

# EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE REPORT

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supporting EAP professionals

## How EAPs can Help Reduce Stress

**S**tress has been called the “health epidemic of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” by the World Health Organization and is estimated to cost American businesses up to \$300 billion each year.

The relationship between stress and work has been well documented. According to one recent study, 69% of employees report that work is a significant source of

stress, while 51% report feeling less productive at work as a result of stress (American Psychological Association, 2009). While it is known that stress can cause a decline in work performance, there is limited data on whether there are gender and/or age differences in the ways stress affects productivity.

“Stressed at Work: What We Can Learn from EAP Utilization,” a recently released white paper from Bensing, DuPont and Associates (BDA) revealed insightful similarities and striking differences between genders and age groups. The overall data showed gender differences in the influence of stress on work performance, yet variances by age were minimal.

In addition, nearly half (47%) of all employees report that stress from a personal problem negatively impacts work performance. The study also

found that stress most often leads to difficulty concentrating, absenteeism and poor work quality.

### Key Findings

❖ BDA’s analysis confirmed that EAP intervention effectively addresses lifestyle issues and workplace stresses, with an overwhelming 94% of employees reporting improved work performance after using their EAP. The most frequently reported indicator

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in job performance was “improved productivity” with 67% of males and 64% of females reporting positive results.

❖ Both genders reported that difficulty concentrating is the most common way personal problems and stress disrupt work performance, with nearly half of women (49.2%) and 44.3% of men citing this impact.

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***“BDA’s analysis confirmed that EAP intervention effectively addresses lifestyle issues and workplace stresses, with an overwhelming 94% of employees reporting improved work performance after using their EAP.”***

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❖ Absenteeism is also a common result of stress. Although women reported slightly higher rates of absenteeism (17.1% as opposed to 15.8%), men on average missed more days of work because of a personal problem during the previous three months.

❖ Poor work quality was the third highest symptom of stress in the workplace for both men and women, with men reporting slightly higher rates (14.4% as opposed to 12.8%).

❖ The stress of a personal problem contributes to a notable gender difference in the rates of

reported disciplinary action. Men were more than twice as likely as women to receive formal disciplinary action (9.8% as opposed to 4.4%). This gender difference was visible across all age groups, with men ages 56-65 reporting the highest rates of disciplinary action; while employees ages 26-35 reported the *lowest* rate of disciplinary action.

**Overview of Similarities & Differences**

The following is an overview of what BDA found regarding the similarities and differences based on age:

***Similarities:***

Men and women reported consistent results for the following:

- Incomplete tasks;
- Management conflict;
- Conflicts with co-workers; and
- Tardiness.

Men and women showed:

- Lowest rates of disciplinary action between ages 26-35; and
- Highest rates of disciplinary action between ages 56-65.

***Differences:***

- *Men* – Higher rates of disciplinary action.
- *Women* – More difficulty concentrating at work. They reported higher rates of absence.
- *Women* – In terms of disciplinary action, rates remained relatively consistent regardless of age.
- *Men* – They were twice as likely to receive disciplinary action. Both younger (18-25) and middle-aged (46-55) had similar rates.

**EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE REPORT**

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**Tailored Approach is Key**

BDA’s findings also suggest that while EAP intervention helps employees positively address stress and improve work performance, a one-size-fits-all approach to employee stress reduction may not be appropriate.

Effective prevention and early-intervention programs should provide services for both employers and

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employees that are tailored to the unique needs of a company's employee population. Moreover, they need to take into account the gender and age differences in the effects of stress on work performance. Research has shown that *awareness* drives *utilization* rates, and the key to building awareness of EAP services is ongoing *promotion*.

### Recommendations

Based on the study's results, BDA suggests the following targeted promotional campaigns and interventions:

❖ To decrease male disciplinary actions, specific EAP support and wellness programs should focus on men and their needs in the workforce. Promotional outreach to men should be brief, factual, and focus on solutions instead of problems. It should also reflect their preferred modes of communication preferences – email and text messages. According to a Pew Internet Project, "Men pursue and consume information online more aggressively than women. Men look for information on a wider variety of topics and issues online than women do."

❖ Managers need to pay attention to female absenteeism since it may be a reflection of stress at home and/or in the workplace. EAPs should offer training sessions designed to teach managers how to identify employee problems and how to refer employees to the EAP.

❖ The EAP should collaborate with management to identify and address the unique needs of each organization's vulnerable population. As such, they should implement a robust promotional campaign to help employees address problems and stress *before* they become an issue on the job.



### Editor's Notebook

Between layoffs, downsizings, and a seemingly endless onslaught of other stress-related issues, it's no big surprise that stress has been called the "health epidemic of the 21<sup>st</sup> century".

The question, of course is what can be done about it? EAP, fortunately, is a perfect position to help – and suggestions are outlined in both this month's cover story and *Brown Bagger* insert.

Given the myriad of work and home problems today, even following the suggestions presented in these articles will most certainly not eliminate stress – but it's our intent that these recommendations will at least help *reduce* it.

\*\*\*

I was enthused to come across an article about "volunteering" for this issue of *EAR*. I am very involved in Lions, and while I admit I'm a little nervous about serving as president of a local Lions club this year, I also know it'll be a real learning experience.

If you're not volunteering already, consider doing so for a favorite organization or charity. You'll find that the benefits you'll *get out of it* will more than offset the time you put *into it*.

\*\*\*

Finally I call your attention to part I of the "Improving Speaking Skill" article in this month's newsletter. While this article was designed to assist employee clients who are intimidated by the prospects of on-the-job speaking, the hints may also prove useful for EA professionals experiencing similar anxieties about upcoming presentations. If some speakers that you've heard appeared "cool as a cucumber," rest assured it was due to practice, practice and more practice!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mike Jacquart".

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❖ To resolve issues for both males and females who are experiencing conflict with management and/or a co-worker, communication training and education should be a cornerstone of the EAP delivery model.

❖ To help employees aged 56-65 who appear to be vulnerable to disciplinary action, the EAP should focus on stress reduction training and intervention programs that offer assistance with issues that are likely to impact this age group. Such issues could include, but are not limited to: elder care resources, managing home and work stress, and financial issues and preparing for retirement.

❖ In addition to effective promotional campaigns, EAP can provide managers, supervisors and human resources with training on gender and age differences as they relate to stress and work performance. Leadership that is familiar with the signs and symptoms of stress in the workplace will be better equipped to encourage stressed-out employees to engage with workplace health programs.

The complete white paper is available at: [http://www.bensingerdupont.com/images/contentfiles/BDA\\_White\\_Paper\\_2013.pdf](http://www.bensingerdupont.com/images/contentfiles/BDA_White_Paper_2013.pdf). ■



# Improving Speaking Skill – Part I

By Walt Grassl

Bob, a junior executive, wants to be better positioned for promotion. He and his peers present status updates regularly to management. While better organized and more knowledgeable about his assignments than his peers, his fear of speaking makes him nervous and unable to recall facts and data he knows cold when talking to colleagues one-on-one.

He joined a speaking club to improve his skills, based on a suggestion by his supportive colleague, Jane, who delivers presentations confidently.

Most people join speaking clubs to improve their public speaking skills. Unfortunately, just joining does not guarantee success. You have to *speak*. You have to *learn* from others, *practice* what you learn and get *feedback*.

Since many people who join speaking clubs have stage fright, they are reluctant to speak. The same causes of stage fright (self-image problems, fear of being embarrassed, etc.) make club members reluctant to speak. The club provides a safe environment to face these fears, *if* you are active and take advantage of the opportunities.

Bob went to see Jane in her office, asking if she had any suggestions to maximize his experience in the club. Jane gave Bob kudos for joining the club and suggested he take five steps to maximize his success with the club. Two of them appear next; the remainder will be presented in part two of this two-part article.



to learn. The more often you speak, the faster you learn.

❖ **Listen to evaluations** –

Feedback is one of the most valuable parts of the speaking club experience.

Don't be offended by the feedback. Listen with an open mind. Instead of thinking that you did something wrong, embrace the evaluation and focus on improving the next time you speak. If you are given multiple things to correct, don't try to fix everything at once. Slow, steady and continuous improvement is the goal, not an overnight miracle. ■

❖ **Speak often** – Many new club members won't speak until they feel their speech is perfect, so, they only speak when pressured. They may feel they will forget part of their speech, which they might, but they have to speak in order to find out or to learn to overcome that problem. Not speaking does not help them improve. Club members are there

*Walt's accomplishments include success in Toastmasters International speech contests, and performing standup comedy. He is also the author of "Stand Up and Speak Up". For more information visit <http://waltgrassl.com>. **Editor's note:** While this article was designed for employee clients intimidated by the prospects of speaking, the hints may also prove useful for EA professionals experiencing anxiety about a similar workshop presentation.*

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# Smoking Cessation Drug Linked with Suicide

Varenicline, the operative drug in anti-smoking medications, like Chantix, approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), has been linked to depression and suicide in a new study of about 13,000 people in New Zealand.

Amid lawsuits and studies that show an increased risk of suicide from the drug, the FDA still refuses to pull the medication from shelves.

The study found that of about 13,000 people aged 14 and older, 250 had sleep disorders, 154 were diagnosed with depression, and 80 suffered from anxiety in connection with varenicline. But in prob-

ably the most staggering statistic, six people committed suicide, four of whom officials potentially link to the use of varenicline.

In the U.S., the FDA has issued fairly strong warnings about Chantix. But the agency has left the decision as to whether a patient should be prescribed the drug in the hands of medical professionals. In 2011, the FDA issued an alert about Chantix and its risks after the agency conducted two studies of neuropsychiatric adverse events in Chantix users. However, the agency said that it would continue to evaluate the drug in an ongoing clinical trial with findings expected in 2017.

In 2012, the FDA did a podcast concerning a clinical trial that found a link between Chantix and the risk of cardiovascular problems. But the agency again left the decision in the hands of health care professionals, saying “Smoking is an independent and major risk factor for cardiovascular disease, and Chantix is effective in helping patients quit smoking. The health benefits of quitting smoking are immediate and substantial. Weigh the risks of Chantix against the benefits of its use.” ■

*Sources: Medical Daily, EAP NewsBrief, a service of the Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA).*

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## Workplace Survey

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# The Undercover Job Search

They say the best time to look for a job is when you already have one. And, judging by a recent survey, many professionals are heeding this advice. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of workers interviewed by Accountemps indicated they would not have a problem looking for new employment before leaving their current firm.

Some employees may go as far as searching for a new gig while at the office. Almost half (48%) of survey respondents between the ages of 18 and 34 said they are likely to conduct job-search activities at work. This compares to 26% of professionals between the ages of 35 and 44 and 21% between the

ages of 45 and 54 who expressed a similar willingness.

Accountemps offers tips to help professionals conduct a job search while still employed:

❖ **Look at internal openings first.** If you’ve outgrown your current role but are happy with your work environment, see if there are relevant openings within your company before looking elsewhere. When it comes to filling vacancies, many employers prefer internal candidates.

❖ **Keep it to yourself.** If you want to keep your job search a secret, don’t mention it to anyone at work. Even the most trustworthy co-worker could inadvertently spill the beans. It’s best to

stay mum until you announce your resignation.

❖ **Play it safe when going online.** Be careful when visiting job boards or using social media to conduct your search. A single status update could be enough to alert your employer. You can further minimize the risk of being caught by ensuring your privacy settings are tight and using services that mask your identity when posting your résumé online.

❖ **Be upfront with potential employers.** Most hiring managers understand that you will need to make arrangements to communicate or meet outside of office hours. Schedule interviews before or after work or during your lunch break. ■

## Sleep Apnea Treatment Eases Nightmares

For military veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and sleep apnea, treatment with continuous positive airway pressure, or CPAP, reduces their nightmares, a new study finds.

Researchers reviewed the medical records of U.S. veterans who had been treated in a VA medical center sleep clinic between 2011 and 2012. The investigators looked at the average number of nightmares per week before treatment and up to six months after CPAP were prescribed for the veterans.

The use of CPAP led to a significant reduction in the number of nightmares, which was most connected to how well veterans complied with the treatment.

“One out of six veterans suffers from PTSD, which affects their personal, social and productive life,” said Dr. Sadeka Tamanna, medical director of the sleep disorders laboratory at G.V. (Sonny) VA Medical Center in Jackson, Miss. “Nightmares are one of the major symptoms that affect their daily life, and prevalence of [sleep apnea] is also high among PTSD patients and can trigger their nightmares.”

CPAP, which is a common treatment for sleep apnea, helps keep the airway open by providing a stream of air through a mask that is worn during sleep. PTSD symptoms such as nightmares usually start soon after a traumatic event but may not show up until months or years later,

according to the National Center for PTSD of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. ■

*Additional sources: HealthDay News and EAP NewsBrief, a service of the Employee Assistance Professionals Association. Editor’s note: “Supporting Our Veterans” is a new feature in EAR focusing on hands-on practical information for EA professionals assisting veterans and their families.*



### On the Job

## Volunteering Linked to Better Health

Three-quarters of volunteers say volunteering has made them feel physically healthier and lowered their stress levels, according to a new study released by United Health Group and the Optum Institute.

The study also illustrates that employers benefit from employees who volunteer in terms of better employee health and in professional skills development that employees use in the workplace.

Among those who’ve volunteered in the past 12 months, 78%

say it has lowered their stress levels. Moreover, volunteers are more likely than U.S. adults overall to report that they felt calm and peaceful most of the time, and that they had a lot of energy most of the time, over the past four weeks.

In addition to physical and mental health benefits, employees who volunteer say doing so has helped them learn valuable business skills. Sixty-four percent of employees who currently volunteer said that volunteering with work colleagues has strengthened

their relationships.

“We know the lone wolf isn’t the kind of person that makes it in today’s world,” says Kate Rubin, vice president of social responsibility with United Health Group. “Working on a volunteering [project] helps build stronger relationships with colleagues and helps build that collaboration muscle.” ■

*Additional sources: Employee Benefit News and EAP NewsBrief, a service of the Employee Assistance Professionals Association.*

# Engagement Key to Retention

A little motivation goes a long way, a new survey from OfficeTeam suggests. More than six in 10 (61%) workers interviewed admitted it's at least somewhat likely they would leave their current position if they felt disengaged. That's bad news for some employers: More than one-quarter (26%) of professionals said their company is not effective at keeping staff motivated.

"When workers are disengaged, retention shouldn't be a company's only concern – productivity and customer service levels also suffer," said OfficeTeam Executive Director Robert Hosking. "There are many factors that contribute to strong employee engagement – chief among them are the ability of staff to reach professional goals and understand how they contribute to the organization's big-picture objectives."

OfficeTeam offers ideas for keeping employees motivated:

❖ **Keep them out of the dark.** Whenever feasible, employees should receive updates on the company's financial performance and long- and short-term goals, and explain what this information means for them and their jobs. Sharing this information will help them feel connected to the organization.

❖ **Ask for input.** Managers should actively seek feedback from employees. Maintaining an open-door policy, and an open mind, will make it easier for staff to approach them

❖ **Break out of comfort zones.** Management should encourage staff to take on new responsibilities and projects. Giving workers a chance to try new things demonstrates confidence and helps them build new skills.

❖ **Discuss career aspirations.**

It's crucial for employees to set career goals so they feel they're working toward something and can see that the company supports their professional aspirations. Management needs to talk to staff about their ambitions and work with them to meet those objectives.

❖ **Give them a break.** Employees need regular breaks to recharge, and managers can set a good example by doing so themselves. If a work team seems particularly stressed, managers could organize a collective breather where you can provide snacks or a catered lunch. ■

*Additional suggestions are available from "Motivating Your Team: 25 Ways to Increase Employee Engagement," a complimentary advice guide from OfficeTeam available at [www.officeteam.com/employerfreeresources](http://www.officeteam.com/employerfreeresources).*

## In the News

# EARF Issues \$100,000 Grant

The Employee Assistance Research Foundation (EARF) has announced the winner of its most recent call for research grant proposals. The OMNI Institute, based in Denver, CO, will receive a \$100,000 grant, plus 12% of that amount for indirect costs, to conduct a 14-month study at the Colorado State EAP, "Impact of

Employee Assistance Services on Workplace Outcomes," with results to be submitted to the EARF Board of Directors in late 2014.

"This study will provide the EAP field with a much-needed, stronger, more empirical research base, particularly with the current focus on the importance of outcomes," says EARF Founder and President Carl Tisone.

This is EARF's third research grant. In 2011 the Foundation awarded \$40,000 grants to both ISW Limits and the National Behavioral Consortium, whose work was published earlier this year.

The Employee Assistance Research Foundation was formed to stimulate innovative, rigorous, and theory-based research activities. ■

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# Borrow Your Own Money? – Part I



By Gary Foreman

**D**ear Dollar Stretcher: “We ‘borrowed’ money from our 401K a few years ago and again just last year. I don’t know if other 401K plans do this, but we are allowed to borrow up to half of the amount in our account with no collateral, and we make monthly payments at about 8 or 9% interest. This means we are actually paying ourselves interest on our own money. In our experience, we’ve still been earning great dividends in our account while paying on the loans.” – Lorrie N.

Lorrie’s right. About 75% of all 401k plans will let you borrow against your account. And about one-third of people who participate in plans borrow from them. But is it a good idea? If you ask your co-workers, you’ll find that many of them think so, but they aren’t that sure how the whole thing works. Let’s try to clear some of the fog.

Let’s start with some facts. The law limits you to borrowing 50% of the account’s value or \$50,000, whichever is less. Unlike just about any other loan, there’s no

credit check. Borrowers have five years to pay the money back. If the loan has been used to purchase a home, the law allows up to 30 years for repayment, but many plans limit the time to 10 years.

You’ll be charged an interest rate that’s considered competitive with other lenders. That’s an IRS requirement. Often plan administrators set the rate at prime plus 1%.

You won’t pay taxes on the amount that you borrow. Taxes come into the picture if you don’t repay your loan on time. Then you would pay a 10% penalty as well as ordinary income taxes on the withdrawn money.

Usually a payroll deduction is used for repayment. Obviously this makes it less likely that you’ll miss a payment. But it also means that you won’t be seeing the money in your paycheck. If you need it for groceries, well, that’s just too bad.

You’ll also need to remember that you can’t deduct your interest expense on 401k loans. That might make a home equity loan look more attractive.

*A word of caution:* Some plans will allow or even require that you reduce or eliminate new contributions to the 401k plan while you have a loan outstanding. You might think that it’s handy to use that “extra money” to help repay the loan. But that’s something that you need to consider carefully. For instance, if you’re 30 years old now, every dollar that you don’t put in the plan today could cost you \$30 when you’re 65. ■

**NEXT MONTH:** How you can tell if it’s a good deal financially.

*Gary Foreman is a former financial planner and purchasing manager who currently edits The Dollar Stretcher.com website and newsletters. **Editor’s note:** Many EAP requests for information about employees’ financial questions can be addressed by utilizing resources such as those offered by Gary.*

## Best, Worst Companies to Work for

### BEST

1. Google
2. SAS
3. CHG Healthcare Services
4. Boston Consulting Group, Inc.
5. Wegmans Food Markets, Inc.
6. NetApp
7. Hilcorp Energy Company
8. Edward Jones
9. Ultimate Software
10. Camden Property Trust

### WORST

(#1 indicates worst company to work for)

5. Radio Shack
4. Dollar General
3. Dillard’s
2. Express Scripts
1. Dish Network ■

Sources: MSN; “Fortune” magazine.