

Employers seeing the benefit of assisting employees

By **JENNIFER OCHSTEIN**
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C SOUTH BEND
ompany culture at Gibson Insurance Group in South Bend has a particular philosophy when it comes to employees.

“We’re employee-centric,” said Shelly Smith, director of human resources at Gibson.

After all, making sure employees are satisfied indirectly makes the company more successful.

“Having non-stressed employees is better for them and it’s better for us,” Smith said. When they’re more personally happy, they can concentrate more at work, making them more productive, Smith explained.

While it may not account for all employee contentment at Gibson, the company’s Employee Assistance Program, or EAP, likely accounts for some.

See *BENEFIT 4*



Gibson Insurance Group is seeing the increase in employers who are sponsoring employee assistance programs for their staff. Seated, from left, are Shelly Smith, director of human resources, and Heather Schmidt, service representative. Standing is Chad R. Hahn, account executive in the employee benefits division.

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Benefit

"We implemented an EAP to keep them (employees) happy, and just plain keep them," Smith said.

Indeed, EAPs now seem to be the norm rather than the exception at companies across the nation, according to Emma Walshe, director of Madison Center's Business and Industry Clinic and a therapist who works with employees who use their companies' EAPs.

An Employee Assistance Program, as its name may suggest, is designed to help employees deal with mental health issues they may be facing, Walshe explained. EAPs are particularly helpful for employees who struggle to balance work and life and helpful for employers who need to assist certain employees with issues specific to the workplace.

And EAPs are not new, growing out of the Alcoholics Anonymous program 70 to 80 years ago, said Walshe, who saw the programs really take off during the 1970s.

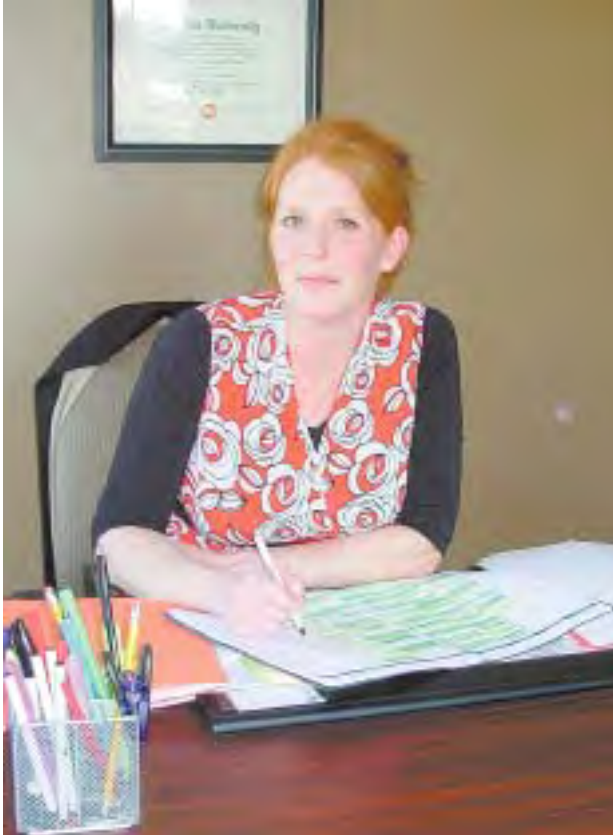
LouAnn Dobbins, coordinator of EAP business development for New Avenues in South Bend, says

the programs have become very popular.

"I've been in EAPs for 24 years, and when I started, maybe 50 percent of Fortune 500 companies offered them, and I would say that close to 100 percent have them now," Dobbins said.

New Avenues, which has offices in 24 states, in part, covers 150,000 people through EAPs with 2,000 mental health providers nationwide, Dobbins said. Further, she described EAP as early intervention. "It doesn't have to be a major problem, but I always say that we're all human and because we're all human we all experience personal problems in our lives. And this is for those problems that don't resolve quickly."

Madison Center's Business and Industry Clinic serves two clients when it comes to EAPs: those who refer themselves and those who have been referred by a supervisor, Walshe explained. Those who refer themselves have identified areas in which they're experiencing personal difficulties. Those referred by a supervisor or management are often having job-related problems. Perhaps, for example, the employee is regularly late for work and he isn't providing an adequate



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Emma Walshe is director of Madison Center's Business and Industry Clinic in South Bend.

reason for tardiness. Walshe said random drug screenings are also administered through the EAP.

"EAPs are very positively regarded and seen as a real benefit to both parties," Walshe said of employees and employers. Part of that

benefit for employees stems from its confidentiality.

"We don't actually know who uses it," says Shelly Smith, with Gibson. "We see a usage number, but we can't identify the individuals."

Indeed, Walshe con-

firmed, employers don't know which employees are using it unless it is a supervisor referral. But even then the supervisor doesn't know the content of the meetings or the detail of involvement with the employee.

EAPs can help employees with a variety of personal issues, including short-term or chronic stress or depression, marital and family therapy, substance abuse, personal relationship issues, work-related conflicts, traumatic experiences, work/life balance, career counseling and crisis response for employees who've experienced a crisis at work, for example, a bank teller living through a bank robbery, Walshe explained.

"People often ask us 'what's the point of therapy,'" she said. "It's to create change. People don't present for therapy if they don't need to change. I help facilitate change."

Walshe said she finds that part of her job also includes educating people about mental health, holding training workshops for de-escalating tense situations and recognizing the signs for depression or substance abuse. One of the major misconceptions people have regarding EAPs or

therapy in general is that "only crazy people" get therapy.

"They have the impression that the level of mental illness has to be high to use the service," Walshe said. "They don't realize that coming to talk about the mild stressors is good, so that stress doesn't become really big. People still have to push past the stigma." She said part of what she does with clients is to normalize the experience of seeking therapy.

Another misconception, Dobbins added, is that many employers believe EAPs are expensive.

"They're well worth the money," she said, claiming that for every \$1 spent on EAPs, employers save \$5 to \$10 in lost productivity.

Smith agreed. She said she knows employees are using it because she sees the numbers of people who use it and because the company itself has a low turnover rate.

"I'm not sure you can tie the two together, but I think it helps," Smith said.

But it just logically follows that if employees are distracted by personal problems, they're not as efficient at work and likely not as happy in their personal lives, she said.

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