

# conversation

with Lissa Daub  
and Rod Ezekiel



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*"Prior to the pandemic, there was a great need for EAPs, and now there's an even higher level of awareness and sensitivity to the need," said Rod Ezekiel, wellness expert and director of well-being, new business and partnerships for Telus Health. Since their inception as initiatives primarily addressing substance misuse, EAPs have evolved into comprehensive, employee-centric programs that address a wide range of personal and workplace challenges. They are increasingly recognized as a valuable tool for promoting employee well-being, improving workplace productivity and enhancing overall organizational health. Ezekiel and Lissa Daub, founder of The Strong Impact Academy, talked about approaches organizations can take to better understand the value of employee assistance programs (EAPs) during their panel discussion webcast, "A 360-Degree Look at EAPs."*

## *Why are EAPs important to you personally?*

**Ezekiel:** I worked as a telecommunications executive for a number of years. During that time, a colleague and good friend—who had been a professional athlete and stayed in shape—ended up having a stroke as a result of the demanding roles we held. Within a few years, I found myself severely burnt out and had to take a full year off to recover. It was during this break that I recognized the availability of professional assistance, which could have been beneficial for both me and my friend. At that point, I dedicated my life to working on well-being and realized that a foundation of well-being needed space in the corporate environment.

## *Among employers, what do you think is the general perception of the real value of an employee assistance program?*

**Daub:** A lot of employers are still putting in EAPs because it's just another box to check. From that standpoint, it's like, "Well, we're paying for it. So, they should just use it." But it's not going that much further. I think that the perceived value might be a little bit low until somebody actually uses it. Our communication with these programs could be so much better.

There is also a disconnect because, ultimately, employers want to do the right thing. The landscape of work is changing so much. Employers

don't always know what the right thing is, and they rely a lot on their benefits advisors to help them. What I'm seeing, though, because I work in a lot of the leadership development areas, is that whether they need help with budgeting or clearing the obstacles to well-being, they are trying to figure it out themselves. When people are put into leadership positions, they're put in there for their technical skills. Anything that an EAP does becomes a difficult conversation for a leader at any level of the organization if they lack familiarity with such programs. A leader unfamiliar with EAPs might instinctively reject the idea, avoiding it. This underscores the importance of educating those responsible for administering the program to encourage utilization. This contributes to creating a culture that embraces reaching out for help when needed.

## *How can employers overcome the stigmas that may be attached to EAPs?*

**Ezekiel:** Part of the stigma stems from the fact that originally EAPs began as occupational alcohol programs to address the negative impact that alcohol misuse has on productivity and organizational performance. Government bodies and organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous assisted workers who struggled with alcohol dependency. More of the organizations took on that responsibility, and they continued

expanding programs to where they are today. To me, EAPs are a foundation of well-being with high value, high impact and very low cost. And they started with empathy for the employee within the workplace.

Confidentiality is important, first and foremost. COVID has slightly changed the optics around getting mental health support. Some of the stigma has minimized itself to a level where folks will reach out. But the bottom line is education. There's so much noise on so many levels. If leadership and managers take an active role in getting the messaging out, using EAPs themselves and talking about different aspects of these programs, that could really help. EAPs are a holistic approach to helping employees where they need it and clearing obstacles to well-being so they can focus and be productive at work.

### *How does offering an EAP enhance engagement and a sense of belonging amongst employees?*

**Daub:** It's taking care of your employees. It's asking: What do people need? What do people want? Everybody, regardless of generation, has an inherent need to belong to something. To feel like they're part of something bigger than themselves, and part of that is feeling like they're being cared for. We are here to work and get a job

done. However, when companies take care of the whole person and remove obstacles, they allow that person to be part of something bigger and bring their whole selves to work, which makes them a highly engaged employee. That old culture of command and control, leave your personal problems at the door—That doesn't work anymore. If you're looking to build a profitable organization (and let's face it, we all are), then you have to manage the whole person. This becomes not just a nice thing to do—It becomes the right thing to do.

### *COVID-19 had a detrimental impact on mental health. Is there evidence of improvement in mental well-being?*

**Ezekiel:** We've studied the impact of pandemics for over 30 years. It takes around two years to come out of a pandemic from a mental health perspective. We've been studying monthly global trends from the COVID-19 pandemic for almost 30 months, and we are slowly coming out of it. We are seeing some very small progress, step by step. But the shortness of our ability to understand our environment and our knee-jerk reactions to things is still an issue. We also see that for employees under 50, sensitivity to stress and the impact on their mental health are double that of employees over 50. They need more mental health support now than ever

before, and to ensure effective utilization, it's crucial to leverage technology and pick a partner that is capable of fitting the needs of the organization and the employees.

### *How can organizations communicate better to help employees understand the confidentiality and value of EAPs?*

**Daub:** In my previous role in HR, mostly working with blue-collar companies, confidentiality was a recurring issue—They're more skeptical than other industries. They would ask about our ability to track and understand employee activities. To address their concerns, we took a proactive approach during an employee meeting. We presented a page from our usage report, showing them the exact information we received. Their reaction was positive. They acknowledged the value of this data as a tool for making informed decisions. We explained that, for instance, if we noticed a significant number of employees accessing our EAP for substance-related issues, we would use that data as a starting point for discussions. We'd offer education and explore ways to better support both employees and their families in dealing with such challenges. Transparency played a crucial role in building trust, and using that data helped to improve employee well-being.

