

Exploring current issues and evidence for Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) – A Literature Review

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State Insurance
Regulatory Authority

CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
Why is SIRA doing this?	4
Background of EAP services	5
A review of EAP literature	6
Key findings and opportunities for reform	12
What's next?	14
Anticipated outcomes	15
References	16

GLOSSARY

ABBREVIATIONS	DEFINITION
EAP	Employee assistance program
EAPAA	Employee Assistance Professional Association of Australasia
ROI	Return on Investment
NSW	New South Wales
SIRA	State Insurance Regulatory Authority
MHW	Mentally Healthy Workplaces



SIRA commissioned the Social Research Centre (SRC) to undertake research activities relating to current evidence available for Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services in NSW.

SIRA reviewed literature regarding EAPs within Australia which was further reviewed by the SRC to assess the interpretation of sources, reliability and validity of information and conclusions. The SRC conducted further searches on EAPs in Australia to identify any additional sources and gaps. It is important to note that this literature review is narrative in type and did not follow a systematic process.

The approach

The scope was limited to enable collection of information pertaining to the area of interest. This approach included a search with various parameters in place to intentionally limit the scope.

Timeframe: the timeframe was limited to literature from the past ten years (2011 to 2021). This was done to ensure relevance of sources.

Geographical scope: most research included in the review was based in Australia, however, systematic reviews of EAPs internationally were included where relevant.

Sources: the type of literature analysed was limited to published and unpublished reports, as well as publicly available reports and journal articles. All sources were in English.

Search strategy: involved keyword searches via academic journal databases (The Australian National University Library) and publicly available sources (i.e., Google and Google Scholar). The following keywords were used: 'Employee Assistance Program' and 'Australia.'

Aims of the review

This review aims to present a consolidated summary of the current issues and evidence on EAP services available in NSW, and beyond, and seek input from industry members to:

1. Enable better support services via existing EAP arrangements across the NSW jurisdiction
2. Inform better practice methodology for the delivery of EAP services (with a focus on effectiveness)
3. Share evidence to support validity of EAP services
4. Form a coalition/community of practice of stakeholders to mobilise the learnings from this review to enhance the delivery of workplace support services in NSW.

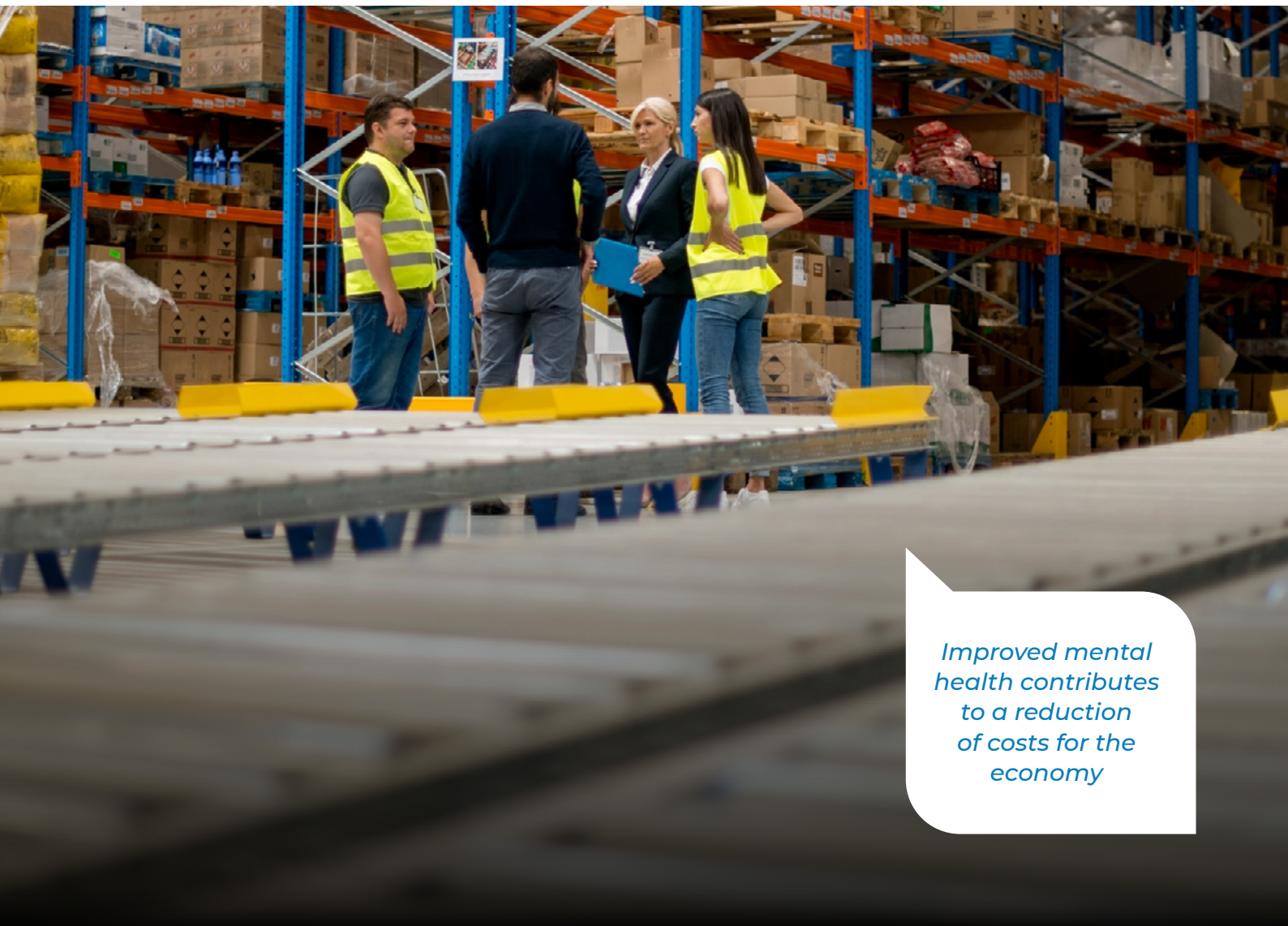
Why is SIRA doing this?



The NSW Government's Mentally Healthy Workplaces (MHW) Strategy launched in June 2018. The strategy sets out a long-term vision to create mentally healthy workplaces across NSW.

The NSW Government's Mentally Healthy Workplaces (MHW) Strategy launched in June 2018. The strategy sets out a long-term vision to create mentally healthy workplaces across NSW. During the COVID-19 pandemic, and in response to increased levels of mental distress in the NSW workforce, the MHW Steering Committee recommended strategy partners investigate the area of EAP to uncover opportunities to maximise the effectiveness of support services for members in meeting current and future workplace needs (*Newby et al., 2020*).

Improved mental health contributes to a reduction of costs for the economy and a key indicator of economic participation in Australia (*Mental Health Productivity Commission Inquiry Report, 2020*). More than ever, policy decisions need to address mental distress in a sustainable, efficient, and effective manner to achieve the intended goals.



Improved mental health contributes to a reduction of costs for the economy

Background of EAP services



EAP services in Australia were established in 1977 with a specific focus on drug and alcohol abuse, and were funded by government grants until 1993 (*Kirk & Brown, 2003*).

Today, the EAP service delivery model offers employees assistance in managing their personal, professional and organisational issues through support services including, counselling and consulting services to prevent and assist in the management of the problems employees experience, and provide overall assistance to support the mental health and wellbeing of the individual (*Joseph & Walker, 2017*).

EAP services are typically offered via phone or online support for individuals with mild to moderate symptoms or temporary distress, “i.e. they are generally well enough to be employed and provide an opportunity for them to receive early intervention help when needed at no cost to themselves” (*EAPAA Response to the Productivity Commission Draft Report on Mental Health (2019) 2019, p. 1*).

EAP providers use triage modes to ensure that people with severe symptoms or who are at risk of self-harm receive appropriate care.





Delivery services and practices

In Australia, EAPs are commonly provided as a mental health workplace intervention in medium and large organisations, with approximately 80% of Australia's top 500 companies having an EAP in place (*Allday, 2013*).

According to the Employee Assistance Professional Association of Australasia Annual President's Report (2019-2020), EAPAA members had responded to more than 9,000 critical incidents and more than 58,000 hours of critical incident or crisis counselling support over that period.

EAPs deliver a range of services including counselling, coaching, mediation, educational resources and risk screening tools. EAPs have evolved over time in terms of the range of offerings and service delivery models (e.g. offering a mobile-first approach), however, there is limited research about the ways in which EAPs have changed and the associated impact on employees and organisations (*Joseph et al., 2017*).

According to the Productivity Commission's Mental Health Inquiry report (2020), there is considerable variation in service delivery, with this determined by the contractual arrangements. Employers can select a basic (i.e., counselling provided by a call centre) or high-level offering (access to psychologists on a face-to-face basis). Given the variability in qualifications and experience of clinicians and providers delivering the services, there has been some concern about the reputation and perceived reliability of EAPs (*Productivity Commission, 2020*).

The Productivity Commission's Mental Health Inquiry report (2020) identified two key actions to improve EAP service delivery:

- Employers need guidance as to which programs are likely to be most effective for their workplace
- EAP providers and their industry bodies, in conjunction with employers, and with employer and employee representatives, should develop minimum standards for EAP and for the evaluation of these programs.

This demonstrates that while EAPs can support workplace mental health, there is further work needed to ensure appropriate, effective, and quality service delivery.



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Guidelines and best practice

Comcare has released the *'Principles for Better Practice Employee Assistance Programs'* which provides evidence-informed guidance for organisations in their implementation and service delivery model of an EAP. This source provides an overview of suggested actions to be undertaken to ensure EAPs better meet workplace needs, including conducting a needs assessment, developing a written policy with EAP providers, specify credentials, training and experience for EAP personnel, and a tailored marketing plan to promote the service.

EAPAA Revised Service Standards (2019) outlines guidance for service delivery, including minimum requirements for EAP providers. The standards are optional but provides EAPAA's members with guidance for service delivery, as well as information that organisations can build into their service-level agreements when procuring EAP services. This source provides guidance for the whole service delivery approach; from implementation plan with each EAP purchaser, to service delivery with employees from referral, to short-term solution focused and crisis intervention.

While the standards promote a systematic EAP delivery approach to support consistent and effective delivery, it is recognised that each EAP will have their own procedures specific to business needs and client and clinician feedback. Furthermore, the standards acknowledge the need for ongoing review and development of service delivery approaches and procedures.

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Effectiveness and outcomes

Joseph et al. (2017) conducted a systematic literature review seeking to evaluate the effectiveness of EAPs. Overall, the studies included in the review found that EAP services enhanced individual and organisational outcomes, including reduction in presenteeism rates and improvements in levels of functioning after using an EAP.

While there is some evidence to demonstrate that EAPs are effective in improving some individual and organisational outcomes, they reported that there are limitations related to the existing evidence on EAPs.

According to the EAPAA Annual President's Report (2019-2020), the effectiveness rate of EAP services in resolving presenting issues was 84% in 2020. In addition, the client satisfaction rate was reported to be 90%. However, there was limited discussion of how effectiveness was defined. The issue related to how to define effectiveness of EAP services and specific parameters is not novel, and this has been investigated by Comcare (*EAPAA Annual President's Report, 2020*).

Further consideration is needed to determine the most useful measures in evaluating the effectiveness of EAPs, however, the most commonly reported measures were utilisation, absenteeism and presenteeism (discussed on the following pages).



One study found that only 8% of employers considered EAP services to be effective in improving absenteeism rates

Absenteeism and presenteeism

Absenteeism was the most common measure included in the literature, however, the findings were varied with some that reported reduced absenteeism, whereas others reported increased rates or no change.

One study found that only 8% of employers considered EAP services to be effective in improving absenteeism rates (Compton & McManus, 2015).

However, there was evidence to suggest that presenteeism may be a better indicator of the impact of EAP on employees.

Utilisation rate

Another measure of effectiveness of EAP services is the utilisation rate, however, this measure is less commonly reported.

Literature included in Joseph et al.'s (2017) systematic review reported that utilisation rates ranged from 2.6% to 8%. The EAPAA survey found that the utilisation rate for EAP services was 6% in 2019-2020.

The Productivity Commission's Mental Health Inquiry report (2020) reported a similar utilisation rate of 5%, with variation between industries (financial and insurance services sector had the highest utilisation rate of 9%, with only 1% for those in the safety and law enforcement industries).

Further research to assess utilisation rates and the barriers to utilisation is fundamental to understanding the effectiveness of EAPs.

Global comparisons

Several recent sources have sought to address EAP evidence gaps by comparing EAP services globally. Roche et al.'s (2021) recent article seeks to address a gap in the literature by providing more critical comparisons of EAPs between various countries.

This research presents findings from an online survey with 74 EAP professionals from across 25 countries including Australia, to provide an overview of the characteristics of EAPs services. These findings identify drivers of development and implementation, and identify trends and differences among regions.

Respondents were asked questions around specific features of EAP services in their country/region including:

- The types of providers and services offered
- Service delivery formats
- Qualification requirements
- Professional organisations
- Standards and guidelines
- Perceptions of EAP efficacy.

They found that service offerings commonly involved relationship (93%), mental health (92%), or trauma or critical incident (92%) counselling, with most support lasting four to five sessions.

The formal qualifications of staff delivering EAP services varied, with Australia having the highest level of requirements for formal qualifications among EAPs (71%) compared to other countries.

They found that there was a trend towards increased use of technology to deliver services, as well as greater focus on well-being initiatives. Internationally, it was recognised that there was increased commercialisation and competition among EAP providers, with the economic and profit factors shaping the business model and service delivery of EAPs.

Attridge's (2019) article explores mental health awareness in workplaces with growing acknowledgement of the risk workplaces can pose to workers' mental health. In this context, EAPs are positioned as key providers of resources and promotion of mental health services in workplaces.

The article further unpacks recent global trends, including growing markets in EAP provision outside of North America, with a relatively substantial portion of these being in Australia. The article cautions against trends observed in North America where EAP offerings are being significantly stripped back.

Attridge asserts that more comprehensive EAP services which include counselling services, support for managers and work teams, expert consultation and supporting arrangements around consultation, educational resources and risk screening tools, can be more effective at becoming integrated into organisations and achieving higher levels of utilisation.

Attridge (2019) discusses new research which uses standardised outcome measures and provides evidence that the use of brief counseling is associated with improvements in presenteeism, absenteeism, workplace distress and work engagement as well as overall life satisfaction. These findings were also consistent across other countries.

Csiernik (2011) also conducted a review of EAP 42 evaluations published between 2000-2009. While most of these evaluations were conducted in the US context, research from other regions was also reviewed including Australia, Canada, Israel, Japan, South Africa, South Korea and the UK. Csiernik compares these evaluations and their various methodologies (i.e. needs assessment, program development, outcome evaluation or process evaluation), noting that these evaluations indicated that EAPs generally produced positive health outcomes for those who seek out counselling and positive financial outcomes for purchasers.

However, Csiernik notes that many of the evaluations had significant limitations, asserting the need for more in-depth evaluations to better assess outcomes of EAPs.

COVID-19 context

Couser et al.'s (2020) article provides a cursory account of the evolution of EAP services during the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of the United States.

It explores some of the challenges and opportunities that a large-scale crisis presents for EAP services and provides examples of how services have responded to these. In this context, EAPs needed to implement a more flexible approach which could evolve to the changing needs of employees in the organisations they operated.

Couser et al.'s (2020) documents the changing utilisation of EAPs during this time and found that counterintuitively, utilisation of counselling services fluctuated greatly beginning with a drop at the onset of the pandemic. Uptake then increased as lockdowns and social distancing restrictions eased.

The nature of employee concerns also changed during the pandemic from common issues around relationships, mental health concerns and work-related issues, then becoming predominantly about mental health concerns.

As people began returning to workplaces, concerns again shifted towards supporting people's transition to a 'new normal'. EAP services gradually became busier and began dealing with higher severity cases with 86% of cases citing COVID-19 as an impact.

EAP services faced numerous changes during this period, including providing and promoting existing and new services. EAPs have also had to consider how to better differentiate their services in a context where there is increased awareness of health service offerings more broadly (Couser et al., 2020).


However, it has also presented opportunities in service delivery. EAPs needed to be responsive to better articulate their value, differentiate themselves for their clients, as well as expand their service offerings to meet evolving needs.

There has been a major shift to more remote and virtual services with broader access through telehealth, video conferencing, online resources, and instant messaging.

According to Couser et al. (2020), more proactive outreach strategies have been employed by EAPs to raise awareness and lower barriers to usage of remote and virtual services among EAP users.

While the effectiveness of these changes is yet to be evaluated, the examples provided by Couser et al. (2020) of responsive and flexible service delivery highlight the need for EAP service providers to continue to evolve to meet changing needs.

It also reveals the need for EAP service providers to better articulate their value and differentiate their service offerings to better educate organisations and employees about EAP.

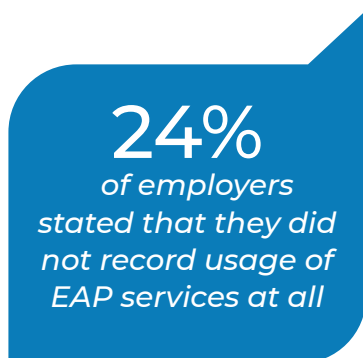


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Monitoring and evaluation

Compton & McManus (2015) noted that the monitoring and evaluation of EAPs was patchy and insufficient. They found that more than half (58%) of organisations that took part in the research had not implemented mechanisms to evaluate the effectiveness of the EAP, with 24% of employers who stated that they did not record usage of EAP services at all.

As part of the literature reviewed, several articles commented on the lack of formal benchmarking to identify best practice or external evaluations to assess effectiveness (Buon & Taylor, 2008; Compton & McManus, 2015). Instead, employers decide the service delivery approach based on their organisational needs. The Productivity Commission's Mental Health Inquiry report (2020) identified that many employers do not fully understand the EAP offering or the appropriateness and effectiveness for their organisation.



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Guidelines related to monitoring and evaluation of EAPs

EAPAA Revised Service Standards (2019) include a requirement to implement internal procedures to ensure regular audits and evaluation of the effectiveness of EAP services, as well as the need for external independent audits. However, the standards do not specify requirements for the EAP provider.

The Productivity Commission's Mental Health Inquiry report (2020) suggested that industry associations representing EAP providers should develop more formal mechanisms to evaluate organisational outcomes, industry standards as well as reliable methods of external evaluation and benchmarking of best practice.

Following this report, Comcare published the 'Principles for Better Practice Employee Assistance Programs' in 2021 which highlights the importance of identifying key metrics to support ongoing monitoring and evaluation of EAPs, as well as identify opportunities for improvement.

Via the principles, Comcare encourages organisations to conduct internal evaluation activities to understand the direct effect of EAP services on employees and the workplace as well as to assess the return on investment. Comcare's 'Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for EAP counselling service' (2021) provides a step-by-step approach that organisations can use to assess EAP services at an individual and organisational level.



This review addresses some of the challenges evidenced in the provision of mental health support services via EAP service providers within workplaces and seeks to explore areas of opportunities to enhance access to effective support.

In general, there has been a narrow focus on measures when evaluating EAP service provision. Most research has focused on organisational outcomes such as reduced absenteeism, with lack of consideration for broader wellbeing outcomes such as health, wellbeing and productivity, or clinical outcomes to measure improvement in psychological functioning.

Like any bespoke service, an effective EAP arrangement is reliant upon careful commissioning, detailed onboarding, supported implementation and regular evaluation to assess the success of their services in place (Compton & McManus, 2015).

Key recommendations

Integrate EAP services and data into organisational safety systems

Integrating EAP services within the organisational landscape is beneficial to provide ease of access for employees who may find themselves reluctant in accessing mental health services, whilst also improving employee wellbeing.

Revisit EAP guidelines and design

To design best fit, evidence based, EAP services, it is helpful to identify and review the purpose and role of EAP's in the modern organisation. Having a greater understanding of the role EAP services play in enhancing employee well-being, the maintenance of psychological contracts in the work context can be similarly improved (Joseph & Walker, 2017).

Currently in the development phase, Comcare is collaborating with employers from across the Australian Public Service (Wrapson & Mewse) to support the delivery of the project (*Supporting workplaces to adopt better practice Employee Assistance Program services - Comcare, 2020*).

Comcare's recent collaboration with employers across the Australian Public Service (Wrapson & Mewse) aims to develop evidence-informed guidance to provide effective EAP services. The guidance material will be purpose built for industry practices to support employers in procuring, promoting and monitoring effective EAP services that provides value for money and improves overall health and wellbeing (Comcare, 2020).

Increase research to reflect the Australian context

Little research has been conducted in Australia. In 2004, only two Australian evaluation studies had been conducted out of 39, which creates further challenges to conduct comparisons between other countries and jurisdictions. The other countries ranged from United States as the lead (29), Canada (6), (2) United Kingdom (Csiernik, 2004).

Currently there is a lack of data and research to establish clear trends that are tangible in the Australian context (Joseph & Walker, 2017).

Furthermore, Compton & McManus (2015) also note that the available literature amongst the field of EAP within human resources is relatively small when compared to other initiatives like performance management, remuneration and training.

Educate and promote EAP services

Australian EAP services use counselling as a core focus, despite EAP providers offering a range of services, integrating work-life and wellbeing programs for the individual.

The greatest challenge is the lack of understanding of the role of EAP's within an organisation and underutilising these services.

Similarly, employers also need to be educated on the problems of workplace mental health and how EAP services can help assist manage these issues.

Referring to the Australian study (Compton & McManus, 2015), table 2 provides a clear indicator that there is no driving motivation for employers to introduce an EAP service, resulting in a lack of evaluation or promotion in the first instance.



Limitations and opportunities for future research

Given the paucity of existing evidence directly relevant to the NSW jurisdiction and the Australian context more broadly, the inclusion of broader global perspectives may help to frame key discussions related to EAP services as well as provide pertinent insights into developments of EAP in other jurisdictions and an assessment of growing research trends.

Currently, Australian EAP services use counselling as a core focus, despite EAP providers offering a range of services, integrating work-life and wellbeing programs for the individual. The greatest challenge is the lack of understanding of the role of EAP's within an organisation and underutilising these services.

Future research should aim to address the limitations highlighted in the evidence to date. A recent systematic review by Joseph, Walker and Fuller-Tyszkiewicz (2017) provides an overview of key limitations and issues related to the existing research and evaluations related to EAPs:

- **Research design:** The majority of existing research has been conducted with quantitative methodologies and post-test intervention designs.
- **Service delivery:** Most research has focused on counselling components of EAPs, with minimal evidence related to broader service delivery components. Some studies also focused on specific groups of employees such as EAP users or those suffering from particular conditions (i.e., drug and alcohol addictions), which cannot be generalised beyond these audiences.
- **Location:** Most research has been conducted in North America, with a lack of research specific to the Australian context.
- **Sample size:** It would be beneficial to increase sample sizes to improve the accuracy, reliability and generalisability of the findings, as well as allow for between-group comparisons.
- **Independent external evaluation:** There was a lack of evaluations conducted externally by independent evaluators to ensure objectivity of findings, with many studies conducted internally.

These limitations impact the ability to assess the validity of research findings related to EAP services.

Key suggestions include greater inclusion of mixed method studies and between-group comparisons to evaluate the effectiveness (i.e., including a control group of non-EAP users to assess the impact of an EAP).

What's next?



Upon publishing this literature review, SIRA is working closely with SRC to conduct stakeholder interviews with industry representatives and conducting qualitative research with employees who have first-hand experiences engaging with EAP services.

Findings from these interviews will help identify issues, gaps and improvements to inform further engagement.

Given that EAP services have not been well evaluated within NSW's jurisdiction, we understand that this research looks to build on the extant evidence around EAP services to promote awareness and best practice, as well as develop a better understanding of how these services are engaged with at an industry and individual level.

Anticipated outcomes



It is anticipated the outcomes will generate discussion and action amongst stakeholders including but not limited to:

Creating awareness to better support EAP arrangements for employees

Enabling best practice methodologies and guidance materials

Mobilise conversations and community groups to enhance the delivery of EAP services across NSW

Understanding how to integrate EAP services and data into organisational safety systems

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