Marital/Relationship Issues:
An EAP's Perspective

Insights from the WarrenShepell Research Group

WarrenShepell

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research indicates that healthy home relationships among employees are critical for their well-being, their performance, and organizational performance in general. However, some employee groups may experience relationship problems more often than others. With this mind, the WarrenShepell Research Group analyzed data on over 150,000 Employee Assistance Program clients to identify employee segments that are at an elevated risk of experiencing relationship problems.

Among the findings when demographic variables related to age, gender, job level, years of experience and employment status were examined:
- Age and gender were found to be the most important demographic drivers of marital/relationship problems.
- More employees in their thirties (23%) access EAP for marital/relationship discord than employees in other age groups.
- More men (22%) than women (17%) access EAP for marital/relationship discord.
- More supervisors and managers (20%) access EAP for marital/relationship discord than other employees (18%).
- Non-full-time employees are 1.5 times more likely than full-time employees to access EAP for domestic violence issues.

Specifically:
- Male supervisors and managers under 40 years of age with fewer years of service access EAP for relationship problems more often than the average employee (39% vs. 24% of average employees).
- Female supervisors and managers between 30 and 49 years of age, working full-time and with fewer years of service, access EAP for relationship problems more often than the average employee (31% vs. 24% of average employees).

In addition:
- There were significant differences among industries in terms of employee reports of marital-relationship problems (e.g. labor versus not-for profit versus communications).

Interpretations and recommendations are tabled to help employers and EAPs develop intervention and prevention strategies to target employee segments that are at risk for relationship problems.

Introduction

Close, personal relationships are vital for psychological well-being. The quality of our relationships has the single greatest impact on our development, well-being, and overall meaning of life. Close ties to other people, including family, friends and other social support groups, also makes us less vulnerable to physical health problems and premature death. Conversely, low social support is associated with future deterioration in mental health. Healthy relationships not only make us feel good - they also lead to healthier and longer lives.

It has long been known that occupational stress can affect the quality of relationships outside of work. Consider the following:

• Forty-four percent of Canadians report negative work-to-family spillover in terms of time spent with their partners.

• Forty-one percent of Canadians report negative

work-to-family spillover in terms of the quality of relationships with their partners.

• High work stress has been linked to marital conflict, family stress, and poor performance in both work and family roles.

• Individuals who have high job satisfaction are more emotionally and interpersonally available to their family.

The costs of unhealthy relationships at home are not trivial. Studies indicate that employers could reduce absenteeism by 6.5% and save $1 billion per year in direct costs if they eliminated high levels of work-to-family interference. Employees with high work-to-family interference are also 6.7 times more likely to say they would leave their jobs to have more time for themselves and their families.

It is clear that employers, for both humanistic and economic reasons, must take appropriate actions to enhance the personal relationships of their employees. But first, employers must understand who in their workforce is having relationship problems. Employee groups that are at risk must be identified so that appropriate intervention and prevention steps can be taken. With this mind, the WarrenShepell Research Group conducted a study to isolate demographic factors that differentiate EAP clients who report relationship problems versus other kinds of problems.

Method
The sample consisted of 153,114 individual clients that accessed the WarrenShepell EAP between the years 2003 and 2005 (63% female, 37% male). The data analyses were conducted on EAP intake variables collected on each client at the first point of access.[1].

WarrenShepell tracks nearly 100 different presenting problems at EAP intake. Three problems, marital/relationship discord, separation and divorce, and domestic violence, are classed as relationship problems. We collapsed all 'other' problems into a composite. We then compared the rates of

relationship problems for specific demographic groups against rates for the total sample. The demographic variables were age, gender, job level, years of service, and employment status. Self-reported stress at EAP intake was also examined.

The data was analyzed using a variety of techniques: Pearson product-moment correlations, Pearson chi-square analysis, Classification and Regression Tress (CRT) and Chi-Squared Automatic Interaction Detection (CHAID). The following discussion is intended to be high-level and relatively jargon-free..[2]

WHO IS HAVING RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS?
Demographic Differences in Relationship Problems

AGE:
Overall, there is a clear age effect, with younger Canadians experiencing more relationship problems. When clients in their thirties accessed EAP, 23% of them accessed for marital/relationship discord (compared to 20% for clients under 30 years of age, 17% for clients in their forties, and 13% for 50 years plus). This group, in addition to clients in their forties, were also more likely to report separation-divorce issues (5% of accesses vs. 3% for other age groups).

Figure 1. Age & Marital/Relationship Discord
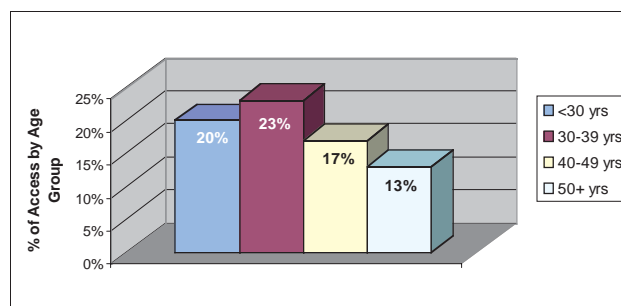
What could account for this age effect? It is possible that EAP clients under 30 years of age are less likely to be in serious, committed relationships. Additionally, clients who are 50 years of age or older are likely in relationships that have stabilized over the years. Separation and divorce occur earlier rather than later

1. Seventy percent of clients access the EAP only once.

2. Although all results were statistically significant, significance levels will not be reported because they are inappropriate for this type of research. A separate 'white page' will be available that describes the research methods and data analyses in more detail.

in most marriages. With respect to clients in their thirties, their greater prevalence of relationship problems may be a function of children and work. More Canadians are delaying reproduction until their thirties. This, combined with increasing responsibility in the workplace, may be placing undue stress on people in this age group.

There were slight age differences in reports of domestic violence, with younger groups reporting more of this problem (e.g., 0.5% of all problems for clients under 30 years of age vs. 0.2% for 50 years of age or older). These small differences nonetheless suggest that domestic violence is a problem that is relevant for all employee age groups. Employers and EAPs should take this into consideration when addressing this problem (i.e., recognizing the signs, implementing policies).

GENDER:
There were gender differences in reports of relationship problems, but not in the expected direction. Although women accounted for the majority of EAP accesses for marital/relationship discord (i.e., 57%), they also accounted for the majority of EAP accesses in general (i.e., 63%). This gender disparity in EAP use was controlled so that associations between gender and relationship problems could be faithfully examined.[3] In fact, men were more likely than women to access EAP for marital/relationship discord (22% of men vs. 17% of women). This finding is supported by past research. For example, 83% of men in one study indicated that their personal relationships are marred by work-related stress. Employers may have to

Figure 2. Gender & Marital/Relationship Discord

alter their assumptions about gender and relationships if they are to support male employees in ways that promote healthy relationships at home.

Despite these findings, it is well-documented that women have less power in marital relationships to bring about a more equitable distribution of child care and household responsibilities. Women also experience less spousal support for their careers than their male counterparts. These circumstances may lead to increased role overload, job stress, and depression in women. It may be that women experience an equal number of relationship problems, but access EAP more to address resulting emotional problems.

There was no observed gender difference in reports of separation and divorce problems (4% of all accesses for both genders). However, as would be expected, five times as many women accessed EAP for domestic violence issue (0.1% vs. 0.5% of accesses for men and women, respectively).

JOB LEVEL:
What about job level? Supervisors and managers were found to access EAP at a higher rate than other employees for marital/relationship discord (20% vs. 18% for other employees). Supervisors and managers tend to work longer hours, take home more unpaid work than other workers, and report higher levels of stress than other workers. This leaves less time for a quality home life. On the contrary, when employees have low role overload, they are more likely to report high family and parental satisfaction, and greater family adaptation. Additionally, marital satisfaction has been found to increase as spouses engage in less 'obsessive working'. Supervisors and managers also manage people. Constant social contact (especially dealing with poor performance) can lead to burnout. The social 'reservoir' may be dry for some supervisors and managers by the time they arrive home to more personal relationships. Given their sphere of influence and higher salaries, it is especially important to create supports to ensure that supervisors and managers are functioning well both at work and at home.
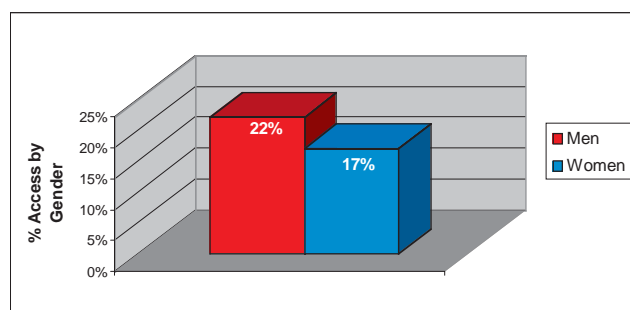
3. These kinds of controls are in place throughout the report.

Figure 3. Job Level & Marital/Relationship Discord

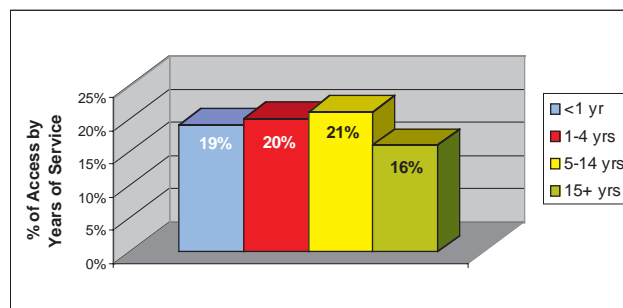**Figure 4. Years of Service & Marital/Relationship Discord**
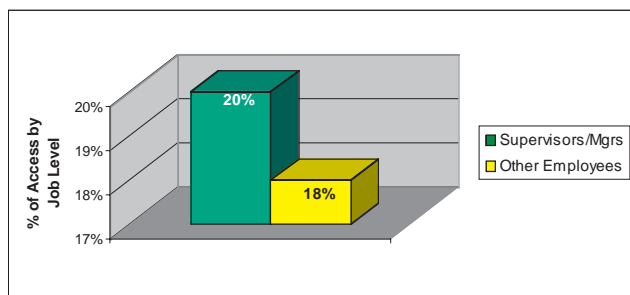
EMPLOYMENT STATUS:
In terms of employment status, few differences existed between full-time and non-full time employees in their accesses for marital-relationship problems (19% of accesses for both groups) and separation-divorce (4% vs. 5% of accesses, respectively). However, non-full-time employees accessed EAP for domestic violence almost 1.5 as many times as full-time employees (0.6% vs. 0.4% of accesses, respectively). While some part-time employees are part of dual-income families, others may be relying on part-time earnings as a single source of household income. Lower job security and socioeconomic status may complicate personal relationships for some part-time employees. A difference of 0.2% may not seem substantive, but if our EAP sample was representative of the Canadian population, this would translate to almost 6,000 additional part-time employees seeking EAP for domestic violence problems. If employers are not able to provide some employees with full-time work, they may need to find more innovative ways of supporting their employees to ensure a more stable home life.

YEARS OF SERVICE:
Reports of relationship problems differed depending on how many years of service employees had. Employees with five to 14 years of service had the highest rate of marital/relationship discord (21% of accesses) compared to 16% for employees with 15 or more years of service. It may be that years of service is a proxy for other variables that have impacts on relationship health such as age (maturity, stable relationships), and income.

EMPLOYEE SEGMENTS & RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS: A CLOSER LOOK

So far, the link between demographics and relationship problems appears to be small. What is needed is a finer-grained analysis of how several demographic variables combine to impact relationship health. Individuals are complex. It isn't enough to know that women are reporting fewer relationship problems. It is more important to understand the circumstances under which they are reporting relationship problems (i.e., at younger ages, as supervisors/managers). Knowing this helps employers and EAPs to identify employee segments that are at risk for relationship problems and craft prevention programs to target these segments.

Through the use of the statistical algorithms CHAID and CRT, the WarrenShepell Research Group was able to isolate complex employee segments that are at risk for relationship problems. These analyses also enabled us to rank the top demographic 'drivers' that differentiate these segments on the basis of EAP accesses for 'relationship problems'[4].

For these analyses, marital/relationship discord and separation and divorce were collapsed into a composite of 'relationship problems'. Twenty-four percent of all EAP accesses were associated with this composite. The following is a capsule review of the findings.

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4. Domestic violence was excluded from this composite for theoretical and methodological reasons.

What Employees Are at Greatest Risk for a Relationship Problem?

The following employee segments report a **higher** rate of relationship problems relative to the total sample (i.e., greater than 24% of accesses):

• **Men under 40 years of age, with less than five years of service, who are supervisors or managers, and who report moderate to high stress** (39% of their accesses). The link between management, stress, and relationship problems was discussed earlier.

• **Men under 30 years of age with five or more years of service** (31% of their accesses). Some younger men may not see themselves as progressing rapidly enough in their careers, either by moving 'up' in their current organization or with new employers. This could lead to self-esteem problems and distress, which could further impact their relationships at home.

• **Women, 30 to 49 years of age, working full-time, with less than five years of service, and are supervisors or managers** (31% of their accesses). Women are still the primary caregivers at home. A full-time supervisory job can lead to emotional exhaustion and leave less energy for social roles at home. Interestingly, when similar women have less than one or more than five years of service, they report fewer relationship problems. The former group may still be in the 'honeymoon period' as supervisors/managers with their new employers. The latter group may be fully acclimatized to their roles and organizations and have wide access to organizational supports. This signals to employers that they may need to create additional supports for female employees who are embarking on supervisory careers.

In general, the above findings suggest that employers may need to provide employees with more realistic job previews and better orientation practices. While 15 years is a long time to benefit from acclimatization, perhaps employers can identify the protective factors associated with extended tenure and find ways to instill these earlier in job tenures.

What Employees Are at Least Risk for a Relationship Problem?

The following employee segments report a **lower** rate of relationship problems relative to the total sample (i.e., lower than 24% of accesses):

• **Women, 50 years of age or older, who are working full-time** (12% of their accesses).

• **Men, 50 years of age or older, who are working full-time** (19% of their accesses).

Both age and career maturity are protective factors against well-being problems in general. With respect to women, current research indicates that well-being is highest for women when they have multiple life roles, including a full-time career. Even similarly-aged women who are working non-full-time jobs report a lower proportion of relationship problems (16% of all accesses for this group).

As an aside, when separation-divorce is examined on its own, reports of this problem were similar to the total sample for a variety of complex employee segments (based on age, gender, years of service, etc.). The learning here is that separation and divorce issues appear to affect everyone equally. Any supports that employers and EAPs enact to address these issues should take this into consideration.

What are the Most Important Drivers of Relationship Problems?

The above analyses enabled us to rank demographic variables in terms of their relative importance as drivers of relationship versus other problems. The following variables are ranked in order of 'standardized importance' (i.e., based on 100%):

1. Age (100%)
2. Gender (40%)
3. Years of Service (24%)
4. Job Level (3%)
5. Work Status (2%)

While job level and work status do not appear to drive EAP access for relationship problems on the whole, as we have seen above, these variables can have a critical impact on relationship health for certain employee segments. The above ranking is based on the total sample[5].

Which Industries Are Reporting the Most and Least Relationship Problems?

How do different industries compare in terms of relationship problems on the part of their employees? Since WarrenShepell tracks EAP accesses for over 40 industries, Chi-Squared Automatic Interaction Detection (CHAID) was used to classify these industries into a smaller number of segments that were similar in employee reports of relationship problems. Again, 24% of all EAP accesses for the total sample were associated with a composite of relationship problems.

• The groups and industries that showed the **highest** rate of employee relationship problems were Associations, Automotive, Entertainment, Unions, and Construction (30% of their accesses).

• The groups and industries that showed the **second highest** rate of employee relationship problems were Education, Municipal & Public Sectors, Utilities/Hydro, Agriculture, Chemical, and Hardware/Software (27% of their accesses).

• The industries that showed the **lowest rate** of employee relationship problems were Communications/Media, Advertising, Religious Organizations, Cosmetics, and Internet (19% of their accesses).

There are similarities among industries within these segments (e.g., labor in the first, not-for-profit in the second, communications in the third). This suggests that there are reliable individual (e.g., attraction, selection) and/or organizational factors (e.g., job characteristics, culture) that bear on the quality of relationships for employees within these industries. This enables EAPs to tailor their services to particular types of organizational clients. These findings also

suggest that there may be opportunities for EAP client organizations to work with one another to transfer HR best practices to promote healthy relationships among employees.

RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS AND STRESS

Some employee groups are reporting higher rates of relationship problems. However, are these employees more stressed by their relationship problems? Our data shows the following:

• Of clients who accessed EAP for non-relationship problems, 80% reported that they were experiencing moderate to high levels of stress.

By comparison...

• For marital/relationship discord, 83% reported similar stress levels.
• For separation-divorce, 86% reported similar stress levels.
• For domestic violence, 92% reported similar stress levels.

Thus, relationship problems are associated with higher levels of stress. Previous research supports this. One study has indicated that men withdraw from their wives after more stressful work days. Both men and women are likely to respond to daily negative emotions in the workplace with more angry marital behaviors at home if their partners experienced similar work days.

How is this changing?

EAP clients that report relationship problems are also reporting lower levels of stress with each passing year. Specifically:

• For clients reporting marital/relationship discord, the proportion that also reported high levels of stress decreased from 44% to 38% to 33% over three years.

• For clients reporting separation-divorce, the proportion that also reported high levels of stress decreased from 52% to 46% to 40% over three years.

5. Additionally, our analysis focused only on demographic variables tracked by the WarrenShepell EAP.

• For clients reporting domestic violence, the proportion that also reported high levels of stress decreased from 71% to 69% to 60% over three years.

How is this to be interpreted? One explanation is that an increasing number of clients are accessing EAP for relationship problems in a preventive manner long before these problems lead to more serious physical and mental health issues. Clients that access EAP for problems while their stress is still low are better able to focus on and solve their problems in a constructive manner.

In general, our findings do not suggest that reports of relationship problems or associated stress levels are increasing with time. However, these analyses were conducted on our total sample (i.e., all organizational clients). Our analyses may yet uncover emerging relationship and stress-related problems in specific industries, client organizations, and specific employee segments.

CONCLUSIONS

Given that employee well-being has significant impacts on employee and organizational performance, employers would do well to explore ways of helping employees to build and maintain personal relationships outside of the workplace. If employers do not take action to create relationship-friendly work structures, the negative effects of work-life imbalance can make their way back into the workplace and impede both employee and organizational wellness.

What Can Employers Do?
Following are some actions that employers could take to foster healthy personal relationships between employees and their family members/loved ones:

Re-design jobs
• Explore roles, duties and accountabilities with employees. Find ways to reduce employee workloads and overtime (especially for supervisors and managers).

Offer training and developmental opportunities
• While job redesign considers how jobs impact personal relationships outside the workplace, training and development considers what employees can do differently to become more effective in the workplace.

Offer alternative work arrangements
• The availability of flextime work hours is associated with higher organizational commitment, job satisfaction and productivity, and less absenteeism, lateness and turnover.

• Telecommuting can lead to greater autonomy, more flexible work hours, and more time to spend with partners if they are also home-based.

Create flexible career development programs
• Work with employees to create flexible career paths that are more aligned with their values and/or personal relationships.

Train supervisors and managers to be sensitive to employee relationship needs
• Employees with supervisors that are sensitive to their personal needs have higher job satisfaction and lower absenteeism than employees with non supportive supervisors.

Schedule events that build strong employee relationships
• Hold regular social events to give employees opportunities to build personal relationships in the workplace that transcend traditional teams. Having a 'best friend at work' predicts organizational performance measures such as customer satisfaction, profit, and productivity.

Offer EAPs
• EAPs offer a variety of supports that are specially designed to deal with relationships issues. EAP programs can also deliver wellness seminars on factors that affect relationships such as shiftwork and dealing with difficult teenagers. This is a cost effective way of reaching a large number of

employees and preventing future relationship problems on a wide scale. In general, EAPs have been recognized by work psychologists as appropriate initiatives for promoting work-family balance.

GENERAL REFERENCES

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THE WARRENSHEPELL RESEARCH GROUP

The WarrenShepell Research Group has been formed to gather, analyze and provide commentary on organizational health trends that affect our clients, their employees and families. Collecting and disseminating data about mental health issues, linking with some of the industry's highest profile research institutes and individual scholars, and drawing from our 25 years of expertise in the industry, the WarrenShepell Research Group's mandate is to help our clients and the broader business community understand the intricacies and the impact of poor mental health, work/life imbalances and related issues in our workplaces and in our communities.

The findings contained in this report are based on WarrenShepell proprietary data. The findings are supported by information from a variety of academic, government, and private research institutions. Most references have been omitted for space considerations and are available upon request.

This study was conducted by Paul Fairlie, Director of Research with the WarrenShepell Research Group. The WarrenShepell Research Group is overseen by Karen Seward, VP Research and Development. Questions or comments may be directed to Karen Seward at 1-800-461-9722.