The Workplace Effects of EAP Use: “Pooled” Results from 20 Different EAPs with Before and After WOS 5-item Data

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of the study was to examine if the use of EAP services was associated with improved work effectiveness. Twenty different EAP providers contributed a convenience sample of 3,187 employee clients who had completed the Workplace Outcome Suite (WOS) 5-item measure both at before use of the EAP and a 90-day follow-up period after EAP use. All five items showed statistically significant positive change, but the greatest amount of improvement was found for work absenteeism, work presenteeism and work distress with less sizable improvements for work engagement and life satisfaction. These results offer evidence that EAP services can improve the workplace performance of employees.

Introduction

This evaluation study examined self-report data from a large sample of employee clients of employee assistance program (EAP) services from 20 different EAP providers who collected on pre- and post-test measures of employee workplace performance. All of these EAPs collected data using the same outcome measurement tool known as the Workplace Outcome Suite (WOS) 5-item measure, developed by Chestnut Global Partners. The 20 different providers represent a mix of EAPs delivery models with both internal programs and external vendors included. The data was “pooled” or aggregated across all of these programs to provide a picture of the workplace effects of EAP intervention.

Measuring the Impact of EAP Services Using the Workplace Outcome Suite. The WOS is short, precise, and well suited for pre- and post-test EAP studies. It uses a Likert-type rating scale that examines various components of the effects of personal issues in relation to four aspects of workplace functioning and to overall life satisfaction. In addition to the commonly understood need for validity, reliability, and demonstrated psychometric properties, the WOS is able to detect change over time and has a manageable administrative and respondent burden. The WOS is copyrighted but can be used free of charge by EA providers with the signing of a License Agreement. The measure can be downloaded online at www.eapresearch.com.

The original 25-item WOS was specifically designed for EAPs and contains five scales, each with five items, that are popular and lie at the heart of understanding EAP effectiveness: absenteeism, presenteeism, work engagement, life satisfaction, and workplace distress. All measures other than the absenteeism scale are effect-indicator structures derived from classical psychometric theory. The absenteeism scale used a formative measurement model that captures the how often the individual missed work due to personal concerns.

Two separate validation studies tested the reliability of the scales, the structural validity of the items, and the construct validity of the unit-weighted scale scores. The results of these studies
support the use of the WOS to evaluate workplace effects of EAP counseling and provide evidence that the WOS does indeed measure its intended set of five constructs.\(^1\) The WOS can assess individual differences that focus on workplace outcomes that are specifically relevant to EAP interventions and are likely to be sensitive to detecting change over time after the use of the EAP services.

**WOS Short Version.** There is also a “super-short” 5-item version of the WOS that is simply a single item for each of the five constructs. It has undergone a validation study and been compared to the original 25-item, although this study has not yet been published. Preliminary results indicate the short version works very well, but as expected is not as sensitive as the full 25-item version. The 5-item version was used in this study and this report is the first to feature these findings.

**Methods**

**Study Design.** A repeated measures design was used in the study to examine possible changes over time in the five WOS items from before to after the use of EAP services. The method of data collection was embedded into the routine EAP initial assessments and the follow-up survey processes at these programs and thus was not disruptive to the EAP clinical process or client experience. A methodological advantage of the use of before and after data is that it allows for each person to serve as his or her own control for other factors (such as demographic and clinical characteristics). However, the study lacked a comparison group of other employees at the same organizations who had similar issues relevant to EAP services but who had not used EAP services. This type of “pre-post” single-group study design is the “workhorse” of applied research evaluations in the field of EAP.

**Follow-up Period.** A goal of the study was to see if an improvement in work performance after use of the EAP persists over time and so the post-test measures were not assessed immediately after the final EAP session. Instead, a three-month follow-up period was featured in this study. Although the various participating EAP firms each reported to have conducted the follow-up at about 90 days after the last use of the EAP service for each case, the actual number of days after final EAP use at which the post-test was administered is unknown.

**Measures.** Five items were used in this study:

- **The Work Absenteeism item** was assessed with the question: *For the period of the past 30 days, please total the number of hours your personal concern caused you to miss work. Include complete eight-hour days and partial days when you came in late or left early.* This item had an open response field to fill in a number of hours.

Each of the other four items had the instructions of: *The following statements reflect what you may do or feel on the job or at home. Please indicate the degree to which you agree with each of the statements for the past 30 days.* Each item was rated on a 1-5 Likert-type rating scale, with 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Somewhat Agree*, 3 = *Neutral*, 4 = *Somewhat Agree*; and 5 = *Strongly Agree*. These items were:

- **The Work Presenteeism item** addressed decrements to productivity even though the employee was not physically absent but nonetheless was not working at his or her optimum due to unresolved personal problems (*My personal problems kept me from concentrating on my work*);

- **The Work Engagement item** referred to the extent to which the employee was passionate about his or her job (*I am often eager to get to the work site to start the day*);

- **The Workplace Distress item** looked at the employee feelings of distress about being at the work site (*I dread going into work*); and  
- **The Life Satisfaction item** addressed one’s general sense of well-being (*So far, my life seems to be going very well*).

No other measures were available that could have further informed the study, such as client demographic characteristics, which EAP services were used, and so forth.
Participant Recruitment and Sample. Only the employee clients of an EAP service (and not family members or dependents) were included in the study because the interest in the relationship between EAP intervention and work performance. The recruitment of participants involved finding employees willing to complete the evaluation from among the many clients at the different EAP providers. Clients were not offered an incentive to participate in the study and were allowed to drop out of the study at any time. The survey response rate from among all possible EAP users and level of participant attrition from before to after use of the EAP are both unknown. Possible biases in the findings resulting from a lack of random sampling and employee self-selection as study participants could not be empirically examined with the data provided. The final study sample included a total of 3,187 employee clients of EAP providers.

Data Preparation. Each of the EAP providers submitted data from their organization to the authors with the responses for each client listed separately on a single line in an Excel spreadsheet. This data was combined across all of the EAP programs and then transferred as one aggregated dataset to the SPSS software program for statistical analysis. Preliminary descriptive analyses revealed a range across participants in WOS item scores at each time period.

Statistical Analyses. Paired t-test analyses were performed to compare the Before EAP and After EAP mean scores to detect differences beyond chance levels. With such a large sample size, the study had a high level of statistical power, which can make even a small difference between means to be found as statistically “significant.” Thus, a more practical measure of the percentage change over time in each outcome measure was also created. This metric is the relative difference between the before and after mean scores for each measure. It was calculated by subtracting the After EAP mean score from the Before EAP mean score and then dividing this figure by the Before EAP mean score.

Results

Tests showed a statistically significant change for each item (at the p < .0001 level). Each of these changes was in the expected direction of showing an improvement following use of EAP services.

Absenteeism. The results revealed an average of 5.79 fewer hours of missed work due to personal problems in the past 30 days after EAP use compared to the past 30 days before EAP use. This result is a 43.6% reduction in work absenteeism hours. See Figure 1.

Presenteeism. Employees also reported that their personal problems interfered less with their ability to concentrate at work after their use of the EAP. This result is a 25.3% decrease in the level of work presenteeism. See Figure 2.
Work Engagement. After use of the EAP, employees on average reported a greater eagerness to get to the job site. This result is a 6.3% increase in level of work engagement. See Figure 3.

Work Distress. After use of the EAP, employees on average reported feeling less dread about going to work. This result is a 24.2% decrease in level of work distress. See Figure 4.

Life Satisfaction. The change in level of life satisfaction was also positive, as more employees on average agreed that their life was going well after the EAP than before use of the EAP. This result is a 13.3% increase in life satisfaction. See Figure 5.

Size of These Effects. Although all five of the WOS measures had significant changes, the size of the effects between the different items was not consistent (see Figure 6). The largest size of the improvements after EAP use were for work absenteeism, work presenteeism and work distress. Thus, the ability to be at work when scheduled, to be productive when at work and to be less distressed about going into work were all rather large size changes experienced by the users of EAP services. In contrast, being eager to get to work each day and feeling satisfied with life were smaller size effects. This pattern of effects for the five outcome areas is consistent with the results from other prior studies using the full WOS 25-item scale.

![Figure 3. Work Engagement](image)

![Figure 4. Work Distress](image)

![Figure 5. Life Satisfaction](image)

![Figure 6. Percentage Change](image)
Conclusion

Even though the kinds of EAP services examined in this study were not specified, these outcomes suggest that EAP intervention in general was associated with improvements in all four workplace outcome areas and also in overall life satisfaction. In the absence of a non-EAP user control group, this evaluation study cannot prove that the use of the EAP alone caused these improvements among the employees who used the service. However, it does demonstrate a statistically significant level of improvement after EAP use for all areas examined, with particularly large changes for absence, presenteeism and work distress. It is also important that these findings were obtained using a common set of measures with the data collected across 20 different providers of EAP services and combined into a large sample of employees. Thus, the findings are likely to be reliable and representative of what most providers of employee assistance can deliver as improvements in workplace outcomes.

References