

Measuring the Effectiveness of Employee Assistance Program in the RMGs of Bangladesh: An Evaluative Study

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ABSTRACT

The core objective of the study is to examine the performance of Employee Assistance Program (EAP) in reducing or preventing job and life-relevant problems of the workers of ready-made garments (RMG) sector of Bangladesh. This study measures the competency and commitment of the counselors in delivering EAP services. At the outset, an extensive literature review and expert interview were conducted to identify the variables relevant to successful EAP. Considering the identified variables, a questionnaire consists of 16 questions was developed. Data have been collected from 100 workers of different RMG factories located in Chittagong Export Processing Zone (CEPZ). Regression analysis and coefficient value was calculated to study the performance of EAP. The key discovery of this study is the EAP failed to reduce job stress of the workers and conflict. Counselors were unsuccessful to show helpful behavior and attitude to the workers. Overall EAP was not successful in raising productivity and job satisfaction of the workers. The industry lacks well-trained counselor in true sense and effective training program on stress counseling could be organized for the counselors. Relevant developmental interventions and extending scope of EAP in the RMGs of Bangladesh are recommended in details. RMG industry of Bangladesh is still immature to conceptualize and actualize EAP in principle and practice. Current study may create stimuli among the practitioners to raise the applicability of EAP in this Sector.

Keywords: Human Resource Management, Employee Assistance Program, RMG, Counseling, and Stress.

1. INTRODUCTION

The export-oriented Ready Made Garments (RMG) sector has made vital contribution to the transformation of the Bangladesh economy (Bhattacharya, Rahman & Raihan, 2002). The sector could make an effective attention of the apparel business community around the globe for its quality production with affordable cost, as cheap labor is the key competitive strength of this sector. It has both macro and micro economic contributions to the national economy, which has created an enormous employment in Bangladesh and an exemplary contribution to women's employment and empowerment.

Garments industry of Bangladesh provides 2.8 million employments of women workers (Mahmud, 2012; Ahamed, 2013). Despite the phenomenal success of the RMG sector, lack of standard working environment is a serious concern that has led to a number of labor unrests including damaging assets and loses of human lives. These events are caused by workplace abuse, ill labor practices, inadequate wage structure, and accidents. Workers of this sector experienced anxiety and mental pressure that forced them to undertake violent activities. As a result, Bangladeshi RMG is facing image problem leading to declining demand and withdrawals of trade benefits such as Generalized System of Preference (USA-GSP). In order to rejuvenate the lost image among the world community of buyers, this sector must install EAP as a

comprehensive intervention to reduce stressful situations at work. Though EAP has become a popular practice in the developed countries, its absence in Bangladesh may lead to bad Human Resources Management (HRM) practice and industrial conflict.

History of EAP dated back in 1950 as a social work preventing industrial alcoholism and was renamed to current term during 1970-1980 as a popular organizational practice (Weiss, 2010). It is also a significant and vital element of HRM practice among the developed nations (McManus & Compton, 2015). According to Attridge (2010), it is an employer-sponsored service to ensure psychological wellbeing and improve job performance of the employees who are suffering from different types of occupational stresses. This program provides counseling services on the events such as personal or family problems including mental health, substance abuse, various addictions, marital problems, parenting problems, emotional problems, financial or legal concerns, absenteeism, mental stress, conflict, violent acts, sexual harassment, and involvement in criminal activities such as theft, and snatching. EAP is a value added human resource management practice that can help employees to cope up with critical situations in their lives under significant work pressure. Organizations should take this intervention for their self-interest to bring out the fullest potentials of an employee (Sharar & Lennox, 2009).

Most of the renowned RMGs in Bangladesh introduced EAP in the form of workers' counseling services under the guidance of human resources policy and company code of conduct. Officers were hired as counselor to provide necessary services. EAP services include counseling on disciplinary cases, workplace safety, workplace conflict, absenteeism, physical illness, mental and emotional illness, compliances, sexual harassment, company code of contract, and labor law and educating Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority (BEPZA) rules (Islam, 2015). However, EAP is still an unexplored issue in terms of practice, and knowledge development in RMG area which will help the management of the RMG sector for effective utilization of human resources and maintain a stress-free work environment through counseling services. This study measure the effectiveness of EAP practice in RMG factories of Bangladesh based on the opinions of the beneficiaries (the workers) of the program in order to develop propositions for managerial decision-making.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Studies conducted by different researchers (Mahmud, 2012; Ahamed, 2013) reported that most of the RMG workers face problems such as mental stress, workplace abuse, conflict and many on or off job stress related to their workplace or personal life. Work pressure that triggers stress in life may create an uncondusive work environment to perform jobs effectively. No job is stress free and it is impossible to escape from stress. It is the responsibility of the organization to help workers in combating stress and program such as EAP is an effective intervention to manage stress and keep the workers productive (Huda & Azad, 2015). It is also admitted by many researchers about the necessity of EAP program in an organization. However, the program itself needs to be studied to ensure its performance. RMG sector of Bangladesh initiated EAP in a form of partial or full fledge counseling programs by a Korean Foreign Direct Investment organization namely Youngone Corporation in late 2002 and later it was officially adopted by BEPZA (Nawaz, 2012). At present, EAP is a mandatory scheme for the RMGs mostly operating in EPZ area. According to BEPZA rules, it is mandatory for all the organization to hire counselors according to 1: 500 worker ratios. This study endeavors to identify the relevant success factors of EAP and measure its effectiveness through both exploratory and conclusive research. This study will try to develop a conceptual proposition to make this program more meaningful in Bangladesh.

3. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The broad objective of the study is to examine the overall performance of EAP. According to the literature and expert opinion, it is clear that, the performance of EAP could be measured by: 1) measuring its role to reduce or prevent work and family related problems, 2) measuring the level of quality and commitment of counselors in delivering services, and 3) to assess the contribution of the program in ensuring employee job satisfaction and productivity. From the aforementioned statements, the study has drawn four specific research questions.

3.1 Research Question

1. What is the role of EAP in reducing or preventing work and family related problems?
2. How competent the counselors are in delivering services to the beneficiaries of EAP?
3. What is the capacity of EAP in increasing job satisfaction and productivity?
4. What could be done to improve EAP program in Bangladesh?

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

EAP is an employee wellbeing program that provides service to employees experiencing mental problem resulted from their job and family (Kirk & Brown, 2003). It is a psychological service offered to the employees as a major technique of occupational stress management (Kirk & Brown, 2003). The program is designed to provide mental (Gerstein & Bayer, 1990 & Arthur, 2002), behavioral (Cole, Smith & Cecka, 2012; Osilla, Cruz, Miles, Zellmer, Watkins, Larimer & Marlatt, 2010; McCann, Azzone, Merrick, Hiatt, Hodgkin & Horgan, 2010; Attridge, 2010 & Merrick, Hodgkin, Hiatt, Horgan, Greenfield & McCann, 2011), and occupational stress management (Clavelle, 2009) services with the objective to support the employees having performance problem due to substance abuse (Arthur, 2002), stress, anxiety (Arthur, 2002), depression (Arthur, 2002, Richmond, 2014), addiction to drugs (Osilla et al. 2010; & Weiss, 2010), traumatic injury (Cole et al. 2012), subject to intimate partner violence (Salomon, Dickin, Gray, Grisso, Cummiskey, Krotki, & Pollack, 2010; Pollack, Cumminskey, Solomon, Krotki, Austin, & Grisso, 2010 & Walters, Clinton-Sherrod, Lindquist, McKay, Lasater, & Pollack, 2010), harassment (Newton, Hayday, & Barkworth, 2005, cited in Sinclair, & O'Regan, 2007) marital problems, career issues (Johnson, 2008), financial troubles and workplace conflict (Scott, n.d.) and suicide (Kirkey, 2015; Australia, 2014; "Counseling-directory" a web site for work related stress <http://www.counselling-directory.org.uk/workissues.html>). EAP is a popular intervention to reduce job stress (Cooper & Cartwright, 1997). Organizations provide EAP for legal obligation, to develop an image in the labor market as caring organization and to increase productivity by reducing occupational stress (Newton, et al. 2005, cited in Sinclair, & O'Regan, 2007). Authors like McLeod (2001), Cuthell, (2004) and Cooper and Sadri, (1995) reported about the success of EAP program in British companies and the operatability of EAP compared to other types of alterative interventions.

EAP is a psychological therapeutic delivery system (Gerstein & Bayer, 1990) or well-being service conducted in the form counseling, consultation (Arthur, 2002, Kirk & Brown, 2003; Pollack et al. 2010, Dickerson, Murphy, & Clavelle, 2012, & Sharar, 2009), assessment (Arthur, 2000) and referrals (Cowell, Bray, & Hinde, 2012; Pollack et al. 2010 & Arthur, 2000) to ensure stress free life (personal, emotional, behavioral and psychological) and to overcome performance problem. According to Yamatani, Santangelo, Maue and Heath (1999), modern employee counseling programs play a crucial role in helping employees with medical, psychological, personal, family, financial, and legal problems. These counseling systems consist of problem assessment, supportive counseling, referrals to higher levels of treatment, wellness education and training, and follow-ups for employees (McCann, Azzone, Merrick, Hiatt, Hodgkin, & Horgan, 2010). It is highly beneficial for the management (McLeod, 2001) and has

become a significant issue of organizational behavior, and HRM (McManus & Compton, 2015; Agyemang et al. 2014; Cole et al. 2012). It is a management tool that helps in absenteeism management (US DoL, 2009), improve workplace performance, productivity and respond to critical situation resulting in customer satisfaction (Arthur, 2000), cost efficiency (Yamatani et al. 1999), corporate reputation (Agyemang et al. 2014) and acts as employee retention strategy (Scott, n.d.). According to Kirk and Brown (2003), interventions in term of counseling programs are crucial in reducing absenteeism, lower employee turnover, and increase employee morale. It helps in balancing work and personal life in an easier way (Scott, n.d.). Counseling programs also an effective technique to ensure good working environment for employees with high expectations work performance (Arthur, 2000; Yun, Takeuchi, & Liu, 2007).

According to Kirk and Brown (2003), the major objective of EAP program is to prevent and remediate occupational and family problems that cause stress in employees' life. Employees should be knowledgeable about the items or content of the service and these should be made easily accessible to them (Donnelly, Valentine, & Oehme, 2015; Pollack et al. 2010). Every organization should assess the performance of EAP, maintain the imitative of improvement and effectiveness through regular monitoring and program evaluation (Compton & McManus, 2015; McLeod, 2001). Another major factor that contribute to effective EAP is that the counselors should be well trained and hired under accredited professional development program (Taranowski & Mahieu, 2013). In addition, the counselors also should have adequate experience in counseling field (Cooper & Sadri, 1995) and act positively to its beneficiaries.

From the above literature review, it is discovered that EAP should cover three broad issues (Table 1) for its overall success. The first issue is to provide employee wellbeing service that helps reduce work and family related problems i.e. job stress, conflict, harassment, mental and family problems through counseling services. Secondly, the counselors' performance in terms of quality and commitment should be effective enough to ensure the success of EAP. Finally, the overall result of EAP should ensure employees' individual productivity and job satisfaction.

It is also revealed through literature review that most of the authors like Arthur (2000), Kirk and Brown (2003), Donnelly (2015, Compton (2015) and Weiss (2010) did their researches in the developed countries like Unites States of America, United Kingdom and Australia within job cultural and social context. Their EAP original aim is to prevent alcoholism at workplace which was extended to occupational stress management issues.

From the literature review, it was also clear that most of the researchers work on the importance of EAP taking the organizational benefit side but avoided the opinion of the beneficiaries of EAP that is the employees. Current study will take the opportunity to fill the gap of research by measuring the performance of EAP in Bangladeshi context by taking workers view on its effectiveness.

Table 1 Broad categories and specific variables of EAP

Broad Categories of EAP	SL. No	Variables	Code	Reference
1. Employee Well-being Issues of EAP	B ₁	Reduce job stress	Job stress	Arthur, (2002); Clavelle, (2009)
	B ₂	Reduce worker place harassment	Harassment	Sarker, & Afroze, (2014).
	B ₃	Reduce workplace conflict/violence	Conflict	Scott, (n.d.)
	B ₄	Reduce mental problem	Mental	Kirk and Brown, (2003)
	B ₅	Solve family & marital	Family	Johnson, (2008); Kirk and Brown,

Broad Categories of EAP	SL. No	Variables	Code	Reference
2. Counselor's Performance Issues of EAP		problem		(2003)
	B ₆	Counselors Qualification	Qualification	Martin, (2016); Marsh, Dale, and Willis, (2007)
	B ₇	Counselors helpfulness	Helpfulness	Cooper and Sadri, (1995); Marsh et al, (2007)
	B ₈	Counselors behavior	Behavior	Cooper and Sadri, (1995); Marti, (2016)
	B ₉	Counselors time engagement for EAP	Time	Martin, (2016)
	B ₁₀	Counselors seriousness	Seriousness	Cooper and Sadri, (1995); Marsh et al, (2007)
	B ₁₁	Counselors priority realization	Priority	Martin, (2016)
	B ₁₂	Counselors listen considerately	Listen	Cooper and Sadri, (1995); Martin, (2016)
	B ₁₃	Counselors suggestion	Suggestion	Martin, (2016)
	3. Outcome of EAP	B ₁₄	Productivity Improvement	Productivity
B ₁₅		Increase satisfaction	Job Job satisfaction	Industry experts

5. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This exploratory research was conducted in order to attain the objectives of this study. Literature review and expert interview were done to identify important variables necessary in order to achieve the objectives of EAP. Opinion from the industry experts (practicing managers of EAP and senior managers of human resource department) were taken for variables identification and to formulate relevant questions for research instrument. Extensive literature review was also conducted in this regard. In order to achieve the second objective, a conclusive research was conducted through primary data collection. A total of 15 questions were selected out of 21 variables discovered from literature review. According to the experts' opinion, several variables namely alcoholism, sexual violence, suicide, and drug addiction are discarded from the study, as these variables are not very common in the socio-cultural context of Bangladesh. They also suggested removing the academic qualification issue of the councilors as most of them are not academically certified especially on psychology discipline like the first world countries. In order to gather opinion from the beneficiaries of EAP, a total of 100 workers who had received EAP services (mostly in the form of counseling service) were selected randomly. The 5-point Likert rating scale (*5 Strongly agree ...1 Strongly disagree*) was used to capture the opinion of the respondents about the counseling performance of EAP. Respondents were chosen from five RMG factories located in export processing zone of Chittagong. The survey was carried out during June to December 2016.

In the questionnaire, workers were asked questions related to what extent the program helped them to reduce stress issues such as workplace abuse, conflict, injustice, family problem, and mental pressure. The questionnaire items also involved in to what extent the program is effective in raising productivity and job satisfaction based on efficiency of the counselors and sincerity of management in ensuring effective EAP. The conceptual model of the EAP is given below.

Overall effectiveness of EAP = A + B₁ Stress + B₂ Harassment + B₃ Conflict + B₄ Mental + B₅ Family + B₆ Qualification + B₇ Helpfulness + B₈ Behavior + B₉ Time + B₁₀ Seriousness + B₁₁ Priority + B₁₂ Listening + B₁₃ Suggestion + B₁₄ Productivity + B₁₅ Job Satisfaction.

6. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

6.1 Results of Regression Analysis

Table 2 Regression result

R	R Square	F	Sig. F Change
.759 ^a	.576	7.603	.000

R-value ranges from 0-1 and any R-value is greater than 0.50 shows an acceptable fit of the model (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2016). According to Table 2, the R-value shows overall fitness of the model, as the value is 0.759. In addition, as the value of R is much near to 0.80 it indicates the model of the study is satisfactorily fit. The analysis shows less deviation between the value of R Square (0.576) and Adjusted R Square (0.500). This also indicates the better fitness of the model the model is highly significant as the F Value of the model is 0.000. (Sig value less than 0.05 is highly significant).

6.2 Proposed Model Based on Results

Overall effectiveness of EAP = 2.11 -0.11 Stress + 0.24 Harassment -0.25 Conflict reduction
 (-1.154; .252) (2.574; .012) (-2.471; .016)
 + 0.24 Mental + 0.12 Family + 0.050 Qualification -0.155 Helpfulness -0.17 Behavior
 (2.490; .015) (1.051; .296) (.470; .640) (-1.555; .124) (-1.304; .196)
 + 0.57 Time -0.069 Seriousness + 0.15 Priority + 0.092 Listening - 0.315 Suggestion
 (4.451; .000) (-.726; .470) (1.436; .155) (.974; .333) (-3.037; .003)
 -0.092 Productivity -0.52 Job Satisfaction
 (-1.008; .317) (-4.801; .000)

6.3 Results and Discussion of Coefficients Analysis

This section elaborately discussed the findings of this study with possible reasons. In order to validate the findings, results were discussed with six industry experts who are highly experienced in human resources management of RMG industry.

Table 3 Coefficients

Serial No.	Variables	Coefficients value	T	Sig.
B ₁	Stress	-.110	-1.154	.252
B ₂	Harassment	.248	2.574	.012
B ₃	Conflict	-.251	-2.471	.016
B ₄	Mental Problem	.243	2.490	.015
B ₅	Family Problem	.125	1.051	.296
B ₆	Qualification	.050	.470	.640
B ₇	Helpfulness	-.155	-1.555	.124
B ₈	Behavior	-.173	-1.304	.196
B ₉	Time	.570	4.451	.000

B ₁₀	Seriousness	-.069	-.726	.470
B ₁₁	Priority	.154	1.436	.155
B ₁₂	Listen	.092	.974	.333
B ₁₃	Suggestion	-.315	-3.037	.003
B ₁₄	Productivity	-.099	-1.008	.317
B ₁₅	Job Satisfaction	-.527	-4.801	.000

According to the results of coefficients analysis, the relationship between dependent variable (performance of EAP) and the independent variables (Table 1) are revealed. Out of 16 variables, a total of 8 independent variables namely stress, conflict, helpfulness, behavior, seriousness, suggestion, productivity and job satisfaction are found to have negative relationship with the dependent variable.

Job stress is found with an inverse relationship with EAP (Coefficient -.110). It means that the EAP program of RMGs was not successful in reducing the vital variable (Cuthell, 2004). However, the level of significance of the data is found insignificant (Coefficient .252). This situation may cause by the inefficiency of the counselor in stress management. After sharing data with the experts, it was found that, most of the counselors are not trained in stress management and the management of the organization is reluctant to organize such training. Although from the study it is discovered that the counselors are qualified however only in term of academic qualification. RMGs are hiring academically qualified counselors but it does not mean they are well trained or skilled in handling EAP. According to the industry experts, the job of the workers are not well designed even it is applicable for the management employees like counselors. As most of the RMGs do not maintain a separate functional unit for counseling, this function comes under the Human Resources (HR) Department. So, most of the counselors perform HR departmental works.

On the issue of reducing the conflict through EAP, it is also found that the program was not successful in reducing conflict at work (Coefficient -.251) and the coefficient value is highly significant (Coefficient .016). Conflict management is a vast issue and in this industry most of the conflict occurs between workers and management. According to the industry experts, counselors are positioned as management employees, and they represent management. So, culturally they may not be interested to take side of the workers at the time of conflict or may try to avoid its remedy fearing the top management. "Them and Us" gap is very common in Bangladeshi job culture and that is why most of the workers also feel that the counselors are not at their side. As a result, they feel comfortable to report their grievance to the Workers Welfare Association bypassing the counselors.

On the issue of counselor's helpfulness in providing EAP effectively and the behavior of the counselors, the relationship is found negative with coefficient value of -.155 and -.173 respectively. It could mean the counselors are not helpful to the workers in providing EAP services effectively and their behavior with the workers could be unwelcoming. Significant value of both the variables (Helpfulness and Behavior) are found to be insignificant at .124 and .196 respectively. It is also discovered from the analysis that they are not serious about the EAP, and their suggestions to the workers are not appropriate to assist the workers in solving their problems, as the relationship is found negative coefficient value -.069 and -.315 respectively. According to the industry experts, counselors are not motivated in their job as there is no recognized career path in this occupation. The performance indicator of the job is less measurable and the position is less visible to the top management. In terms of career development, most of the counselors are interested to learn and do the HR functions and found disengaged and reluctant to counseling.

Finally, on the issue of EAPs contribution to improve productivity and job satisfaction of the workers, the relationship is also found negative (Coefficient $-.099$ and $-.527$). It means the ultimate result of EAP is not effective. However, the coefficient value of job satisfaction is highly significant that is $.000$ (Significant Value). It may happen as the impact of EAP program maybe unclear to the management in cost-benefit terms to make them interested to invest in this comparatively new idea. On the other hand, EAP is totally a service based program and workers may be confused to understand how it influences job satisfaction, as there is no tangible financial benefit of the program. Until today, the understanding of job satisfaction of the RMG workers in Bangladesh is highly confined within financial gain of a job and may not value the investment on EAP by their employer (Sarker & Afroze, 2014). However, as the workers are not ready to give any point to EAP influencing their job satisfaction, no question comes in terms of linking productivity as outcome of successful EAP.

Besides the negatives, there are some positive findings of the study. RMGs have succeeded to improve their EAP in achieving better result in the area of reducing harassment (.248), and mental health (.243). The level of significance of the coefficient value is also high. According to the experts, the counselors are doing very well in this area. Most of the counselors are female and they do not compromise with the harassment issue at workplace, as most of the workers are female too.

EAP program of the sample RMGs has somewhat been successful in reducing family problems as the relationship was found positive (coefficient $.125$). This coefficient value of the variable is found insignificant ($p = .296$). According to the industry experts it revealed that, some of the RMG factories have initiated family welfare programs for the workers. The other variables of counselors' performance i.e. counselors are qualified (Coefficient $.050$), their time engagement (Coefficient $.570$) for EAP, priority realization (Coefficient $.154$) and considerate listening (Coefficient $.092$) are found with positive relationship with EAP. It means EAP has succeeded in this regard. However, the significant values of these variables are found insignificant apart from time engagement variable. From the study it is evident that the qualification and skill of the counselors had no way contributed in EAP program in maximizing productivity and job satisfaction of the workers. According to the findings, the relationship of productivity and job satisfaction variable is found negative ($-.099$ and $-.527$).

7. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATION

Successful EAP is beneficial in solving various types of employee problems that affect job performance of the organization. The program is also motivational to the workers that results in productivity enhancement and job satisfaction. Though the practice of the program is very new in Bangladesh, it should be considered as high priority by the management as to sustain peace and harmony in this industry. The study exposed some reality of the EAP program of the RMG sector of Bangladesh. In some issues like reduction of harassment at job and solving mental problems of the workers are observed remarkably. To make the program effective, counselors' training is very important. Regular training sessions could be organized for the counselors' hiring external counseling psychology practitioners. Besides, candidates with the educational background with industrial psychology and relevant subjects should be preferred at the time of hiring the counselor position. They should be empowered with proper authority and responsibility to attain the workers problems boldly to take the sensitive issues to the attention of management. Independent counseling department could be formed in the organizational structure or it could be a core function of human resource department where workers should enjoy the opportunity of participating in EAP policy formulation, monitoring, and auditing. Regular awareness program could be arranged to make the workers and management knowledgeable on the EAP issues as a preventive measure to eradicate harassment and conflict at work. To solve family related problems mostly related to child care, some RMG factories

developed parenting resource center to counsel working mothers in association with international NGOs. Some are focusing on employment related Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs. Few garments factories at Dhaka have initiated different employee engagement programs like “work and play” to inflate the morale of the employees.

The study makes a considerable contribution to understand the importance of EAP as a standard practice of employee wellness program and better industrial relations at large. The research result may aid the managers, practitioners, and consultants to shape a better work environment for the people who are less empowered. In terms of further research, it will be a great opportunities for the scholars to extend the scope of the research considering large sample size and different categories of sector like textile, steel mills and armed forces. Researchers could examine the relationship of EAP with productivity and profitability of the organizations.

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