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Are you encouraging workers to use your EAP?

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Employee assistance programs (EAPs) have been linked to increased productivity and lower absence rates, but few organisations and workers in some industries are taking advantage of them, according to AccessEAP CEO Sally Kirkright.

Kirkright says a recent IBISWorld report on the use of EAP services in Australia in the five years to June 2014 found the usage rate in some industries was as low as five per cent.

Even in the US, where the EAP market is "far more mature", the usage rate is as low as six per cent, she says.

"With one in five people experiencing a mental health issue in any 12-month period and the number of Australian workers with access to an EAP rising, the usage rate should be much higher.

"EAPs are designed to promote positive organisational behaviour, enhance employee wellbeing and improve workplace productivity.

"It is a confidential service that is free of charge to employees and so it is difficult to understand why the usage rates can be so low."

Kirkright says one reason might be a lack of mental health awareness and acceptance.

Further, some workers are unaware EAP services are confidential, while others know their employers have EAPs but don't know what the term means or how the programs can help them.

"A gap still exists between [mental health] awareness and organisations actually recognising and responding to their responsibilities when it comes to mental health issues in the workplace", Kirkright says.

"We find with some organisations that a company culture exists where they simply want to tick the box when it comes to mental health.

"They are interested in providing the service to employees but are not promoting the program or wanting employees to actually use the service."

Employers need to get educated on mental health, and should hold regular workplace EAP and mental health awareness sessions to normalise usage of EAPs.

"If employees are concerned about the confidentiality of the program, it is vital to reiterate the private nature of discussions."

EAP services, Kirkright says, include counselling for personal, family and workplace issues, and also provide organisation development services that adopt a "proactive and preventative approach focused on

equipping employees with greater knowledge and practical skills to enhance workplace wellbeing".

"Training initiatives focus on empowering individuals and building on their existing skills to promote positive wellbeing and create a mentally healthy workplace."

Kirkright says industries with high EAP usage rates include government, health and education.

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