

NOVEMBER 2019 | VOL 11 NO 6

@work

Official Publication of Disability Management Employer Coalition

Healthcare & Wellness Integration

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Rachel Shaw, MBACEO and Principal
Shaw HR Consulting

How to Increase the Impact of Your EAP

The World Health Organization (WHO) reports depression alone is the leading cause of ill health and disability worldwide. Nearly one in five American adults experiences mental health problems in any given year,¹ with employees suffering from depression reporting the equivalent of 27 missed work days per year. Across the country, organizations are experiencing a rise in accommodation requests and performance and attendance issues related to stress and mental health. This all equates to lost productivity and less innovation in our organizations. Today, too much leave goes unmanaged, tolerated, and simply not budgeted for.

What then, is an employer to do with our disabled workforce? The often-prevailing attitude of “treating mental health is not our job” is not working, and the leaves are costing our organizations too much. Too many human resource (HR) departments have divested or underinvested in the “whole employee.” If you expect to tackle the real killers of productivity, innovation, and retention, you must build a workforce that has the ability to successfully struggle through issues — both personal and professional — and that believes you care.

Simply put, employees need time off — for happy life events and for terrible things that occur. We hire the

whole person and must account for time off and, when needed, support its use. At the same time, employers regularly struggle to meet workload demands and staffing needs because employees misuse and abuse leave. Employees at work take on workloads for employees missing work regularly, causing a stressful environment.

Many think of mental illness accommodations relating to conditions such as schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder, or other named illnesses. However, the bulk of psychological matters impacting the workplace are related to stress and anxiety. They often involve an employee struggling with the difficulties of life — going through a difficult breakup, experiencing issues with a child, caring for an ill or aging family member, or managing financial issues. While personal in nature, such stresses affect an employee’s professional life.

Every employer can apply tools to reduce the negative impact of stress and mental illness in the workplace. Early conversations are key; an often overlooked early intervention resource to support leave management is your organization’s employee assistance program (EAP).

EAPs are known to reduce leave by 54%, but less than 6% of employees use them.²

As an employer, your EAP gives you a unique opportunity to provide both emotional support and get employees back on track at work. When you witness the workplace being impacted by personal matters, refer the employees to your EAP. Understand you can suggest this resource and, in some instances, require attendance. Realize that due to a variety of reasons, some cultural and some social, employees may not be comfortable accepting help through an EAP. If you raise concerns and an employee is not showing improvement and/or does not seem to be able to manage issues that continue to impact them at work or their availability for work, require them to use your EAP. Let them do this during work hours to help the employee maintain privacy and so that childcare or after-work activities do not get in the way of you supporting them to manage through difficult times.

References

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