

Improving Employee Health Through Counselling

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Abstract

Employees experience both occupational and personal issues which interfere with their work and therefore the need to have an effective counselling program. Organizations have realized this need and the continuous demand to maintain and improve productivity. Studies have shown that organizations that put in place counseling programs have not been able to effectively evaluate its success. Studies have suggested that measuring success of a counseling program is necessary. This paper looks at components of a successful counselling program and how it helps in improving health of employees. Organizations need to put in place ways to ensure that counseling programs are evaluated and improved over time to meet the changing needs of employees.

Key terms

Counselling, effectiveness, success, evaluate, employee health

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I. Introduction

Employee assistance programs are ways of assisting employees to deal with both occupational and personal problems. Organizations have come up with a number of assistance programs to help employees focus and remain productive. One such program is employee counselling which a number of organizations have established to ease some of the employee problems that they may be experiencing. The contribution of employee counselling at work has been recognized by most organizations as well as studies. Among the contribution is that it leads to employee productivity (McLeod, 2001., Kirk and Brown, 2003., Werner and Desimore, 2009). Organizations have specific benefits that have been realized from employee counselling. Organizations that have counseling programs have also set expected outcomes. These outcomes from counselling are geared towards performance improvement. Feedback relating to counseling is necessary for further improvements and adjustments of the program where necessary.

Given challenging work situations that modern employees face, it is important to note that employee counselling helps in solving a number of issues (Berridge, 1999). Employees experience a number of problems that can interfere with their productivity and in turn health such as alcoholism (Mangione *et al.*, 1999, Roman, 1981) and stress (Bickford, 2005). Some of the health issues that employees experience is as a result of stress. Some of the well known health issues caused by stress include: increased blood pressure, indigestion, immune allergic responses, stomach acids, indigestion, diarrhea, fatigue, insomnia, depression, muscle aches and headaches (Bickford, 2005., Thoits, 2010 and Kasl, 1984). When individuals are not able to manage both work related and personal stressors, the result is poor health and even loss of life. Employee counselling is an intervention to all these only when it is of high quality (Elliot and Williams, 2002). The question is which type of counselling can improve employee health? The answer to this question lies in the process and quality of counselling that employees get. Quality counselling is believed to start with proper diagnosis of employee problem, proper counselling procedure and an appropriate solution to employee problem. This paper explores various literature and studies that support counselling as a way of improving employee health.

Employee counselling program

Specific activities that have been identified to help employees deal with their problems such as stress management, exercise and fitness interventions, drug abuse cessation are part of employee assistance programs. There is a need to establish a clear link between specific interventions and employee health. Employee assistance programs need to meet certain thresholds so as to have greater impact on employees. According to Werner and Desimore (2009), counselling program's effectiveness is determined by the ability of organization to evaluate its contribution accurately. There are various ways of evaluating success of a program, extent of use by members of the organization, changes in the organization after introduction of the programme which could be in terms of behaviour or units produced, and the cost-benefit analysis to know if the costs are unbearable or not among ways of evaluating counselling programs.

The extent of use of a program depends on the needs of employees, if the program was established based on the demand then there is likelihood that most employees will use the program. Other factors that are known to influence the extent of use of counselling program is the trust by members and the confidentiality which is highly valued by employees. Trust is created overtime based on a number of factors that employees value. Confidentiality in handling of employee records and any other information that employee shares with counsellor privately unless the information affects other parties. This implies that service providers should be professionals, well trained and dedicated (Richardson, Bambling and Sheean 2009). Where organization is not able to offer certain specialized services then referrals should be made to appropriate persons.

Conducive environment for offering counselling also encourages employees to use a service. Studies show that most people value privacy and would seek services in quiet place free from noise and disturbance. The physical components of the counselling environment/room must be comfortable to allow employees open up and talk about their problems. Proper temperatures, lighting and ventilation are some of the important factors. The conducive environment can be created by the counsellor through non verbal clues (Bambling et al. 2008). The warmth and the welcoming messages that a client gets from the counselling place is very important and encouragement to continue with services.

A very important component of a counselling program at work place is management support, this is necessary in terms of capital provision and quality. This implies that there will be allocations for the counselling program during planning. When human Resource planning is done for the organization, staff needs for the counselling unit is also done for continuity of the program. Adequate allocation of resources means quality resources required will be available.

Employee counselling and health.

Several studies and views have supported the idea that employee counselling is a major factor in improving employee health. Employees need to be healthy to accomplish their work, again serious costs are reduced when employees are healthy. Some of the benefits of a healthy work force is improved productivity (Van Steenberg and Ellermers 2019). Early efforts in employee counselling was towards employee health (Kirk and Brown, 2003). Also it is believed that counselling highly contributes to employee wellness and should be given a lot of consideration.

Counselling helps employees to manage stress. Work environment is known to present various sources of stress. While most of the stressors can be managed, stress goes along way to be the major cause of health issues (Bickford, 2005, Thoits, 2010, Kasl, 1984) Stress management and wellness is one of the major reasons why counselling is done at work. Studies have shown that through counselling employees are able to release emotions, this serves to remove the mental blocks that individuals may experience. When employees experience problems, it interferes with the mental functioning (Ganster and Schaubroeck, 1991), mental issues arise from stress that the employee experience, this is also supported by Donovan and Doody (2013) who believe that stress affects both the physical and psychological health of an individual.

Management of stress also helps in dealing with other health issues which have been found to be connected to stress. Stress is a major cause of cardiovascular disease (Non et al., 2014). Other health issues as gastrointestinal disorders which is a result of stress (Ray, Gulati and Henkel 2020). Stress is also connected to the oral ulcers (Ciapeli and Cajulis, 2004) and other conditions which cause discomfort. There is evidence that stress is connected to most of human diseases, this implies that if stress is managed then there will be serious improvement in health of employees. When counseled, employees experience relief which goes along way in relieving even the mental reasoning.

Employee counselling can only improve health if employees realize the need and benefits of counselling. Employees should not be coerced into using counselling service within an organization, individual's demand is a step towards problem solving (Hughes and Kinder, 2007). This also depends on individual's perception and reaction to stress. For organizations to improve uptake of counselling services, sensitization and training on health issues is necessary at work place particularly in organization which experience high levels of stress. It should be noted that counselling should be aimed at achieving both productivity and improving health, which is normally a challenge as most are geared towards organizational interests (Bickford, 2005)

According to Torun (2013), counselling services is like health services being offered to employees at work place, suggests that counselling should be a legal requirement by employers to offer to their employees. This is a good area for research, in order to gauge the requirement that should be met by an organization before such a policy is implemented by any authority. Evaluation and feedback of the counselling process helps in improving service delivery and ensuring that standards are met. Evaluation can be in the form of feedback which employees give after service consumption, it can be also based on the realization of specific objectives achieved.

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