



Government

Sector EAP analysis
and clinical insights


assure
PROGRAMS

COMMENTARY

Introduction

This report considers the psychosocial risks and insights derived from EAP (Employee Assistance Program) observations for customers in the Government Sector. It is intended to support Assure Programs' business partners in exploring trends at an industry level and is best used in conjunction with each customer's individual EAP reporting and other data sources, to inform proactive mental health and wellbeing strategies.

Assure covers over one million Australians across all industry sectors including employees' family members, and in 2019 provided 65,000 hours of EAP counselling and 6,800 hours of support for critical incidents and significant events. 77% of all Assure's counselling sessions were face to face, and 95% of clients were either 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with their counselling experience.

In the Government Sector, Assure provides EAP services to 21 organisations, totalling 42,000 employees plus their families. In 2019 Assure provided 5,000 counselling sessions and 460 hours of support for critical incidents and significant events in this sector.

Mental health issues are the most common reason people are accessing EAP at Assure, comprising 35% of all presenting concerns. Because we only use experienced psychologists (not provisionally registered psychologists, counsellors, social workers or chaplains) we are able to assess and treat these issues (particularly complex and trauma-related cases) using evidence-based interventions. Additionally, if appropriate, we offer continuity of care for longer term treatment in conjunction with a GP Mental Health Care Plan, where clients can receive rebates through the Medicare system when necessary and continue to use the same Assure psychologist if they choose.

Industry context and psychosocial risks

The opportunity to make a difference to the local, state or national community can be a powerful motivator for individuals working within this sector. Having noted this, working in the government (including at the local, state or federal level) can be associated with a high degree of pressure to meet the needs and requirements of the public and other stakeholders. At times, this could necessitate working to tight deadlines, a meticulous attention to detail, and maintaining a constant awareness of regulatory requirements and the broader context within which one's work sits. These demands may be detrimental to an individual's wellbeing if strategies are not put in place to help them safeguard their mental health.

In addition to this, challenging emotions may arise in cases when the process of making societal change is hampered by rules and regulatory requirements, or when the results of one's work are not directly visible to the employees or other stakeholders involved. For example, taking steps to commence or maintain a valued community service or intervention could be constrained by legislation. Understanding how to focus on the factors within one's control, switch off, and take steps to prevent burnout may thus be particularly critical in this context.

Relatedly, although work in the Government Sector is not inherently political, the work may be influenced by changes in political leadership or decisions made at the upper levels of government. For example, a change of leadership could culminate in a departmental restructure or an amendment to budgets in order to achieve greater efficiency. Having noted this, possessing the psychological flexibility and resilience required to adapt to these changes may be an important component of working effectively in this sector.

Direct interaction with the public may also pose psychosocial risks for employees within this sector. For example, the provision of support or advice to members of the public (e.g., as part of frontline roles in defence, health, education, or social services) could place employees in situations where they need to de-escalate aggressive or confrontational behaviour, including verbal or physical abuse. This may be particularly the case at times when public-facing departments receive increased media attention or heightened public scrutiny as a result of decisions made. Employees in these situations could be subject to a greater risk of anxiety or vicarious trauma, particularly given their perceived sense of accountability to the greater community. Taking steps to manage these risks and provide adequate support at all levels of government is thus a critical component of promoting a psychologically safe and healthy workplace.

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EAP Insights

The information on the following pages summarises EAP utilisation for Assure's customers in the Government Sector over the past two years, in comparison with all other sectors. We can make the following observations and insights:

- Overall utilisation was marginally lower from 9.58% in 2018 to 9.16% in 2019, compared to 8.15% for the all-sector average in 2019. This stable degree of utilisation reflects consistent levels of awareness and acceptance of mental health issues between 2018 and 2019. The observation that EAP usage is higher in the Government Sector than in other sectors may relate to the diverse psychosocial risks associated with this sector and employee role types within it, as well as the high degree of pressure to meet the needs and requirements of the public and the greater community.
- The most common age of clients (29% aged 30-39) is slightly lower than in other sectors (33%), but higher than during 2018 (26%). It was also notable that substantially more clients were aged 50 or above in the Government Sector (24%) compared to other sectors (15%) and also during the previous year (23%). This could suggest that greater support may be needed for personnel in this sector later on in their careers (e.g., leading up to or during the transition to retirement).
- 33% of clients were in their first 2 years of tenure, compared to 37% across all sectors. By way of contrast, 29% of clients had exceeded 8 years of tenure, compared to 25% across all sectors. This may be reflective of the longstanding commitment that many personnel in this sector make to the public service over their career. It could also corroborate the potentially greater need for support later in life for employees in this sector.
- More clients were female (70%) than for other sectors (63%). This may be consistent with the overall gender mix of employees in this sector, especially older employees noting the comments above regarding age and length of tenure.
- Access by family members was slightly higher between 2018 (11%) and 2019 (13%). This rate of utilisation was comparable to the rate across all sectors during 2019 (13%).
- Employee awareness about their EAP service comes predominately from HR or People & Culture (20%), the Intranet (18%) or one's supervisor (18%). This data suggests that keeping all online sources of information up-to-date and equipping HR personnel and supervisors with the capabilities required to support vulnerable staff members and offer a referral to EAP when needed may be of particular importance in this sector. It was notable that hearing about EAP from the Intranet was more common in the Government Sector (18%) than in other industries (14%), highlighting the comparative importance of online resources in the public sector.
- The mix of workplace concerns (38%) and personal concerns (62%) reflected a greater skew towards workplace concerns in the Government Sector than in other sectors (34% and 66% respectively).
- Among personal concerns, symptoms of anxiety (including pre-existing anxiety) were the most commonly reported concern (25%), which is slightly higher than the all-sector average (23%). This was also accompanied by concerns about relationship issues within couples and families (22%), and stress associated with personal demands (7%).
- Among workplace concerns, excessive workload pressures (13%), reduced productivity (8%) and conflict with supervisors (8%) were the most commonly reported. These were more or less consistent with the frequency of these concerns in other sectors – with the exception of excessive workload pressures, which were reported somewhat more frequently in other sectors (16%).
- Access to Assure's Manager Support Program was primarily to help employees through change, critical incidents and other stressful situations (38%), which was less frequent during 2019 than during 2018 (47%), but more frequent than in other sectors (33%). The second most frequent purpose was to manage the difficult behaviour of an employee or colleague (28%), which was substantially higher than the rate during 2018 (14%) and also higher than the rate in other sectors (15%). This may suggest that providing managers with the skills needed to have difficult conversations with employees, manage staff performance, and provide support during times of organisational change may be particularly valuable in this sector.



Mental Health & Wellbeing Strategies

Assure has been working with a number of its customers in the Government Sector to develop and deliver proactive mental health and wellbeing strategies. Every organisation has its own challenges and priorities so there is no one-size-fits-all solution, but common themes include:

- Mental health awareness (for leaders and employees), including how to support staff in need and refer them to EAP when required
- EAP awareness: Assure has an awareness video to allow much greater reach via customer Intranets and email
- Dealing with aggressive members of the public
- Having difficult conversations with members of staff or the public
- Change management
- Leading resilient teams, particularly during times of change
- Handling vicarious or direct trauma
- Creating psychologically safe workplaces
- Wellbeing assessments and positive psychology programs have also been helpful for people who are already coping well ('surviving') but want to raise their performance to another level ('thriving').
- Electronic or virtual delivery of training and awareness programs allows employees to access them in geographical remote locations and at times that fit with operational requirements.

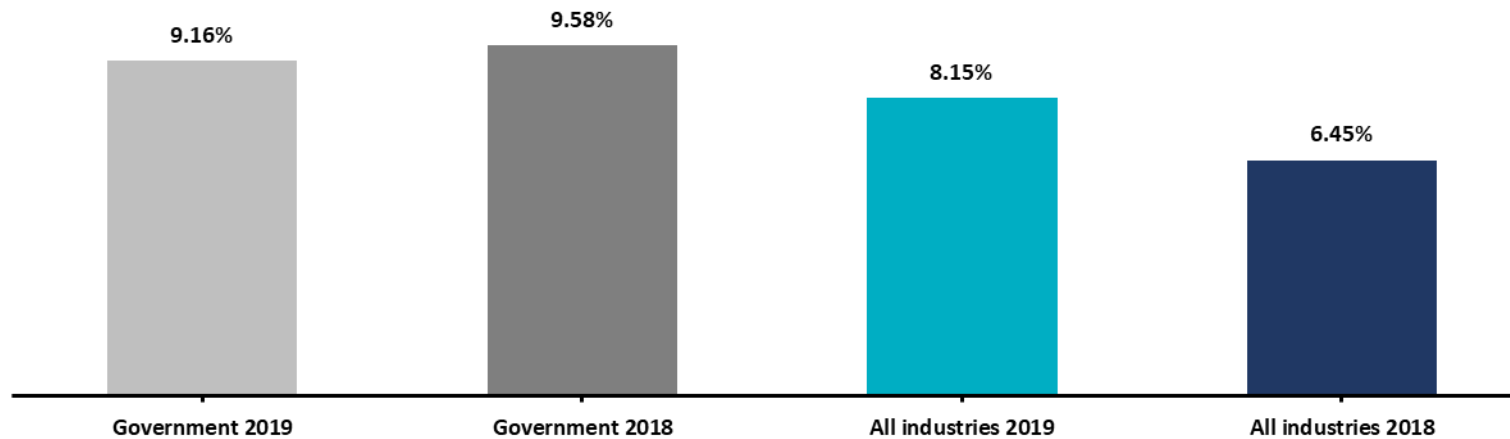
Resilience and self-care: Noting the increasingly complex and uncertain environment within the modern workplace, the need to build a resilient and agile workforce is critical. Research tells us that one-off resilience training simply does not cut it, so how can we create sustained behaviour change to help employees and leaders navigate our increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous work environment? Assure has designed a program Thrive to address this, using an assessment tool based on the 6 key neuroscience pillars of resilience, that can be targeted to the specific needs of each organisation. Acknowledging the need to scale up across large, geographically dispersed workforces, this program incorporates virtual coaching via state-of-the-art technology and artificial intelligence, alongside face-to-face training and coaching programs. This approach provides an interactive and engaging way to build resilience through a comprehensive program tailored to different learning needs.

Psychosocial risk assessments: As a precursor to deciding on specific mental health and wellbeing initiatives, and to help target investment in the most cost effective way, we would recommend carrying out an assessment of psychosocial risks across your organisation. Assure has developed an online assessment tool the Backbone of Mental Health & Wellbeing in the Workplace which allows business leaders and employees to assess strengths, or areas to improve, within 8 key areas of clinical risk.

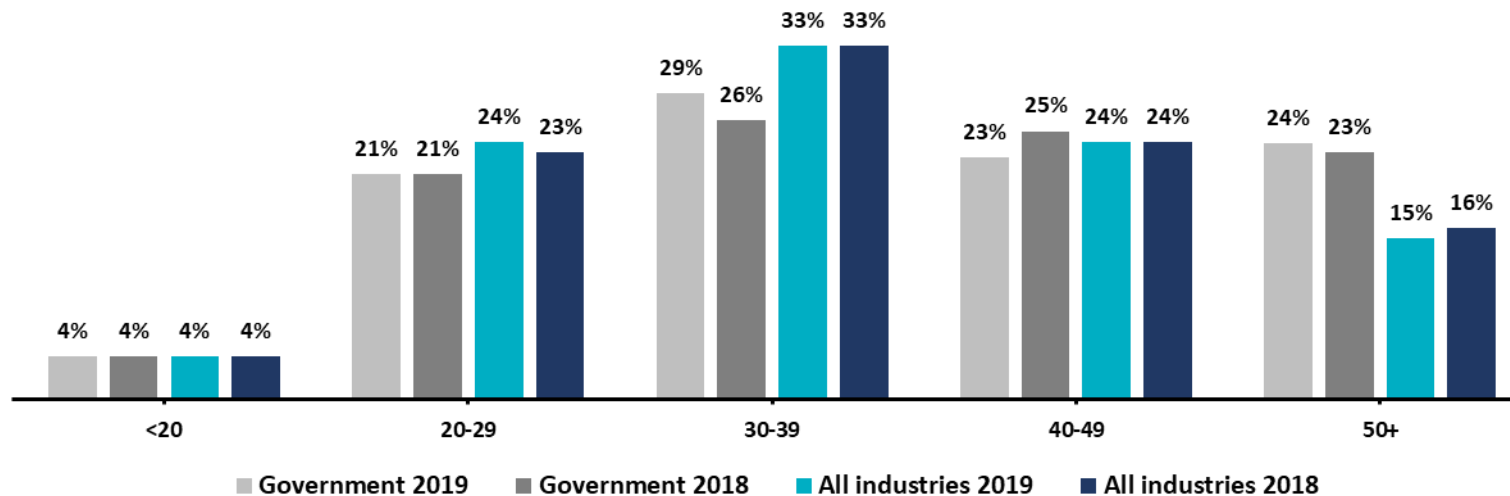
If you would like to discuss your strategy for proactively improving the mental health and wellbeing of your organisation, please talk to your Assure Programs Customer Care Manager or call (07) 3211 8919.

WHO HAS BEEN ACCESSING EAP?

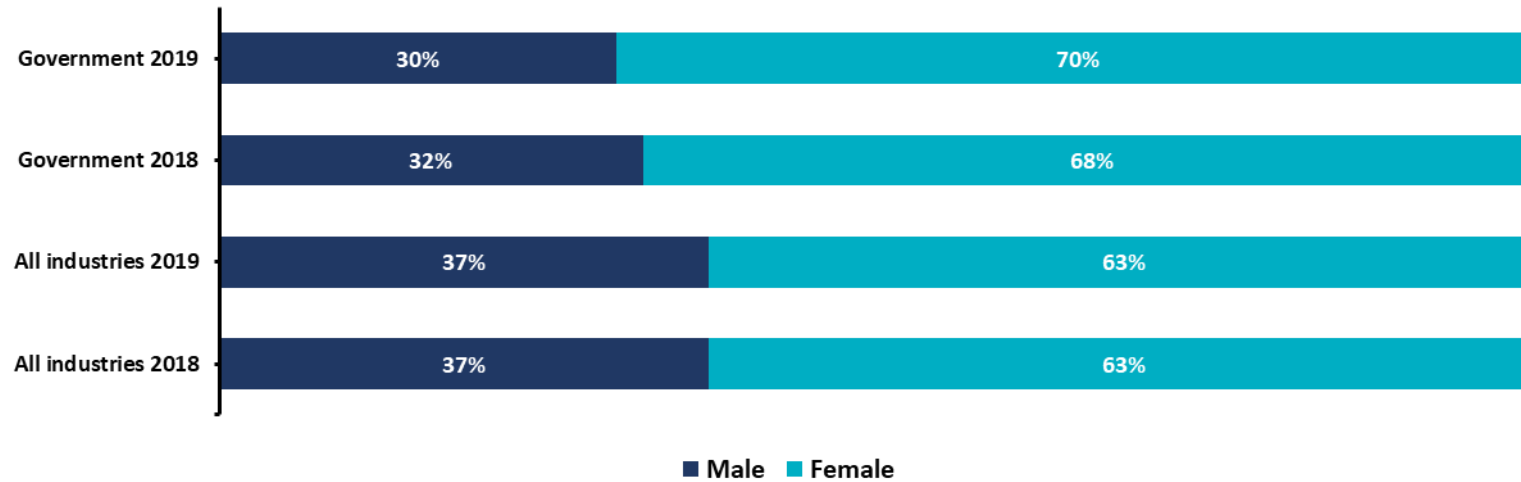
EAP Utilisation



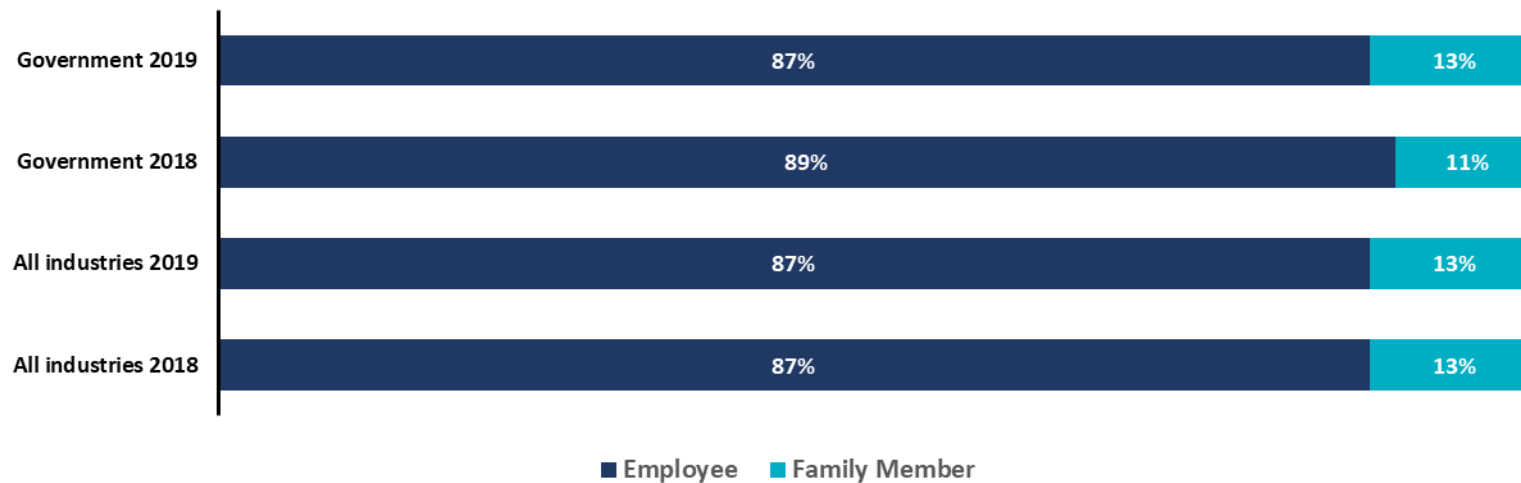
EAP client age (as % of all clients)



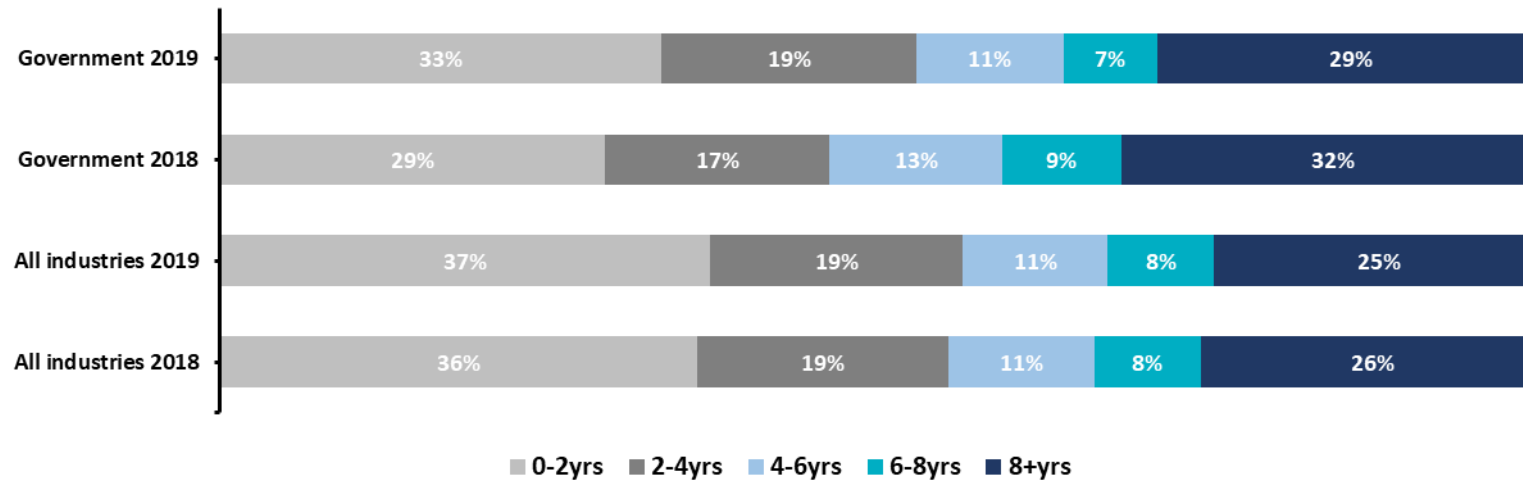
EAP client gender (as % of all clients)



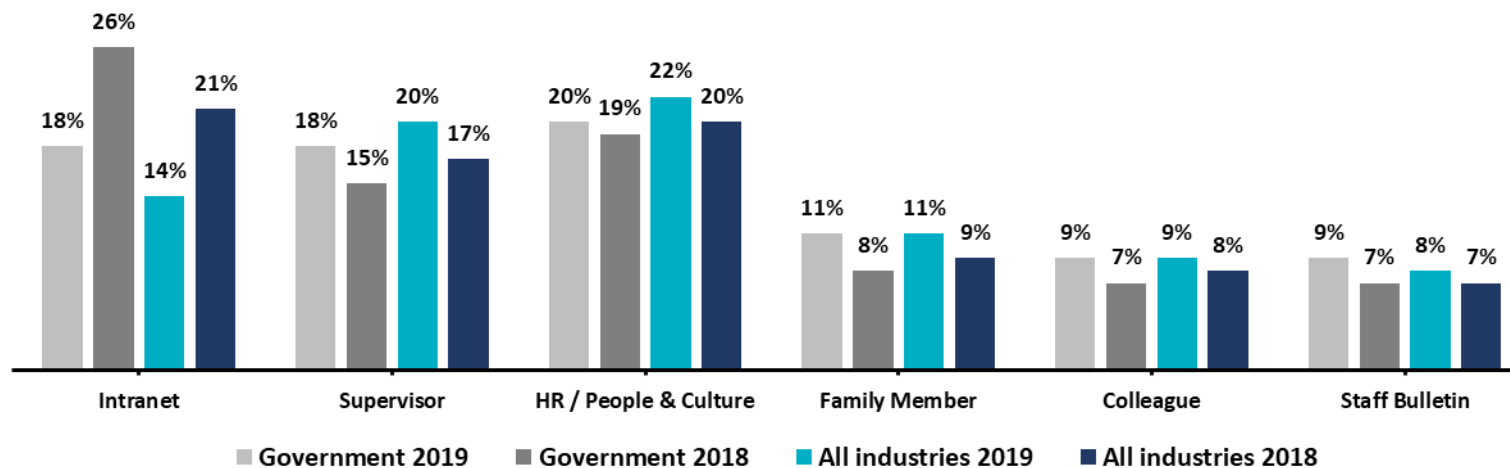
EAP client type (as % of all clients)



EAP client length of employment (as % of all clients)

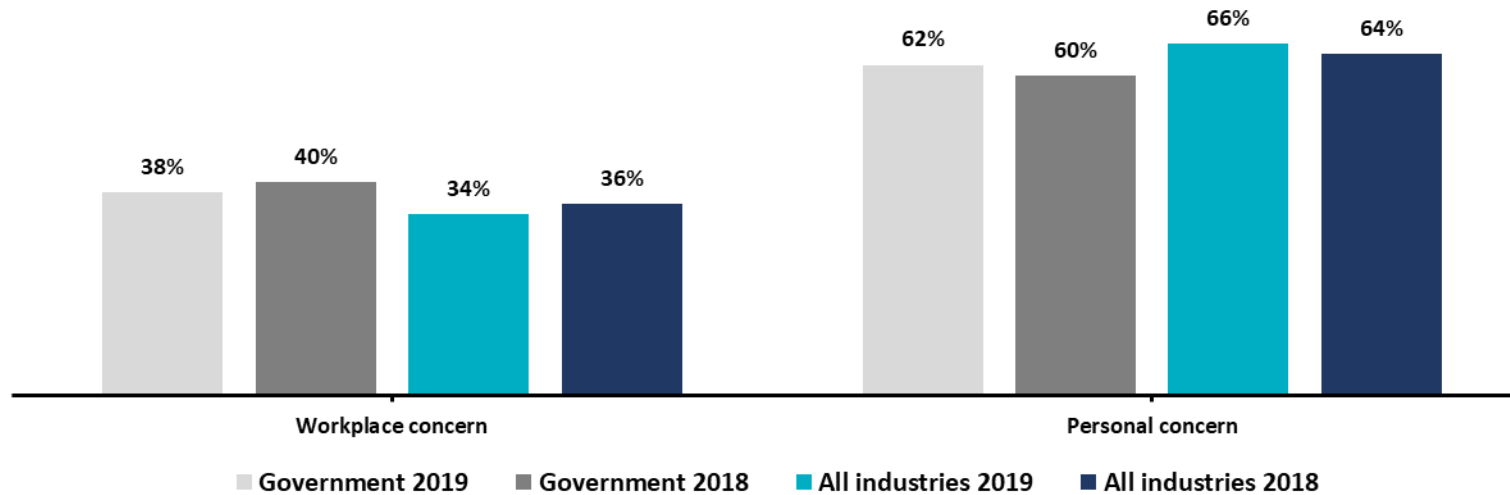


How learnt of EAP? (as % of all clients)

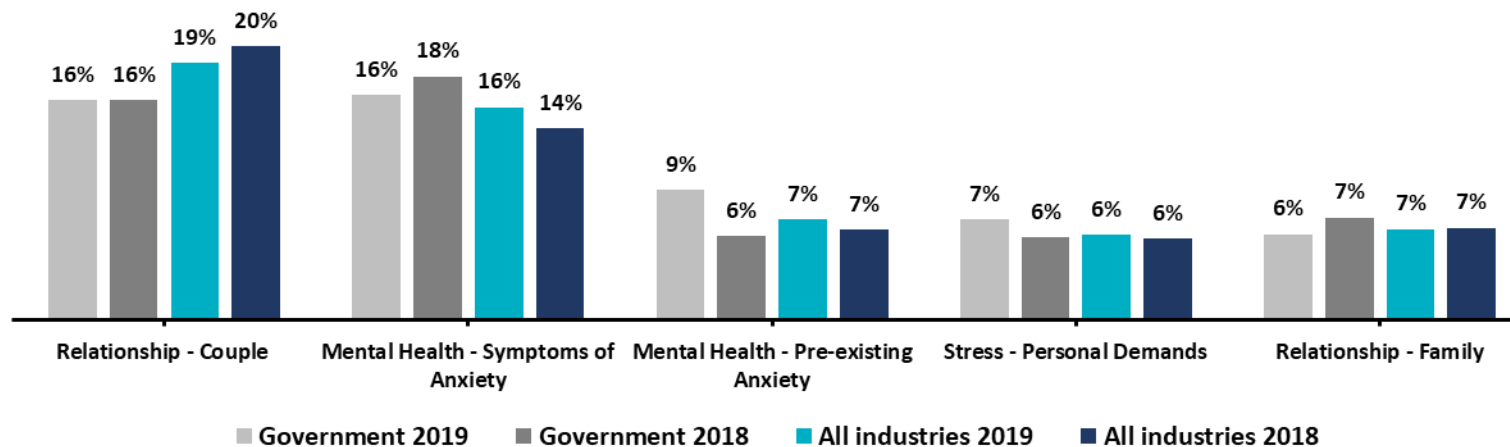


WHY HAVE PEOPLE BEEN ACCESSING EAP?

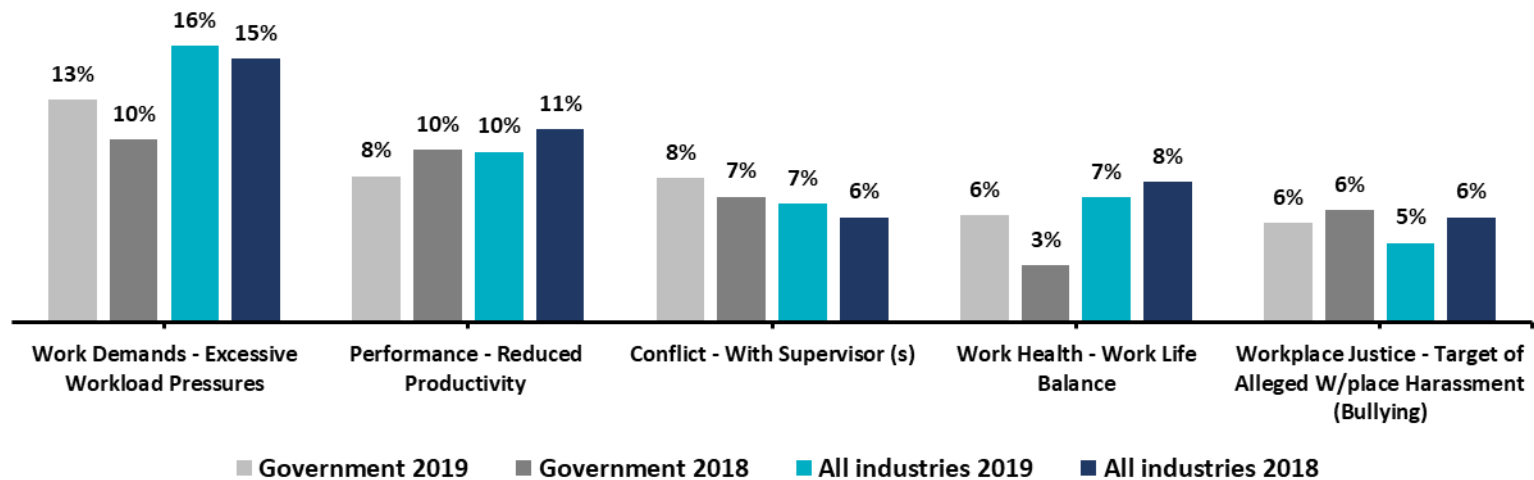
Primary presenting concern (as % of all clients)



Top 5 primary presenting concerns - PERSONAL (as % of all clients)



Top 5 primary presenting concerns - WORKPLACE (as % of all clients)



Reasons Managers accessed Manager Support Program (as % of all MSPs)

