

# Call for employers to tackle barriers to EAP use

By [James Harkness](#) on 25 September 2014

One in five Australians suffer from a mental health issue, but only a fraction of workers with access to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) seek help. To optimise workplace wellbeing, employers have been urged to take action.

A recent report, by market researchers IBISWorld, into EAPs (a free counselling service to help employees deal with personal and workplace issues and to equip them with practical skills to enhance their wellbeing) suggested the usage rate could be as low as 5 per cent in certain industries.

Given that the number of workers with access to an EAP is rising, AccessEAP CEO Sally Kirkright said the usage rate should be much higher.



## Poor awareness, continued stigma

Kirkright suggested usage was low because of poor awareness of EAPs among Australian employees and the fact that the stigma associated with mental health issues has “intensified” over the past forty years, despite an increase in mental health awareness, meaning sufferers are reluctant to seek help.

She said part of the problem was that some employers simply want to “tick the box” when it comes to mental health. In other words, while they are interested in providing employees with an EAP, they don’t promote the availability of the service or want employees to use it.

She also said EAP providers are not doing enough to educate managers in their client organisations, citing a recent survey by SANE Australia that found 95 per cent of organisations believe their managers needed significantly more education on mental health issues as well as better skills-based training on how to manage these issues in the workplace.

Kirkright warned employers that if the usage rate remains low, “everyone loses” — it will not only mean employees aren’t seeking help for mental health issues, but organisations won’t experience the potential health and financial benefits that a mentally healthy workplace can bring.

## Successful EAPs have long-term benefits

Kirkright said EAP providers and their client organisations need to work together to raise awareness of the issue of mental health in workplaces and to encourage greater use of EAPs

She said EAP providers should ensure organisations appreciate the long-term benefits of a successful, well-run EAP, including the positive impact on employee wellbeing and organisation health through improved productivity, lower absenteeism, and reduced workers compensation costs.

According to the IBISWorld report, she said, the average return on investment from EAPs in terms of productivity gains was more than \$10,000 per employee and there was a decrease of almost one day off in the following eight weeks after employees discussed personal, family or workplace issues.

Kirkright said it was also important for organisations to require their leaders to prioritise the issue of mental health: while mental health in the workplace is everyone’s responsibility, they have the capacity to influence their peers and implement the necessary changes to work towards workplace wellbeing.

Kirkright recommended organisations hold regular EAP and mental health awareness sessions to provide employees with a better understanding of mental health issues and the service available to help them, including the confidential nature of discussions.

She also said EAP providers should educate managers in client organisation so that they are able to talk to employees about the EAP services available to help them.

Events such as Mental Health Awareness Month in October as well as Stress Down Day and R U Ok? Day provide EAP providers and their client organisations with an opportunity to raise awareness of mental health issues, reduce the stigma, and promote EAPs.

### **About AccessEAP**

AccessEAP is a not-for-profit EAP provider. To find out more, visit the provider's [website](#).

**Source:** [http://workplaceohs.com.au/workplace-culture/corporate-wellness-programs/analysis/employers-urged-to-better-promote-mental-health-service#.VEXgJ\\_mUccA](http://workplaceohs.com.au/workplace-culture/corporate-wellness-programs/analysis/employers-urged-to-better-promote-mental-health-service#.VEXgJ_mUccA)