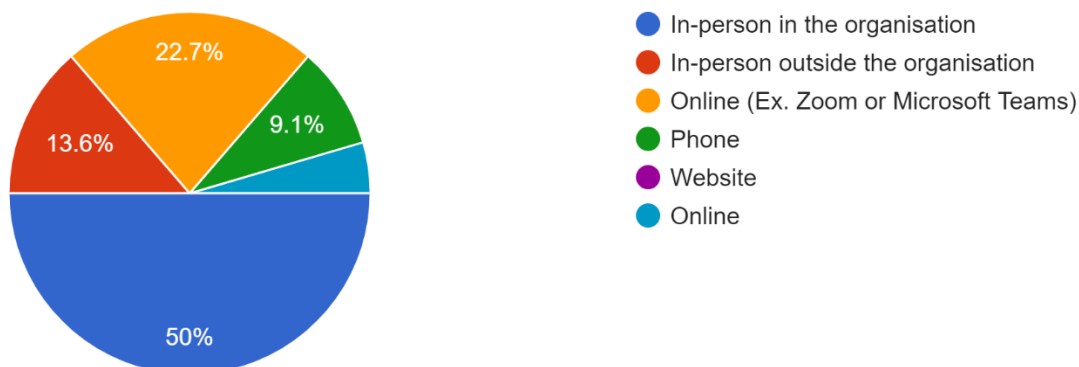
59.1% of the respondents had an EAP program in their organisation.

Range of Services opted

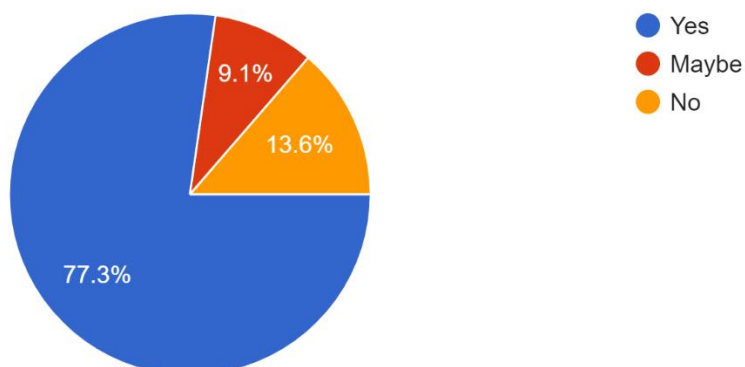
22 responses



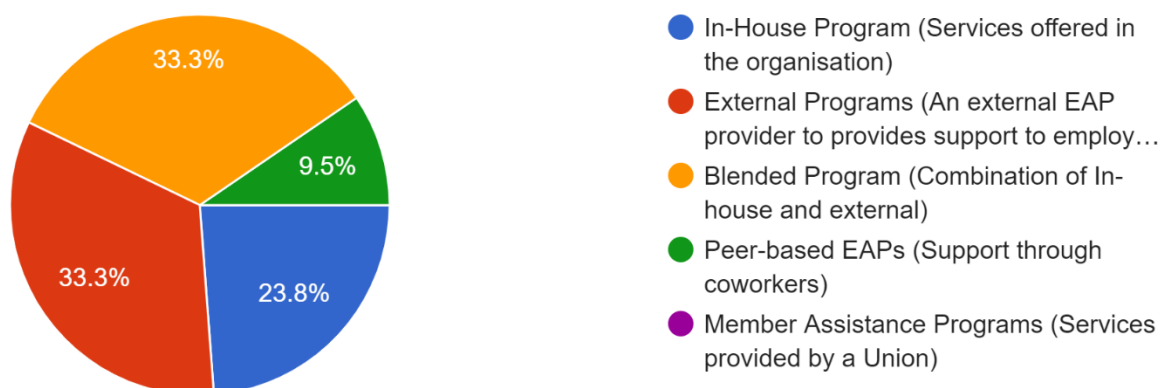
3.2 Preference of Service Delivery model



3.3 Preference to join a group as part of EAP service



3.4 EAP Model preference



Strategies to Promote EAP

Table 2 : Strategies to promote acceptance of employee assistance programs

Strategy	Pref.
Create a safe environment to avoid stigma	9.09%
Encourage employees to training and education on mental health awareness and self-care.	9.09%
Ensure Confidentiality and Privacy	4.55%
Increase accessibility of the available EAP services.	27.27%

Normalise Help-Seeking Behaviour	13.64%
Promote awareness of the available EAP services.	31.82%
Share stories of employees who have benefited from the program.	4.55%

Discussion

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) have gained traction globally as organizations recognize their value in supporting employee wellbeing and productivity. While traditionally focused on individual employee needs, there is a shift towards more comprehensive models that integrate organizational wellness (Kirk, 2006; Kurzman, 2013). However, to ensure long-term success, EAPs must evolve beyond the "return on investment paradigm" and position themselves as strategic partners in workplace productivity and innovation. Modern outsourced EAPs must offer management-sponsored services to employees and present evidence of the effectiveness of the program. The focus must be on building trust and de-stigmatize the usage of counselling services. A more holistic approach is required to make EAP a strategic tool to retain, engage and support employees.

The first research question has been addressed based on literature review outlining the negative impact of new work models and digitalisation on employees, resulting in social isolation, blurring work-life boundaries, and overall mental well-being.

The next research questions aims to examine strategies that our increase uptake of outsourced EAP services by employees and service offering expectations by EAP providers. These two research questions were addressed by a mixed method approach. Based in literature review a broad framework is suggested (Refer Table no. 1). Additionally a survey was carried out among HR professionals to examine their perception on the services and other aspects related to the service delivery of employee assistance programs. Strategies to promote acceptance of employee assistance programs is presented in table 2.

Based in the findings of the survey, there is need for a holistic approach towards EAPs. Modern Outsourced EAPs could support organisations on a wide range of services that can be offered to employees. Mental wellbeing counselling, coaching for professional development, financial counselling, managing workplace relationships. With changing diversity at workplace, there is a need to incorporate parenting counselling and affirmative therapy to LGBTQ+ employees. There is huge demand and opportunity for online EAP services. With increasing usage of technology and changing work mode, there is a need to reimage existing EAPs programs with keep pace with the changing workforce patterns and demands (Langlieb et al, 2021). The stakeholder network should be expanded as individuals prefer to be part of a support group as part of the EAP offering. Based on the responses, the preference for external EAPs was high through external vendors or blended program where community based services or third party counselling services could be integrated with an internal EAP. To increase the intake of EAPs, there is a need to promote the wide range of service and increase accessibility of the services. Help seeking behaviour must be normalised and organisations must focus on creating safe environments to offer counselling and coaching support to the employees.

Conclusion

The findings of the research draw attention of organisations and professionals involved in offering counselling services to design programs as part of employee assistance programs. There is a need for organisations to re-look at their employee assistance and offer a wide range of holistic services to employees. EAP service provider and professional must identify and offer a wide range of services based on the current social dynamics of workplace. Organisations need to adopt strategies to develop credibility and trust for EAP programs, increase overall employee engagement to reduce perceived stigma of adopting EAPs impacting. The perceived bureaucratic and disciplinary controls must be eliminated, and the focus must on social, emotional and financial wellbeing of employees. With increasing emphasis on diversity and equity, inclusive and accessible service delivery model must be established adopting a structure approach involving different stakeholders. Metrics could be established to measure the usage and effectiveness of the EAP programs. Future research could focus on how trade unions in India can be integrated in the EAP programs in the Indian context due to the changing legal compliance requirements. Research could be carried out to examine the gap in perception of employers and employees with regards to the services that can be offered through an EAP.

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