



***Heightened EAP  
communications improve  
productivity and the return on  
your EAP investment***

*Bill Danylik, Chief Development Officer*



## Heightened EAP communications improve productivity and the return on your EAP investment

### Summary: Investigating why some employers have better EAP ROI than others

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) have been in existence for over 40 years helping people solve their personal problems. The primary reason organizations contract with EAPs is to address employee productivity issues: employees with personal problems are distracted and less productive. Organizations realize a significant return on investment when their employees are returned to full productivity after getting help from the EAP.

Despite the excellent ROI, there remains a gap between the number of distracted employees and the number who seek help. On average, about 20% of all employees experience a distracting life problem each year, but only about 3 to 5 percent of employees will call their EAP for help. That utilization gap represents significant room for employers to improve results. We have been tracking our own results for decades and we see significant differences in utilization rates with our top performing clients. We set out to find the reasons why some clients have better utilization than others and the short answer was communications.

On average, about **20%** of all employees experience a distracting life problem each year, but only about **3 to 5 percent** of employees will call their EAP for help. That utilization gap represents significant room for employers to **improve results**.

With that in mind, we recruited 40 of our underutilizing clients to participate in an accelerated communications program to determine the impact of communications on utilization. The results were surprising with some clients increasing from a baseline of almost zero utilization to more than 20 percent in less than a year. Overall, the group saw a 380 percent increase in utilization.

What follows is brief examination of the variables and results we identified upon completion of this test.

**What Productivity Research Tells Us** About a decade ago, the Bureau of Labor Statistics published a report showing that 1 out of 5 employees suffers a personal problem significant enough to impact their productivity while at work. The type of problems involved are wide ranging, including substance abuse, relationship issues, financial problems, legal matters, childcare, and a myriad of other day-to-day issues. The associated drop in productivity can also vary, ranging from a few hours of distraction to extended absence while the employee tries to resolve the issue on their own. The problem of repeated absences is obvious, but even temporary distractions can be serious: a distracted employee can be injured when focus shifts from dangerous work; product or service quality can degrade when a distracted employee loses focus.

Just how much time is lost to these distractions? A landmark study conducted by Yankelovich Research quantified the amount of time employees spend on personal problems while at work. The survey was administered to 1,000 full time employees of various industries, showing that the



## Heightened EAP communications improve productivity and the return on your EAP investment

average employee spent 2.4 hours per week dealing with their problems while at work. That represents an average of three weeks of productivity that each employee loses every year. Extrapolate that to a larger workforce: the problem compounds to 300 weeks of lost productivity for every 100 employees.

An Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can be an important tool in addressing these productivity losses. A 2008 study published in *The Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health* looked at the increase in productivity resulting from an employee receiving treatment from an EAP. The study indicated that up to 80 percent of the productivity losses was associated with *presenteeism*, or employees who are at work but not really working. Their study went on to look at the impact of EAP treatment intervention. Employees who accessed EAP services reported that they spent 6.36 fewer hours per week dealing with the problem after treatment.

At ESI, we treat thousands of employees every year for a variety of issues. A few years ago, we conducted a widespread study with employees who had received EAP services to quantify how much time they were spending on the problem during work hours before and after treatment. On average, they reported a 23 percent reduction in the amount of time spent dealing with the problem while at work.

These studies represent just a sampling: there have been numerous other studies on the matter of employee productivity losses and presenteeism related to problems. While the specifics may vary, the trends are clear:

- Employees spend work time trying to resolve difficult personal problems
- Employees who get help from their EAP spend less time on the problem after seeking services

### Taking the research to next level results

If you accept these research assertions, it follows that employers should be doing all they could to encourage and channel employees to use their EAP services, but utilization statistics do not bear this out. On average, traditional EAPs see an employee utilization rate of between 3 percent and 5 percent, falling far short of the roughly 20 percent (or 1 in five employees) who could benefit by the services. This utilization gap represents an untapped productivity loss reduction for employers – not to mention the burdens that could be eased for the respective employees by problem resolution.

So why aren't more employers making full use of their EAP?

In our experience, it comes down to two primary reasons:

- Employees are unaware of the availability and scope of available services
- Employees have trust issues about whether the services are confidential



## Heightened EAP communications improve productivity and the return on your EAP investment

Essentially, both reasons point to a failure of communications.

With this in mind, we set out to test the impact that heightened communications could have on utilization. We initiated an intensive communications program targeted at organizations with historically low utilization rates. ESI enrolled 40 organizations in our Automated Digital Communications program and tracked changes in their utilization over the course of 15 months.

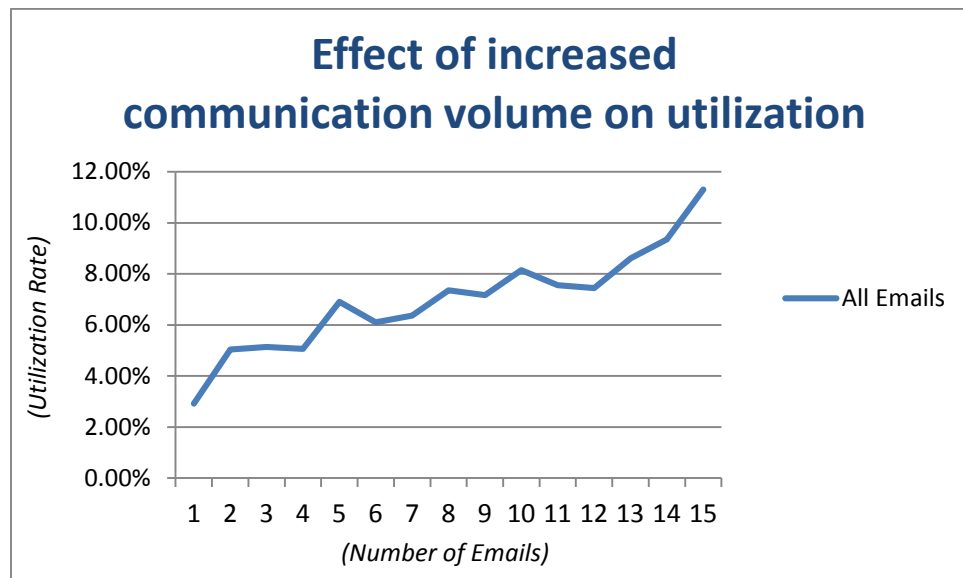
The communications program featured targeted and varied messages, videos, articles, and benefit descriptions. We varied the messaging to include:

- Benefits reminders: brief descriptions of benefits and services designed to ensure that members understood the full complement of available services
- Testimonials: Descriptive statements gleaned from member survey results highlighting satisfaction with the services received
- Links to videos and articles that offered help with common issues

All messaging included reminders and assurances of confidentiality. In addition, most messaging emphasized that this was a cost-free benefit.

During the course of the test, ESI continued to provide all our standard communications materials including brochures, posters, flyers, newsletters and, in some cases, onsite meetings. We wanted to ensure that the only change would be the increase in direct communications with the employee Member.

**The results are shown in the chart below.**







## Heightened EAP communications improve productivity and the return on your EAP investment

The chart above shows the increase in utilization in those employers that provided a complete list of emails for all employees. The average utilization for these employers at the beginning of the test was 2.92 percent. Over the course of 15 months, utilization increased to an average of 11.3 percent, a utilization growth of more than 380 percent.

External messaging was consistent and it broke through the clutter, reinforcing the features and value of the EAP benefit. Plus the program built confidence that the EAP benefit was totally confidential.

Clearly the ESI Automated Digital Communication program produced significant results that translated to productivity gains and more help for employees.

### **Conclusion: Higher ROI and Enhanced Productivity Achievable**

EAP services offer organizations a high return on investment if properly promoted and utilized. If employees are spending close to 3 weeks of time at work dealing with personal issues as the Yankelovich research found, even a small reduction in that productivity loss will more than offset the cost of your EAP program.

Employee awareness can be enhanced with consistent communications that describe all the available EAP benefits and services. In addition, including messaging that EAP services are confidential is key to achieving maximum utilization. The appropriate level of utilization varies by organization, but our study clearly shows that utilization rates in excess of 10 percent are achievable. Your EAP should be able to help you with developing a communications plan that fits your organization's goals and culture. It should include a variety of messages highlighting all the EAP benefits and services. Although our study focused strictly on the impact of email communications, our overall client experience shows that varying the types of messaging to include brochures, videos, meetings and emails yields the best results.