

# What Factors Affect the Effectiveness of Employee Assistance Programs in a Small Start-up Company? A Case Study of EAP from Shandong Province, China

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**[Abstract]** In China, EAP have grown dramatically since the 1990s, but there are lack of conclusive evidences across big and small companies about EAP effectiveness. Using qualitative approach, this case study investigated the effectiveness of EAP and some related critical influential factors in a small company with four employees in Linyi City. Four critical factors were associated with the participants' experience of EAP, which can impact the effectiveness and limitations of the EAP. We concluded with suggestions for improving the effectiveness of the EAP of small company in modern China.

**[Keywords]** employee assistance program; small company; effectiveness; qualitative research; semi-structured interviews

## Introduction

Employee assistance program(EAP) is defined as “job-based programs operating within a work organization for identifying troubled employees, motivating them to resolve their troubles, and providing access to counseling or treatment for those employees who need these services” (Sonnenstuhl & Trice, 1990). Generally, EAP have two main goals: to prevent or detect some problems that affect work performance and to maintain or restore healthy human resources. Existing literature showed that the number, focus, scope, and importance of EAP in both private and public organizations in USA and other western countries have increased substantially since the 1970s (Oss and Clary, 1998; Maiden, 2001). In China, EAP has grown dramatically since the 1990s. Research suggests that Chinese employer are increasingly willing to invest in providing the EAP to promote employees' well-being (Collins, 2000; Zhang, 2006).

China now continue to lag the design and delivery of EAP in USA. Unlike in USA or Europe, EAP in China rarely include alcoholism, illegal drug use and substance-abuse intervention (Zhang, 2015). Generally, EAP in China aims to improve the employees' mental health such as depression, anxiety, compulsive gambling, marital problems etc. EAP in China encourage employees to seek confidential assistance with stressful personal situations before a mental problem develops, even ultimately job loss occurs. Zhang (2015) considers Chinese EAP is unique for two reasons: a less focus on alcoholism and the strong involvement of Group Counseling and Enterprise collective mental training. China have some super company employed lots of staffs and have a good tradition called “big mobilization meeting”. Accordingly, to be more efficient, EAP in China now use group counseling and the collective training lectures to combine with health programs into an integrated wellness program that seeks to provide a full range of lifestyle guidance and support. Wellness strategies learned from group counseling and training would help employers identify physical and mental-health problems early on, and even prevent many of them from happening in the first place.

Some observation in practice have suggested that many outcomes such as productivity, accidents, absenteeism, inattentiveness, poor morale, tardiness, unwillingness to accept new assignments and responsibilities may be affected by EAP. Even it is over-optimistically claimed that EAP can resolved all problems ultimately affect organizational performance, productivity, profits and/or service (Smith, 1999). Most employers and employees who have experienced EAPs view them quite positively, and EAP can lead to a double winning position: increasing organizational effectiveness and enhancing employees' well-being. Nonetheless, it is obvious that EAP is not a panacea for the solution of all employee job-related problems.

While the program or service provides assistance for personal problems, it may not eliminate all tardiness, absenteeism, accidents and morale problems for some employees, or solve all organizational problems. Along with a growing need for EAP, there is a large accumulation of research evidences about EAP effectiveness. A wide range of indicators have been used to measure EAP success, including cost savings, percentage of employees accessing EAP, percentage of employees returning to work after treatment, improvement in work performance, attitudes and knowledge about mental health, and so on. Earlier research found that EAP in the United States claim a 50% to 85% success rate (Luthans & Waldersee, 1989). But some controversy always exists. It is fact that we cannot make the definitive conclusions about the outcomes of EAP because the evaluation standards of EAP quality are very different across the most evidences, and the evaluation methods mainly are based on testimonial or anecdotal.

Methodological issues lead us to difficultly determine whether EAP research findings reported are due to the EAP or other potential factors (Sharar & Lennox, 2009). For example, most researches focused on employer, and less researches explored the effectiveness from employee perspectives (Attridge, 2000). The experiences of employees are important in determining the effectiveness and outcomes of EAP because employees are main force and direct beneficiaries in such program. But there is very little research on employees' experiences with EAP in China. Moreover, few researches focused on small-sized company and organization. Small start-ups face to more and more survival stress. So EAP may be urgent to them. At last, considering ethical issues, empirical studies in EAP field are not suitable for hard-science, e.g. rigorous experimental design including randomly assigned experimental group and control group. So qualitative methods used to assess the effectiveness of EAP is more popular than experiment.

This study is significant in that it contributes to the understanding of effectiveness of EAP from the research participants' perspectives, and involves each research participant's perception of the extent to which accessing the EAP services helped or failed to address the problems for which they sought help. Based on the results, we will offer some suggestions to improve the effectiveness of the EAP of small start-up company.

## Method

### *Context of Study*

Start-up is a tricky thing all over the world. Some reports showed that mental health of entrepreneurs is a genuine problem in American and China (Bradbury, 2013; Li, Sheng, & Xia, 2015). So, the EAP for small start-up company is urgent. Our study focused on the employees' individual experiences and perceptions about EAP using a phenomenological approach. We interviewed four employees in a small start-ups company majoring in baby toy design, manufacture, and sales in Linyi city, Shandong Province, China. Given this context, we asked employees, who utilize EAP, their opinions about the factors they associate with the effectiveness and limitations of EAP. The goal of this case study is not to 'prove' whether EAPs work, but rather to understand the experiences of EAP. That is, we are interested to the employees and our purpose is to investigate what four clients of an EAP think about the effectiveness or limitations of the program and how the program can improve the employees' mental health. We tried to understand how "people use their experience to make decisions in complex, dynamic, real time environments" (Meso, Troutt & Rudnicka, 2002, p. 63).

### *Participants*

Four employee (2 male, 2 female) volunteer were recruited, who were willing to frankly talk their experiences with the EAP after using this service for half a year. All participants were born in Linyi City, Shandong Province and worked for above 5 years in this company. Only Kexin Zhang is a senior sales manager, Bo He, Yong Wang and Xiaohong Jiang are ordinary staff worked in sales, customer service and administrative department respectively. Kexin Zhang is a 42-year-old single mother with one teenage daughter. Bo He is 32-year-old single man, who is forced to find partner under the pressure of his parents and relatives. Yong Wang is a 38-year-old man with a 5-year-old son, who have been working in this company for eight years. Xiaohong Jiang is a 44-year-old married woman with a bad son.

***Procedure of Data Collection***

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used in data collection of this qualitative study while smart-phone audio was recorded. After I introduced the purpose of my study and participants filled out a consent form, I asked some open-ended questions. For example, what benefits did you get from using the EAP? What are the limitations of this program? All the interviews were finished at that comfortable, professional location close to the workplace.

***Data Analysis and Interpretation***

At first, we transcribed the recorded audio. Second, a series of coding procedure were finished using NVivo 10 (Boje, 2002). Third, we searched for categories among the participants' responses to isolate commonalities relative to program benefits, limitations, and recommendations for program improvement. We analyzed each data categories. At last, we integrated, analyzed, and interpreted the results of my study into themes (based on the categories) according to the literature that was reviewed, my research purpose, and my own experiences with, and judgment about, EAPs.

**Results and Discussion**

Each participant's data from the interview transcripts listed as follows.

***Kexin Zhang***

She is one of few women in a senior manager position and is perceived as a successful, confident and independent woman. She thought the company's top management strongly supported the program, which was essential to program effectiveness. She noted that one factor that limited the effectiveness of the EAP was the lack of follow up and regular evaluation of the services provided. She thought top management support and supervisor education and training were critical factors in making the EAP "more mainstream so people aren't afraid of them." At last, she concluded that confidentiality surrounding the use of the EAP was also a key factor associated with the effectiveness of the program.

***Bo He***

He sought counseling to cope with the pressure of marriage and to learn how to support his parents who were also suffering from the pressure of their relatives. He viewed ineffective communication as a critical factor that limited the effectiveness of the program. Above all, his knowledge about the EAP was limited because he had difficulty remembering some general information about the program. Although Bo He indicated he did not significantly benefit from the counseling experience, he viewed the program as valuable and commented that his employer displayed leadership by offering such a program.

***Yong Wang***

During this study, he had been made on-going disputes with his wife on a variety of topics including how to raise their son and his spending habits and inability to manage money. Their partner relationships were broken. He said he had emotional trouble. His understanding of program effectiveness was related primarily to process issues, such as program evaluation, lack of qualified professionals to run the program, as well flexibility in determining the number of available counseling sessions. He thought the counselor responsible for managing the program should display professional leadership. Especially He mentioned that group counseling is interesting and more effective than private one-by-one counseling. I asked him if he thought the number of group counseling sessions was enough. He answered that the number of sessions she attended, that were paid for by the company, were not adequate to effectively deal with his emotional problems.

***Xiaohong Jiang***

She was not satisfied in her current position, as she felt unchallenged and her professional skills in customer

services were not adequately utilized. She told me she was stressful to have a promotion and good relationships with her drug abuse son. She stated that the provision of EAP information by management at staff meetings was a reflection of management and union support for the program. Research (Clemmet, 1998) suggests management and work union support is critical to the success of EAPs. She considered such support a critical factor in the effectiveness of the program. I asked her what situation she would be in without counseling. At once she indicated she would have had a nervous breakdown and definitely would have been unable to function well at work. Her counselor provided a safe environment, allowing her to feel comfortable and providing some coping strategies and mechanisms. At last, she also advised that it should be better to allow her to choose more counselor.

### Conclusion

Through the examination of the experiences of four employees with the EAP, this qualitative study explored the factors the participants associated with the effectiveness and limitations of the EAP. Now some suggestions are presented for making EAP more effective in small start-up company. A successful EAP in small company is determined by four critical factors as follows.

1. Support for the EAP by management department and the boss
2. Clear and well-defined statement of confidentiality
3. Group counseling and group training
4. Skilled counselor

Group counseling and group training is a special factor affecting EAP effectiveness in China (Zhang, 2015). Other factors are consistent with previous studies in Canada (Nofield, 2006). At last, we would like to summarize some limitations of our qualitative study. First, generalizability of case study like this is generally limited. Our study only focused on specific participants and contexts. Second, we did not collect quantitative survey data. Future study can use the mixed research design. A longitudinal study over an extended period may provide more information into the factors that participants associate with the effectiveness and limitations of EAP.

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