



Engagement Rate

The new metric that highlights why
Employee Assistance Programs
should lead the charge in creating
mentally healthy workplaces

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Introduction

While there are various laws in place throughout Australasia which aim to prevent discrimination, physical injuries, and mental distress there are still many occupations which face psychological risks. The World Health Organization (WHO) predicts mental illness will be the leading source of disability and absence in the workplace by the year 2030 (*Managing Mental Health, 2018*).

Work-related stress can be caused by a variety of issues, such as working long hours, high job demands and poor support. If work-related stressors are ongoing, they can lead to an increased risk of depression, anxiety and other health conditions (*Health Navigator Editorial Team, 2020*). According to Safe Work Australia (2017), over 50% of serious mental health condition claims are caused by work related pressures, harassment and exposure to violence.

Mental health can also have a significant impact on the economy. Research conducted by WHO estimates that anxiety and depression cost the global economy US\$1 trillion in lost productivity every year (nd). From a regional standpoint, mental illness leads Australian and New Zealand employers to lose around \$12 billion annually from issues such as reduced productivity, absenteeism and compensation claims. (*The Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance, nd; Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction, 2018*). Creating and sustaining a healthy work environment entails emphasising mental health and wellbeing which would benefit both employees and organisations.

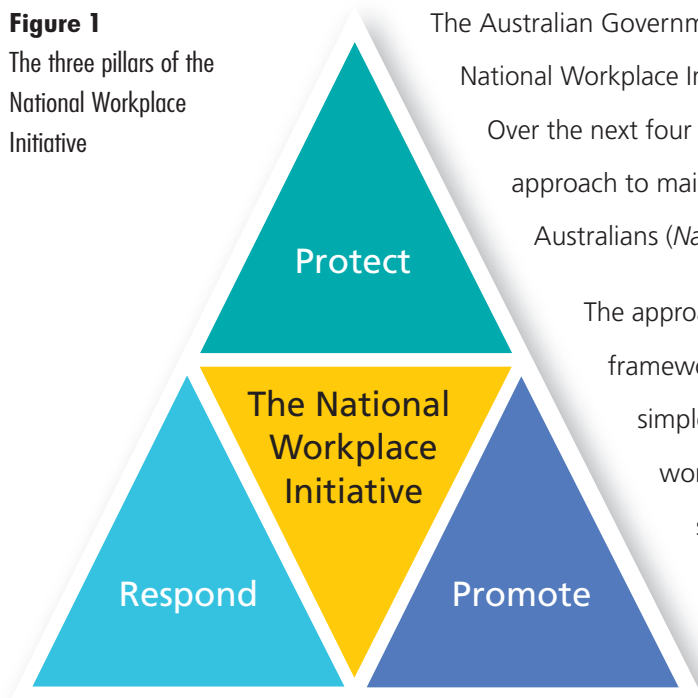
Focusing on mental health and wellbeing as a strategy to strengthen the workforce has been brought to the forefront of new developments in Australia and New Zealand. Research highlights that organisations who invest in ensuring a mentally healthy work environment receive many advantages, including an average return on investment of \$2.30 for every \$1.00 spent (*PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2014*). Additionally, employees who are healthy are nearly three times more productive than those who are not, and they are also more likely to be engaged, creative, and innovative (*Wellplace, nd*).

The New Zealand Ministry of Health administers an annual survey to remain up to date on the health and wellbeing of New Zealanders. To support the national approach to wellbeing in the workplace, there are multiple programs and resources available to assist New Zealand employers in the creation of a healthy workplace, focused on wellbeing and supporting staff. Some of these resources are: *WorkWell, Good4Work, Wellplace, and Workplace Policy Builder (Toi Te Ora Public Health, 2020)*.

The National Workplace Initiative

Figure 1

The three pillars of the National Workplace Initiative



The Australian Government announced an \$11.5 million investment in the National Workplace Initiative (NWI) as part of its 2019 / 20 Federal Budget. Over the next four years this initiative will develop a uniform, national approach to maintaining mentally healthy workplaces for all Australians (*National Mental Health Commission, 2020*).

The approach consists of integrating an evidence-based framework to inform practices in the workplace, provide simple referral processes, acknowledge and reward workplace programs that are effective, identify gaps in services and research and continue to improve the feedback loop (*Morgan, C 2021*).

This foundation works to ensure businesses can manage work-related risks to mental health, identify and support employees that may experience mental unwellness and promote good mental health by fostering a mentally healthy environment and culture (*Morgan, C 2021*).

The National Workplace Initiative framework

The NWI is a framework built upon three pillars: **Protect, Respond** and **Promote**



Protect

Organisations should be proactive to ensure the ability to identify and remove risks that could lead to the development of mental ill-health, or at least minimise risks that cannot be removed.

Businesses will be able to take action to protect their employees by:

- ▶ Being aware of commitments to laws and regulations
- ▶ Creating healthy and safe work designs
- ▶ Enhancing resilience in both individuals and the organisation as a whole when faced with difficulties and challenges
- ▶ Further developing the functionalities and process of operations, human resources and management
- ▶ Implementing a zero-tolerance bullying policy



Respond

Organisations should be able and ready to respond to those in need of support when experiencing mental ill-health or distress.

Businesses will be able to respond to their employees in need by:

- ▶ Creating a stigma-free workplace culture when discussing or handling mental ill-health
- ▶ Expanding awareness and understanding of mental distress
- ▶ Providing training to leadership to support intervention and recovery processes
- ▶ Implementing and emphasising the use of employee assistance programs
- ▶ Including mental health within diversity and inclusion initiatives



Promote

Organisations should foster a business environment that highlights positive aspects of work while focusing on creating cultures that are good for people.

Businesses will be able to promote mental health to their employees by:

- ▶ Providing opportunities for development and growth
- ▶ Supporting the development of meaningful work connections
- ▶ Advancing opportunities to make worthwhile contributions
- ▶ Improving workplace cultures

Figure 2 The National Workplace Initiative framework as presented by the National Mental Health Commission

With the recent push throughout the region to prevent mental unwellness and promote a mentally healthy workplace, Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) have the opportunity to work hand-in-hand with organisations to not only implement wellbeing frameworks, but also further develop and improve this area of research.

EAPAA and the effectiveness of EAPs

The **Employee Assistance Professional Association of Australasia (EAPAA)** is the peak Australasian body working to ensure the highest professional and ethical standards are being followed by provider and user members that supply workplace employee assistance programs throughout the region. EAPs are work-based, early intervention programs with the main objective of early identification and / or resolution of problems that may be negatively affecting the performance and wellbeing of employees at the workplace. These problems may derive from issues at work or in an employee's personal life, and can include difficulties surrounding health, relationships, finances, emotional concerns, and a variety of other problems that may arise. EAPAA provides quality control and best practice techniques developed around evidence-based methodologies to ensure EAPs are designed and managed by the best professionals in Australia and New Zealand.

As of today, EAPAA provider members throughout Australasia oversee over 11,500 organisations, providing coverage to 9.4 million direct employees. Between July 2019 and July 2020, providers responded to over 9,500 critical incidents, investing 60,000 hours of service in critical incidents and crisis counselling. EAPs overseen by EAPAA have been found to have an 84% effectiveness rate in Australia and a 70% effectiveness rate in New Zealand, when resolving presenting issues. Furthermore, client satisfaction rates with EAPs are 90% in Australia and 83% in New Zealand. Previous research highlights that employees who utilise EAPs see improvements with their initial mental health concerns (eg depression, anxiety) after a 5 month period, unlike their counterparts who don't seek assistance from EAPs (*Follmer & Jones, 2017, as cited in Richmond et al, 2016*). Utilisation rates of EAPs continue to rise as the importance of workplace programs become more prominent, stigma around accessing mental health support reduces, and employees become more aware of the holistic benefits.

Assessing true EAP effectiveness

EAP effectiveness is directly linked to ensuring those individuals who may benefit from support access it through their provider. Traditionally EAPs have provided support to those with personal and work-related issues, with a perception of dealing with crisis and mental health response. Over the last five years there has been growth in broadening EAPs to include wellness-based programs - incorporating more nutrition, legal, financial, sleep and health advice. This shift is allowing EAPs to partner with organisations to offer a broader wellbeing solution beyond a response strategy. The current and most common metric to assess the engagement of a customer with their EAP provider is utilisation rate. Utilisation rate measures the number of referrals to EAPs for self-referred one-on-one, couple, or family counselling. While utilisation rate provides a good understanding of how many employees have accessed an EAP, it does not capture the full engagement of an organisation with their EAP provider. ▶

Assessing true EAP effectiveness *continued*

► To better understand the true partnership between organisations and their EAP providers, EAPAA has established a new metric and benchmark referred to as **engagement rate**. Engagement rate is the total number of employees that have been serviced in any way by an EAP company over a 12-month period. Examples of the services that comprise the engagement rate metric include training / seminars, mediation / conflict resolution, and coaching as shown below in Figure 3.

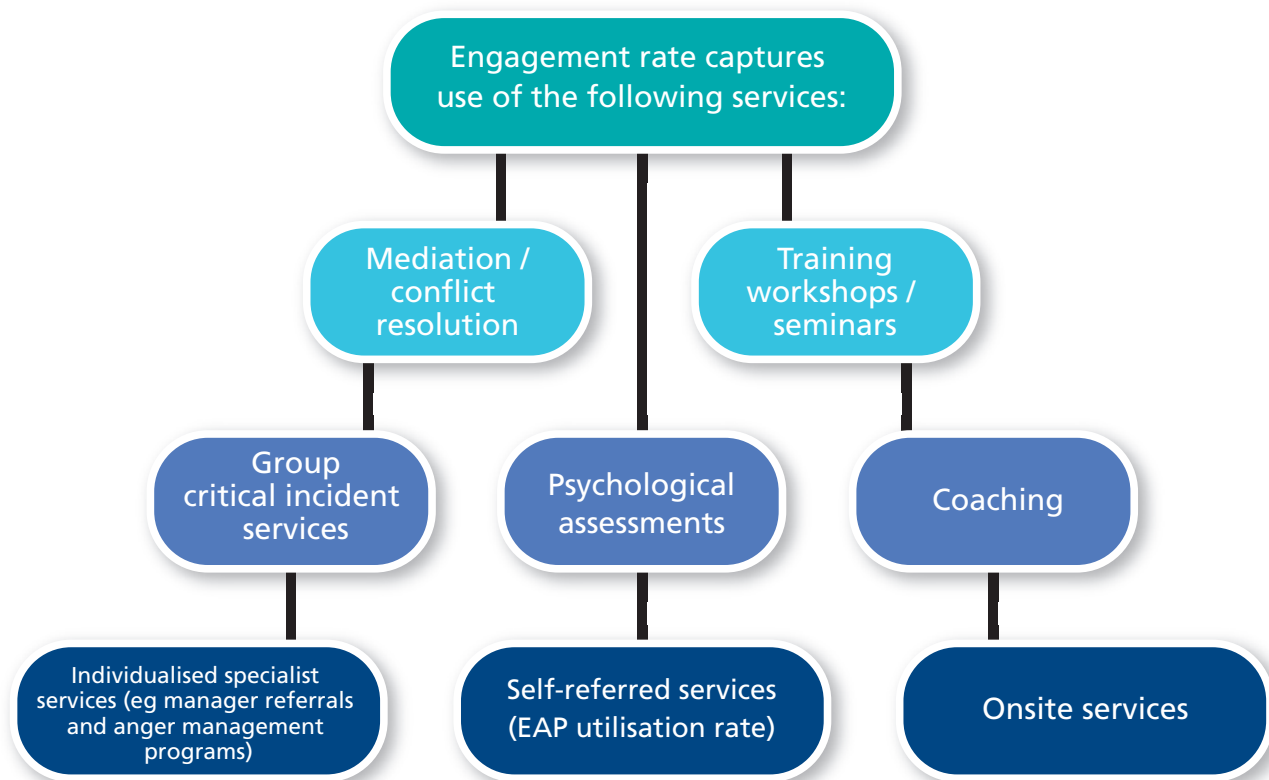


Figure 3 EAPAA Metrics for Engagement Rate

With the inclusion of engagement rate, EAPs will have more opportunity to showcase the full impact of their programs within an organisation along with the true involvement rates between employees and self-referred services. The addition of engagement rate as a new benchmark for EAPs is crucial to not only keep up with the natural evolution of EAPs, but also to foster partnerships with external organisations to promote mentally healthy workplaces for all.

The role of EAPs in developing a mentally healthy workplace

By aligning with nationwide initiatives, EAPs can play a significant role in creating and sustaining mentally healthy workplaces throughout the region. For over 30 years, EAPAA has been directly working with a broad range of mental health issues that display in the workplace while holding all members administering EAPs to the highest level of standards. EAPAA is the prime organisation to work directly with the government to assist with targeted intervention, case management systems, and minimising mental health's impact on productivity. Doing so would provide relief to public resources and free up funding which could then be allocated to different mental health causes and awareness campaigns.

In order to help organisations move from **awareness** of mental health to **action**, EAPAA in collaboration with the government could design and implement education programs which would allow organisations a better understanding of how to develop effective EAPs (Brecht, nd). At this moment there are no laws in place requiring those providing EAP services to be a part of an organisation such as EAPAA, which leaves individuals at risk of exposure to unethical and unprofessional services. Ensuring an industry has the confidence to set up and provide appropriate and professional mental health services to its employees would lead to an increase in investment in these programs and a more active role in reducing the negative impacts mental health can have in the workplace.

Research and data analysis

Industry	Utilisation Rate NZ	Utilisation Rate AUS
Overall	6.88%	5.18%
Government	10.43%	7.48%
Healthcare	7.24%	6.13%
Construction	5.75%	4.12%
Education	6.02%	6.01%
Professional Services	6.04%	5.03%
Transportation	3.55%	5.01%
Small Business	6.92%	3.54%
Manufacturing	5.46%	4.17%
Hospitality	4.80%	2.07%

In April 2021 EAPAA surveyed all provider member organisations to assess the impact of EAPs throughout Australasia. 60% of EAPAA member organisations responded and provided information on current trends in EAPs. Overall, EAPAA provider members administer EAP services to 12,000+ organisations and provide coverage for 9,300,000 direct employees. The survey also compiled information on current utilisation and engagement rates of EAPs throughout the region. See *Table 1 at left*.

EAPAA defines utilisation rate as the number of new referrals for an EAP in a 12-month period divided by the number of lives (employees) covered by this service and is presented as a percentage. Within Australia the overall utilisation rate is 5.18%, and in New Zealand it is 6.88%. EAPs are present in a wide range of industries.

The highest utilisation rates are present in the areas of Government, Healthcare & Education.

Table 1 EAP Overall Utilisation Rate by Industry

Engagement rate

“ Within Australia the overall engagement rate is 11.43% and in New Zealand the rate is 11.62% ”

Engagement rate is the new benchmark developed by EAPAA to understand the full reach of EAPs in the workplace. EAPAA defines engagement rate as the total number of employees that have been serviced by an EAP company over a 12-month period in any direct way. Within Australia the overall engagement rate is 11.43%, and in New Zealand the overall engagement rate is 11.62%. EAPs can engage with and provide services to employees in a variety of ways. In the last 12 months, EAPs have provided training workshops and / or seminars to over 36,000 employees and mediation / conflict resolution services to 1,000+ employees. Within the same time frame, 4,800 employees have been given psychological assessments, 2,100 employees have engaged in coaching services and 4,670 employees have been assisted through individualised specialist services related to mental health and wellbeing. EAPAA member providers invested 29,300 hours in group critical incidents and 25,980 hours in other onsite support services over the last year.

As highlighted above, the influence EAPs have on creating and sustaining a healthy workplace is wide reaching.

Conclusion

The use of EAPs to assist in the creation and preservation of a mentally healthy workplace is not a new notion but one that continues to prove its efficacy. With the upsurge in nationwide frameworks focusing on creating mentally healthy environments with an emphasis on wellbeing in the workplace, it only makes sense to incorporate EAPAA in the execution of these new structures. EAPAA has been around for decades supporting organisations and providing education on the benefits of promoting and taking care of employee mental health along with implementing evidence-based standards for EAPs that can be used along-side other industry guidelines and legal obligations. With the addition of engagement rates, EAPAA will be able to better highlight the full capacity of EAPs in Australasia which will allow the true effectiveness of these programs to be more apparent than ever before. The best way to get more out of an organisation is to invest more into it, and this can be achieved by providing industry and government partners a better understanding of how crucial EAPs are to a flourishing workforce.

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