



Professional Services

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 Professional Services 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 Professional Services Sector, Assure provides EAP services to 26 organisations, totalling 40,000 employees plus their families. In 2019 Assure provided 7,200 counselling sessions and 320 hours of support for critical incidents and significant events in this sector.

Data in this report includes the Law Sector, for which a separate report has also been published.

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

Work in the Professional Services Sector often goes hand-in-hand with a high-pressure work culture, entailing deadline-driven projects, long work hours, meticulous attention to detail, pressing client or business demands, billable hour targets, and challenges associated with maintaining work-life balance. These stressors can greatly increase the likelihood of performance anxiety and stress, particularly if employees feel that the act of reaching out for support will diminish their capacity for career progression as a result. Encouraging personnel to access Assure's EAP service when needed, and help others in need to do so, is likely to play a critical role in mitigating some of these potential risks.

One of the key factors underpinning these stressors is the importance of having a high degree of client focus in the Professional Services Sector. Clients have now come to expect greater value, speed, quality and transparency in the solutions and services that Professional Services organisations provide. Finding an appropriate balance between each of these needs can be a great challenge for employees in this sector, given that focusing specifically on one need may compromise other important requirements. For example, consultants may need to balance producing a report rapidly vs. ensuring that the report is thoroughly researched and of a high standard. These tasks can be a significant source of cognitive demands for employees, particularly when tasks conflict with one another or pose a risk to role clarity.

Such challenges in the Professional Services Sector are often compounded by the competitive marketplace within which organisations now operate. Given the growing number of competitors competing for similar kinds of work, many organisations are facing increased pressure to establish credibility in the marketplace and articulate the selling points or competitive advantage that distinguish their work from that of their competitors. This may be coupled with heightened pressure to diversify and modernise client offerings at a time of rapid digital innovation and growth. Inherent to these trends is the need for constant adaptability, critical thinking capability, and resilience in the face of rapid change.

Although these shifts present opportunities for the growth and development of professionals working in this sector, these sector-wide changes have also redefined many employees' roles and ways of working. For example, consultants may need to develop advanced competency in leveraging the latest technology to analyse large quantities of data. These strategic realignments and dramatic shifts in how roles are carried out on a day-to-day basis may pose significant threats to psychological wellbeing and job satisfaction if they are not managed in an appropriate manner through support, training and guidance.

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The high-pressure nature of work in the Professional Services Sector is associated with a variety of risks pertaining to workload and psychological job demands, particularly given that clients now expect greater value, speed, quality and transparency in the solutions and services that these organisations provide.

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EAP Insights

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

- Overall utilisation increased from 9.70% in 2018 to 11.33% in 2019, compared to 8.15% for the all-sector average in 2019. This increasing degree of utilisation may suggest that there has been a growing awareness and acceptance of mental health issues between 2018 and 2019. The observation that EAP usage is substantially higher in the Professional Services Sector than in other sectors may potentially reflect the high-pressure nature of working in this particular organisational context, especially during 2019.
- It is notable that clients aged 20-29 were substantially over-represented in the Professional Services Sector (38%) compared to other sectors (24%); on the other hand, clients aged 40 and above were substantially under-represented in the Professional Services Sector (23%) compared to other sectors (39%). This may suggest that younger employees may be more likely than older employees to be willing to reach out for support from EAP. Alternatively, it could also reflect the high degree of pressure faced by young trainees, students or new graduates in this competitive sector.
- 68% of clients were in their first 4 years of tenure, compared to 56% across all sectors. By way of contrast, 16% of clients had exceeded 8 years of tenure, compared to 25% across all sectors. In line with the previous comment about age, this potentially suggests that the initial years of working at a new organisation may be especially demanding for those working in the Professional Services Sector.
- A consistent proportion of clients were female (63%) compared to other sectors (63%). This may be consistent with the overall gender mix of employees in this sector, especially younger employees noting the comments above regarding age and length of tenure.
- Access by family members was more or less consistent between 2018 (10%) and 2019 (11%). This rate of utilisation was somewhat lower than the rate across all sectors during 2019 (13%).
- Employee awareness about their EAP service comes predominately from HR or People & Culture (28%), which was substantially higher than in other sectors (22%). This data suggests that equipping HR personnel 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, given that these personnel are the primary gateway to EAP for many employees. By way of contrast, hearing about EAP from a supervisor was less common in the Professional Services Sector (9%) than in other industries (20%), reflecting a potential need to educate more supervisors about how to refer staff on when needed.
- The mix of workplace concerns (35%) and personal concerns (65%) was consistent with other sectors and remained more or less stable. However, it should be noted that whilst relationships and mental health issues are classified as personal concerns, they often have their origin in workplace pressures. Furthermore, workplace issues can often be a factor underpinning stress in the home environment.
- Among personal concerns, symptoms of anxiety (including pre-existing anxiety) were the most commonly reported concern (26%), which is slightly higher than the all-sector average (23%). This was also accompanied by concerns about relationship issues within couples and families (26%), which is consistent with the all-sector average (23%).
- Among workplace concerns, excessive workload pressures (24%), reduced productivity (9%) and psychological injury or illness (8%) were the most commonly reported. It was notable that concerns about excessive workload pressures were more frequently reported in the Professional Services Sector than in other sectors (16%), which is likely reflective of the typically high-pressure work culture in the Professional Services context.
- Access to Assure's Manager Support Program was primarily to seek advice about on referring an employee to EAP (32%), which was higher during 2019 than during 2018 (27%) and also higher compared to other sectors (22%). The second most frequent purpose was to help employees through change, critical incidents and other stressful situations (28%), which was lower during 2019 than during 2018 (29%) and also lower than in other sectors (33%).

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Mental Health & Wellbeing Strategies

Assure has been working with a number of its customers in the Professional Services 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 clients and difficult client conversations
- Change management
- Leading resilient teams
- Handling vicarious 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 geographically dispersed locations and at times that fit with business requirements.
- A number of customers have looked at extending Assure's support to their clientele, as a way to make their client offering more competitive.

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.

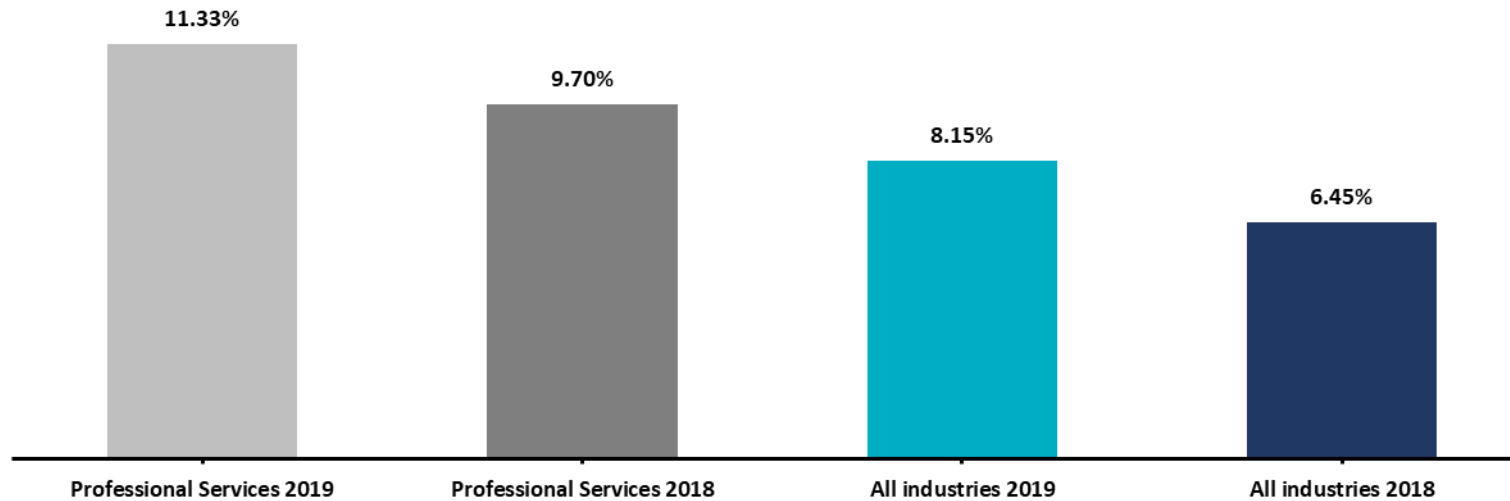
Psychosocial risk assessments: As a precursor to deciding on specific mental health and wellbeing initiatives, and to help target investment in the most cost effective way, we would recommend carrying out an assessment of psychosocial risks across your organisation. Assure has developed an online assessment 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.

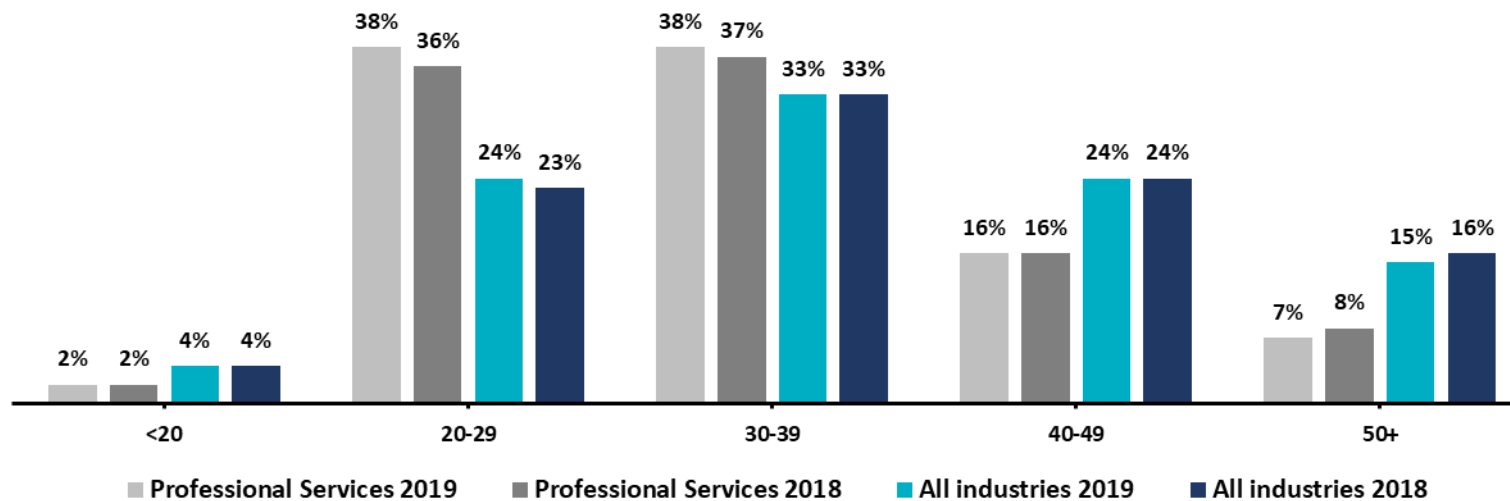
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WHO HAS BEEN ACCESSING EAP?

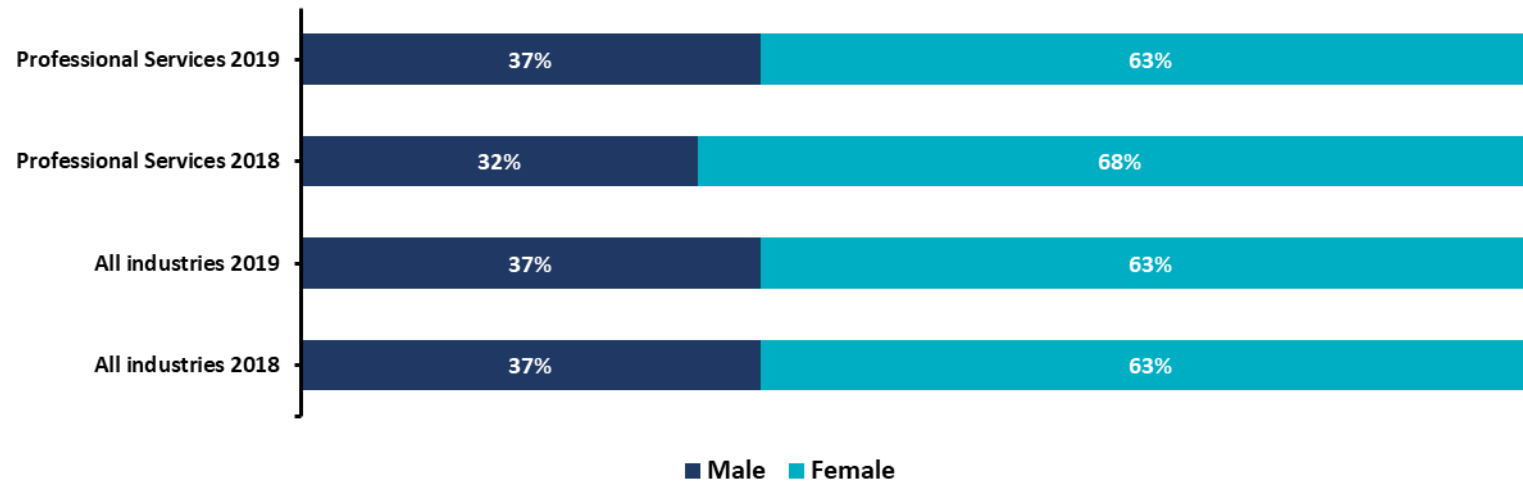
EAP Utilisation



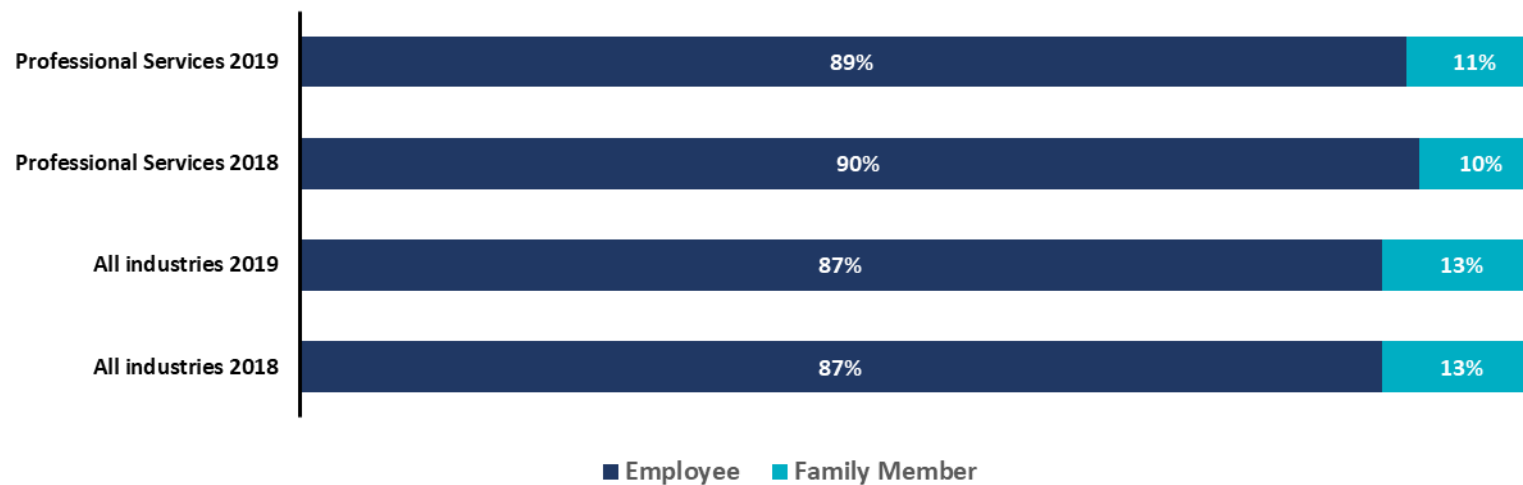
EAP client age (as % of all clients)



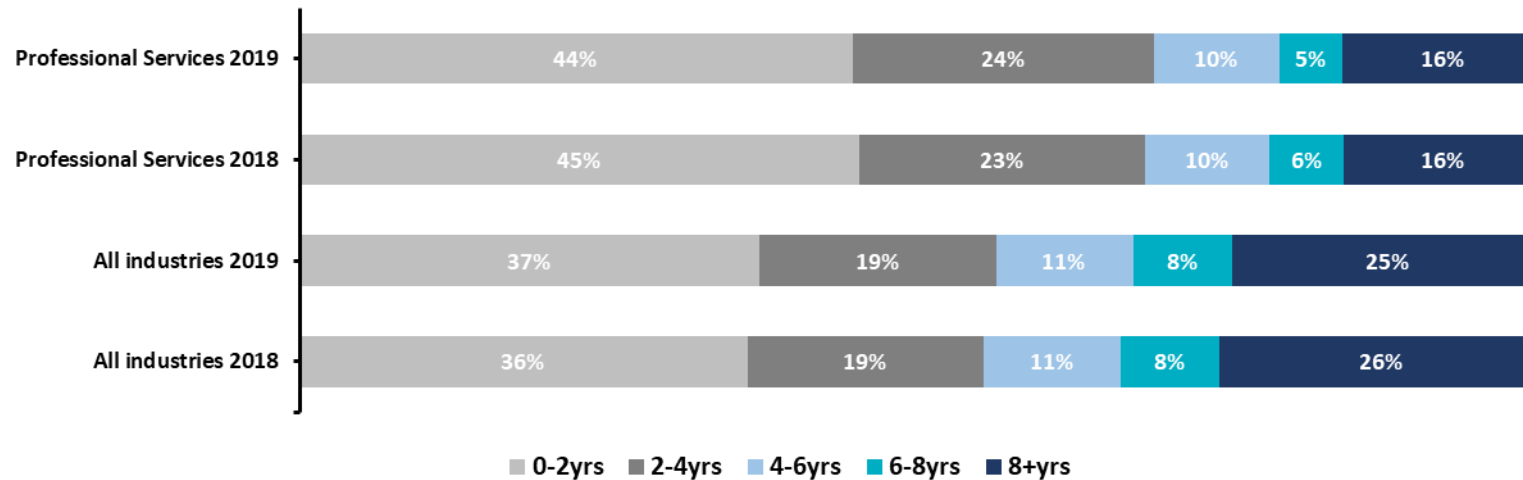
EAP client gender (as % of all clients)



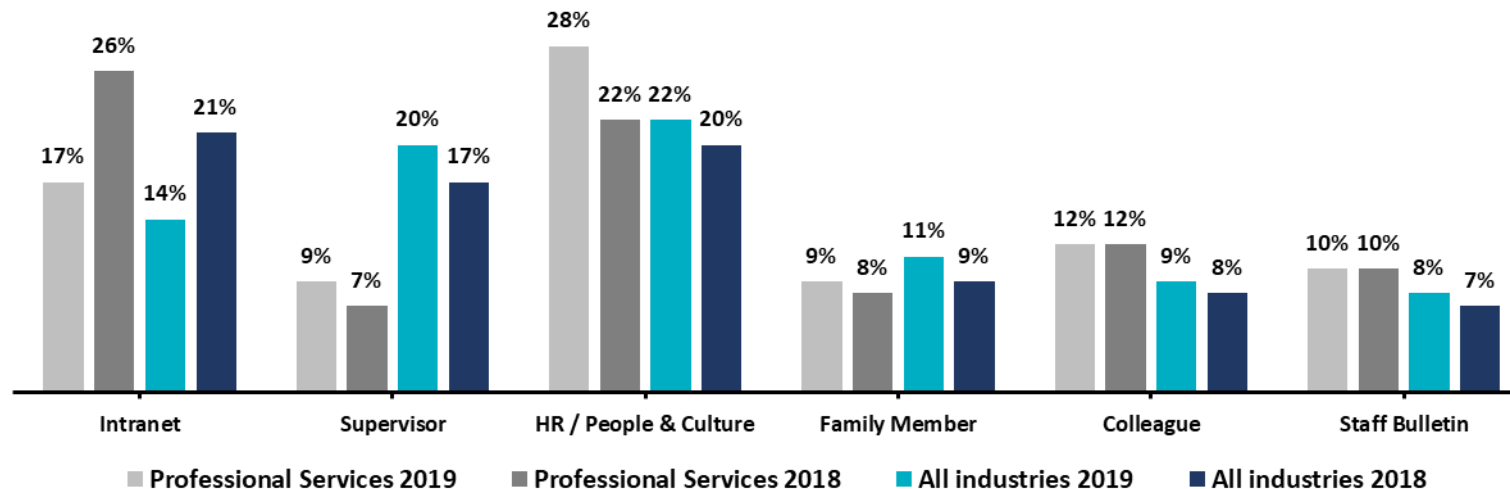
EAP client type (as % of all clients)



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



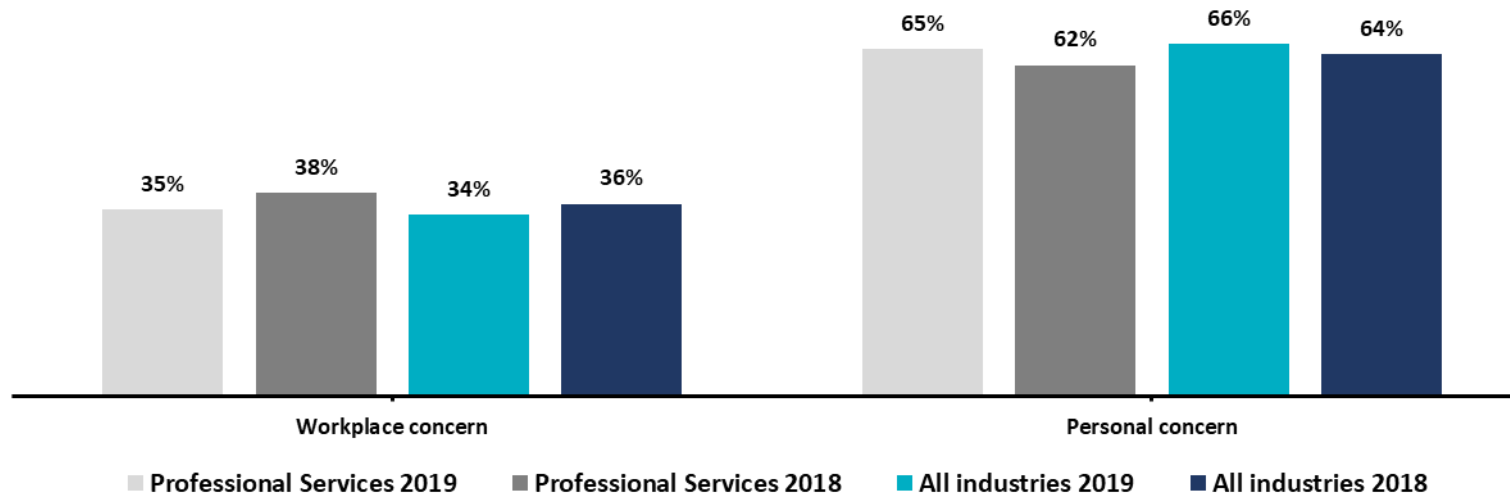
How learnt of EAP? (as % of all clients)



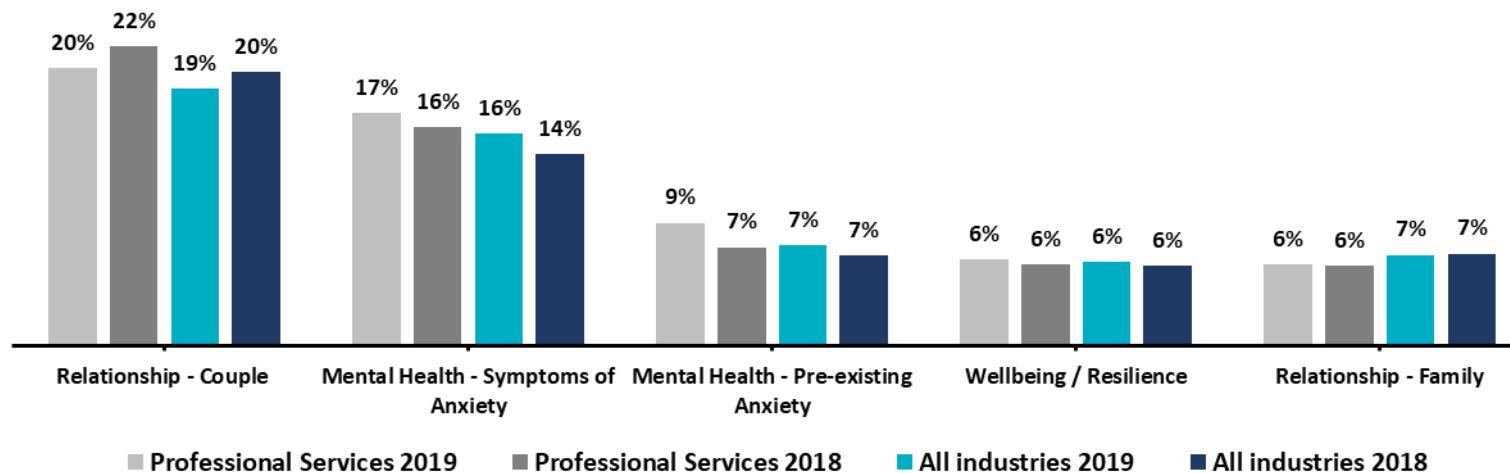
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WHY HAVE PEOPLE BEEN ACCESSING EAP?

Primary presenting concern (as % of all clients)

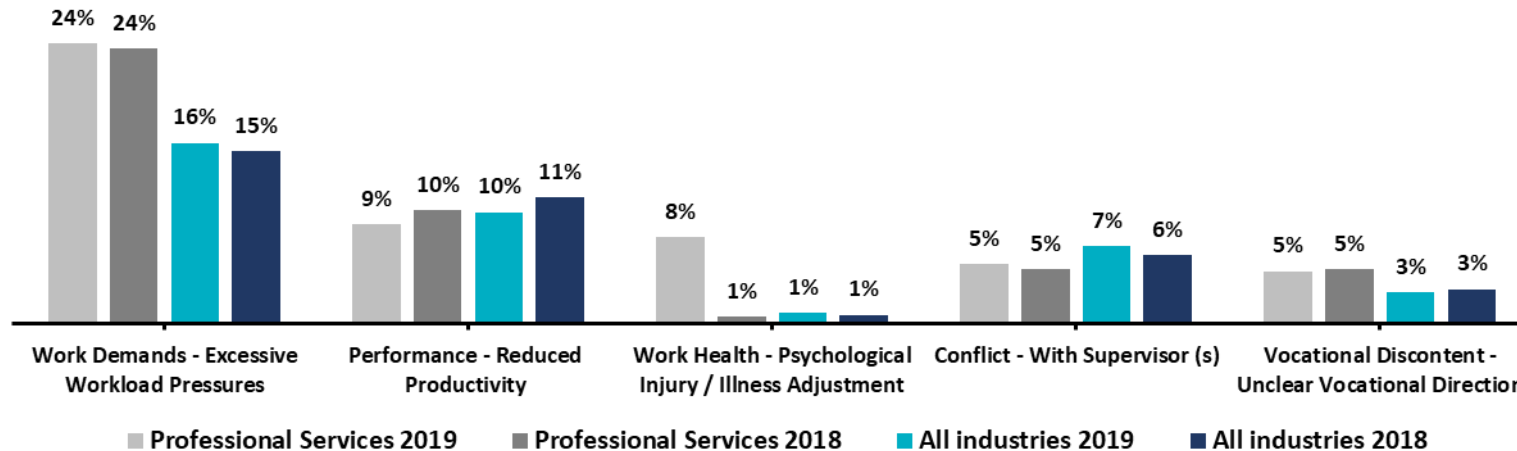


Top 5 primary presenting concerns - PERSONAL (as % of all clients)



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



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

