



Retail

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 Retail 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 Retail Sector, Assure provides EAP services to 28 organisations, totalling 40,000 employees plus their families. In 2019 Assure provided 4,100 counselling sessions and 390 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 Retail Sector entails a combination of psychosocial risk factors that may make it particularly susceptible to mental health issues, and not surprisingly this leads to high EAP utilisation. This includes periods of elevated workload and time pressure, particularly during peak retail periods of the calendar year (e.g., Christmas). During such periods, employees may be required to more frequently undertake tasks that increase their degree of physical strain, involving greater physical effort, prolonged standing, repetitive movements, and manual handling. These physical demands may have a subsequent effect on psychological wellbeing over an extended period, especially when combined with limited opportunities for breaks and recovery.

A further psychosocial risk factor to take into account for this sector relates to the need for frequent interaction with the public, including interactions with customers whose behaviour poses a risk to the personal safety of employees or other customers. Some of these challenging interactions may include workplace bullying and harassment, threats, verbal or physical abuse from a third party, and otherwise demanding interactions with customers. These may pose a significant risk to mental health if employees do not have the capability required to de-escalate such interactions, practice appropriate self-care, and receive appropriate internal and external support.

Many retail organisations are also required to carefully balance a variety of critical elements in order to be competitive in the contemporary marketplace, including the growing consumer demand for convenient delivery, personalised customer experiences, and innovative products. Balancing these competing needs may increase an employee's degree of psychological strain, particularly when these elements are linked to key performance indicators.

In more recent times, structural changes in the Retail Sector – including the casualisation of the retail workforce, less stable work schedules, technological developments, and a rise in the popularity of online retail – may create uncertainty regarding employees' roles and ways of working. This, combined with an ongoing need to maintain customer loyalty and stay up-to-date with ever-changing customer expectations and shopping behaviour, may heighten the rate and pace of organisational change. Redefining jobs and day-to-day tasks in this way can have a significant impact on organisations, particularly if employees are concerned about the stability of their employment over an extended period or receive insufficient training pertaining to new or modified aspects of their work.

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The geographical spread of regional and metropolitan retail networks creates challenges with employee communication, the rollout of training, and the development and monitoring of consistent management practices.

With this combination of stressors, we should not be surprised that the Retail Sector has significantly high levels of EAP utilisation. Most businesses are well aware of these issues and Assure is supporting a number of them in developing mitigation strategies.

EAP Insights

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

- Overall utilisation increased slightly from 4.43% in 2018 to 4.51% 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. It is notable that overall utilisation in the Retail Sector is low compared to other sectors. Although this may suggest that the proactive management of psychosocial risks in this sector has been effective so far, it also presents an opportunity in 2020 and beyond to further increase the awareness and acceptance of mental health issues. Doing so may subsequently increase the uptake of Assure's EAP service in this sector.
- It is notable that the most common age of clients is somewhat lower in the Retail Sector than in other sectors, particularly in the age brackets of 40-49 (19% in Retail compared to 24% across all sectors) and 50+ (9% in Retail compared to 15% across all sectors). This may reflect a younger workforce overall in this sector, or alternatively suggest that younger employees may be more likely than older employees to be willing to reach out for support from EAP.
- 40% of clients were in their first 2 years of tenure, and 19% were in their first 2 to 4 years. This is consistent with other sectors and with the previous year.
- Slightly more clients were female (65%) than for other sectors (63%). This may be consistent with the overall gender mix of employees in this sector, especially for younger employees.
- Access by family members was consistent between 2018 and 2019 (both 11%), which is slightly less than the rate of utilisation across all sectors (13%).
- Employee awareness about their EAP service comes most commonly from their supervisor (28%), which was much higher than in other sectors (20%). This was followed by HR or People & Culture (19%). This data suggests that equipping supervisors and 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.
- The mix of workplace concerns (33%) and personal concerns (67%) was consistent with other sectors and remained 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 depression or anxiety, including pre-existing anxiety were the most commonly reported (29%), which is similar to the all-sector average (28%). This was followed by relationship issues between couples or within families (25%), which again is similar to the all-sector average (26%).
- Among workplace concerns, excessive workload pressures (12%), concerns about performance and reduced productivity (12%) and work life balance (9%) were the most common. Although concerns about excessive workload pressures was lower in the Retail Sector than in other sectors (16%), concerns about performance and reduced productivity (10%) and work life balance (7%) were more frequently reported in the Retail Sector than in other sectors.
- Access to Assure's Manager Support Program was primarily to help employees through change, critical incidents and other stressful situations (44%), which was higher than in 2018 (37%) and also was higher than in other industries (33%). This may be reflective of the customer-facing psychosocial risks commonly encountered in this particular sector, such as verbally or physically abusive customers. There was also an increase in seeking advice about on referring employees to EAP (19% in 2019, up from 13% in 2018).

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Mental Health & Wellbeing Strategies

Assure has been working with a number of its customers in the Retail 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)
- EAP awareness: Assure has an awareness video to allow much greater reach via customer Intranets and email
- Dealing with aggressive customers and difficult customer conversations, including content tailored to the unique demands and pressures associated with retail environments
- 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 remote locations and at times that fit with rosters and business needs.

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?

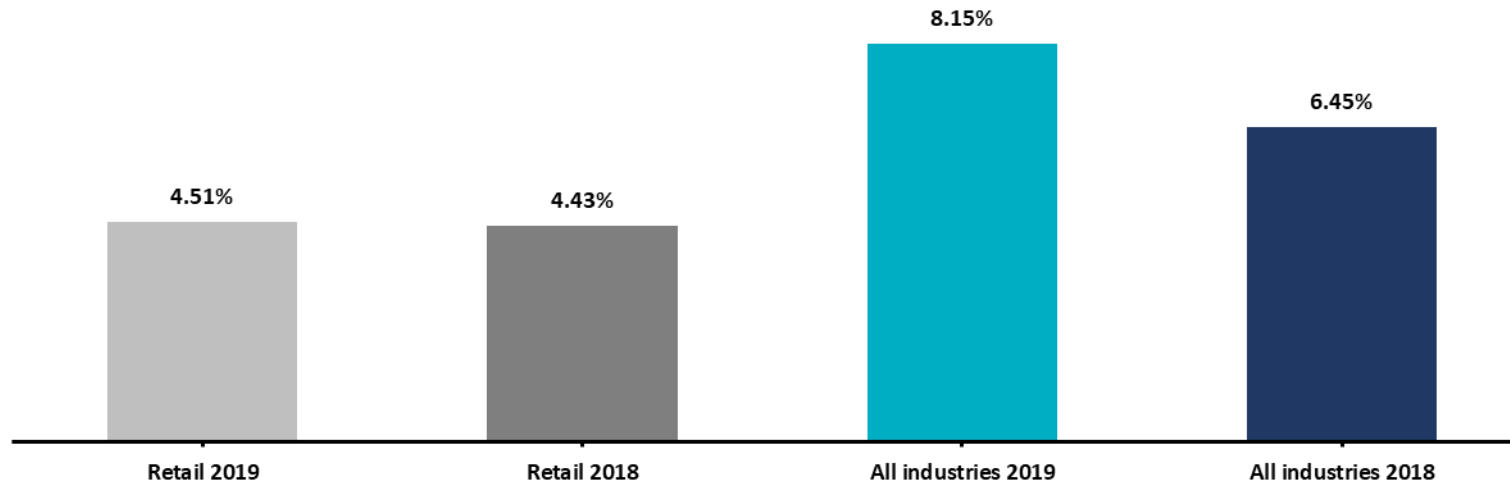
Assure has designed a program Thrive to address this, using an assessment tool based on the 6 key neuroscience pillars of resilience, that can be targeted to the specific needs of each organisation. Acknowledging the need to scale up across large, geographically dispersed workforces, this program incorporates 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.

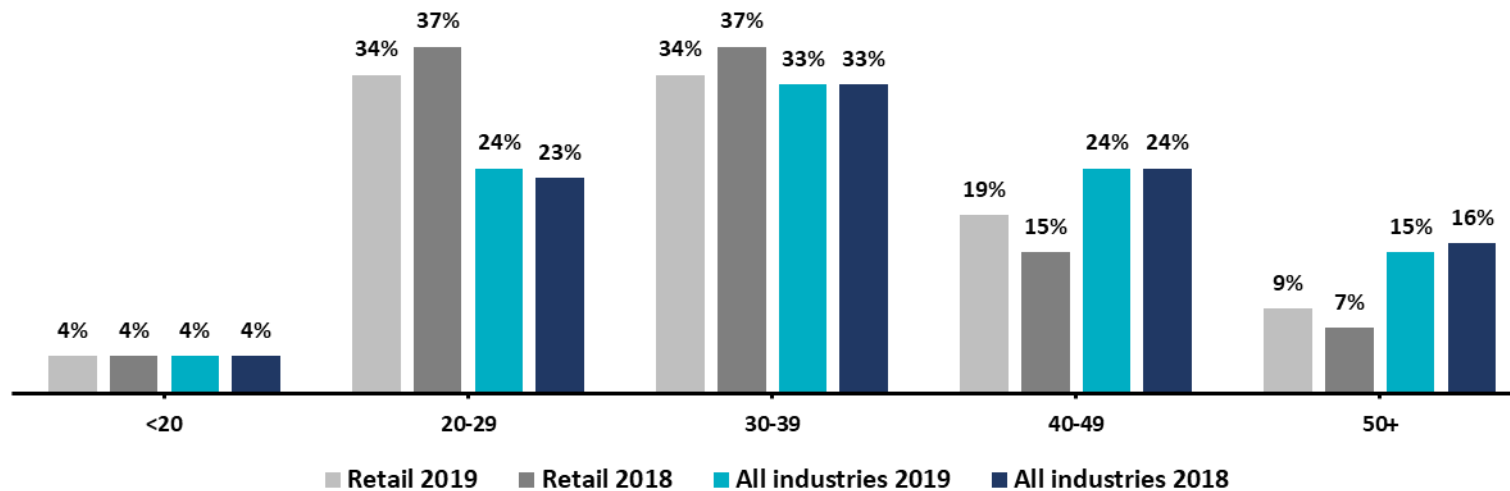
If you would like to discuss your strategy for proactively improving the mental health and wellbeing of your organisation, please talk to your Assure Programs Customer Care Manager or call (07) 3211 8919.

WHO HAS BEEN ACCESSING EAP?

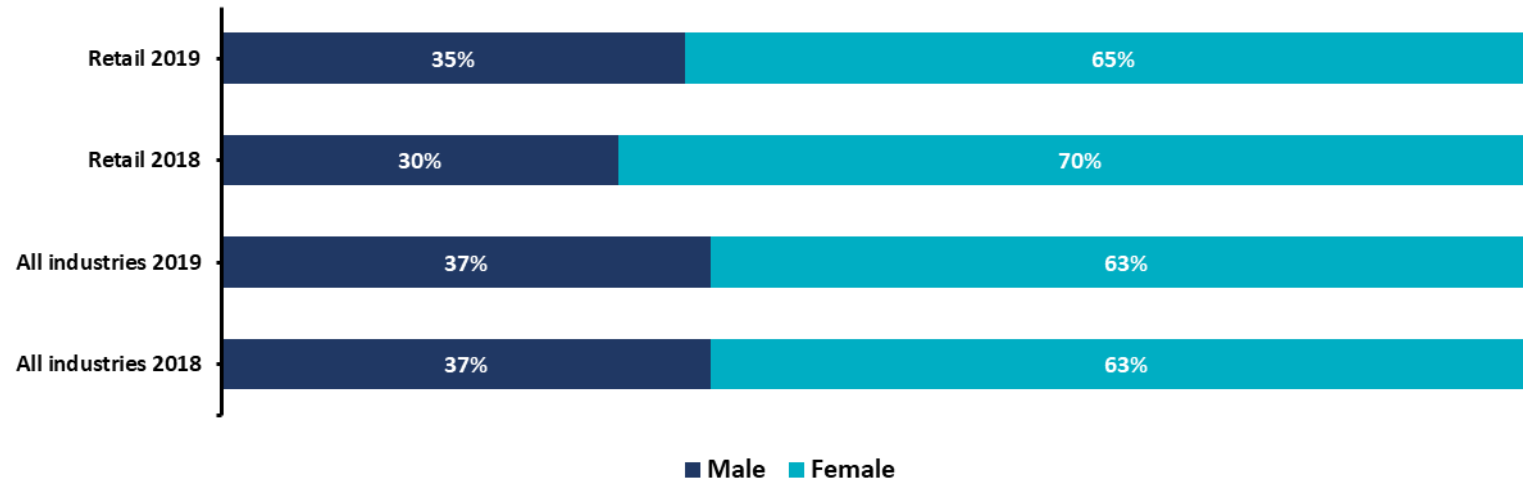
EAP Utilisation



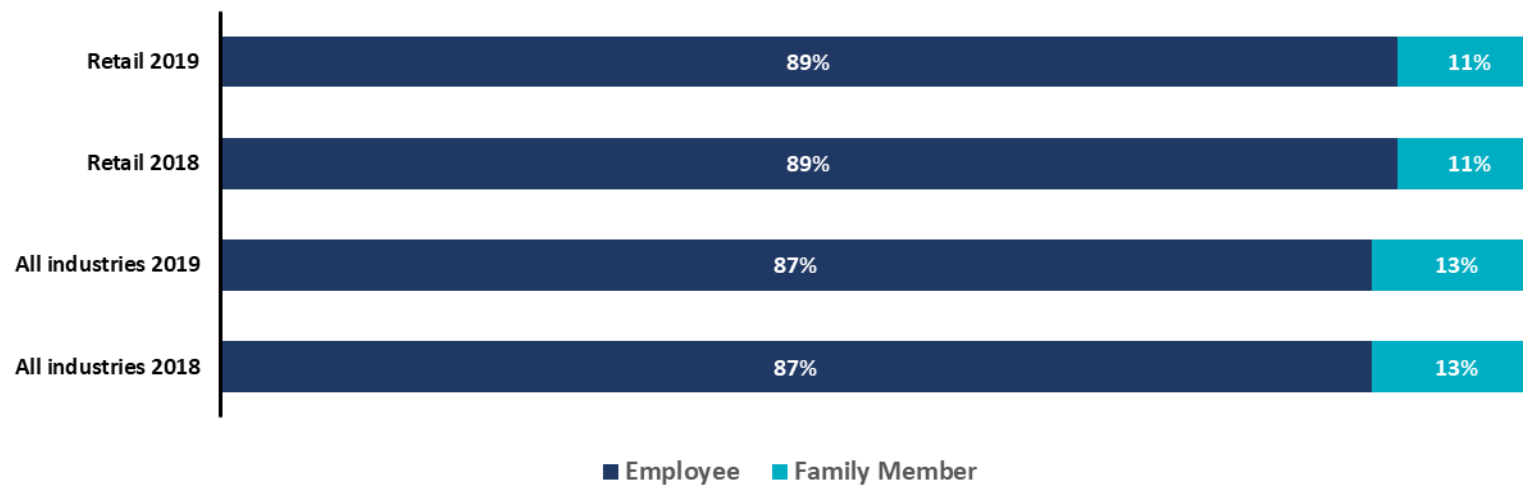
EAP client age (as % of all clients)



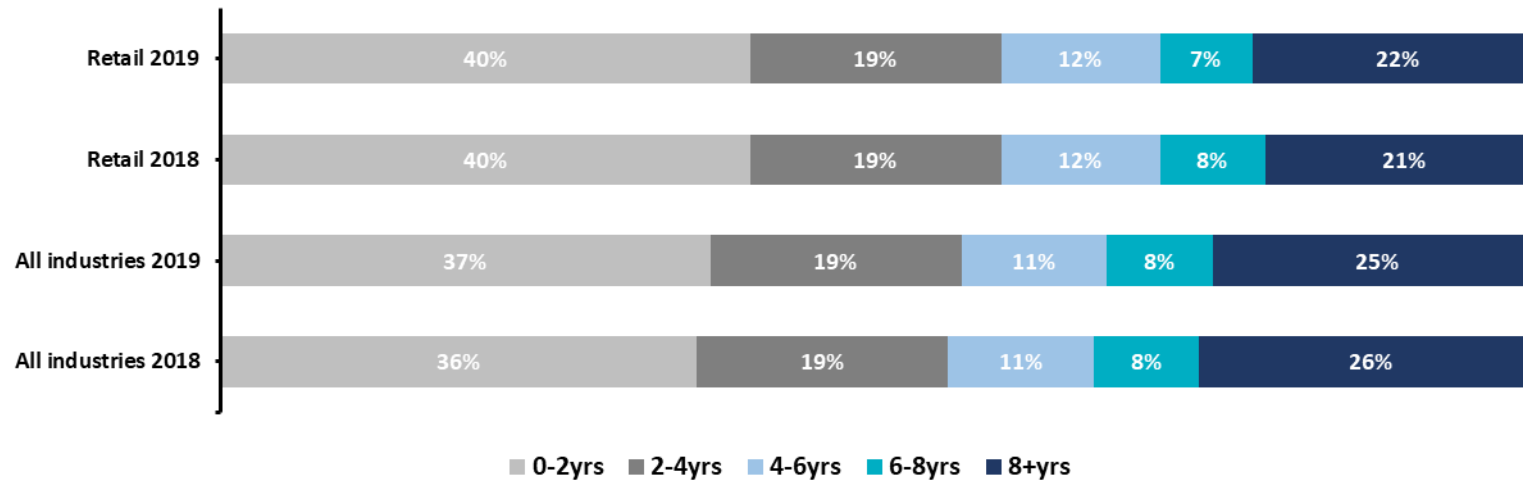
EAP client gender (as % of all clients)



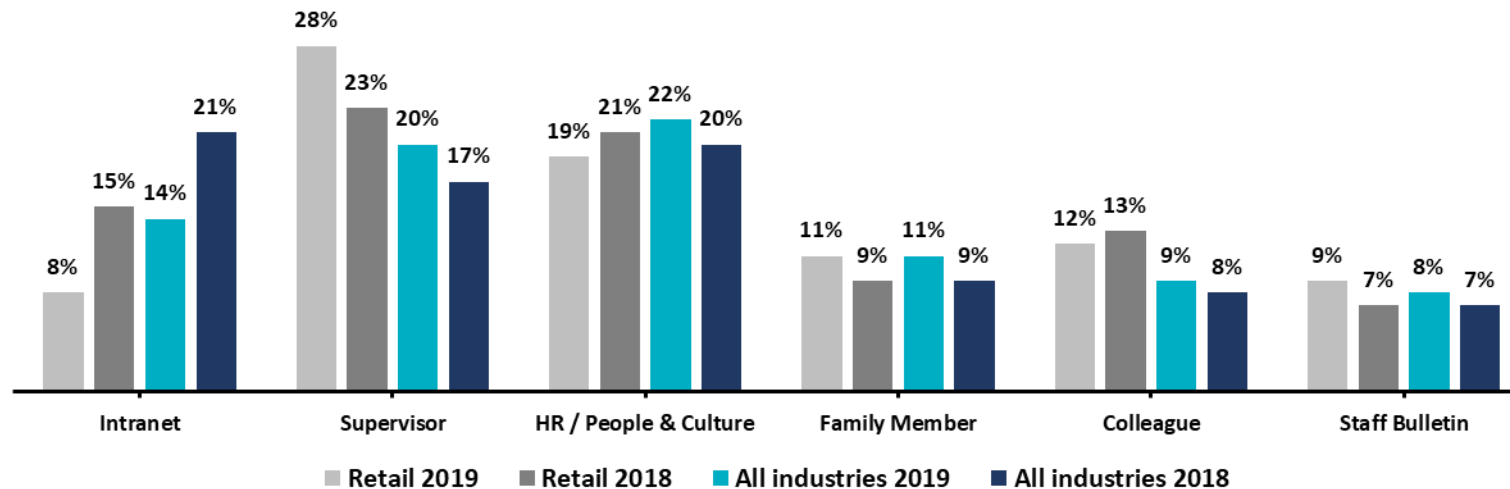
EAP client type (as % of all clients)



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

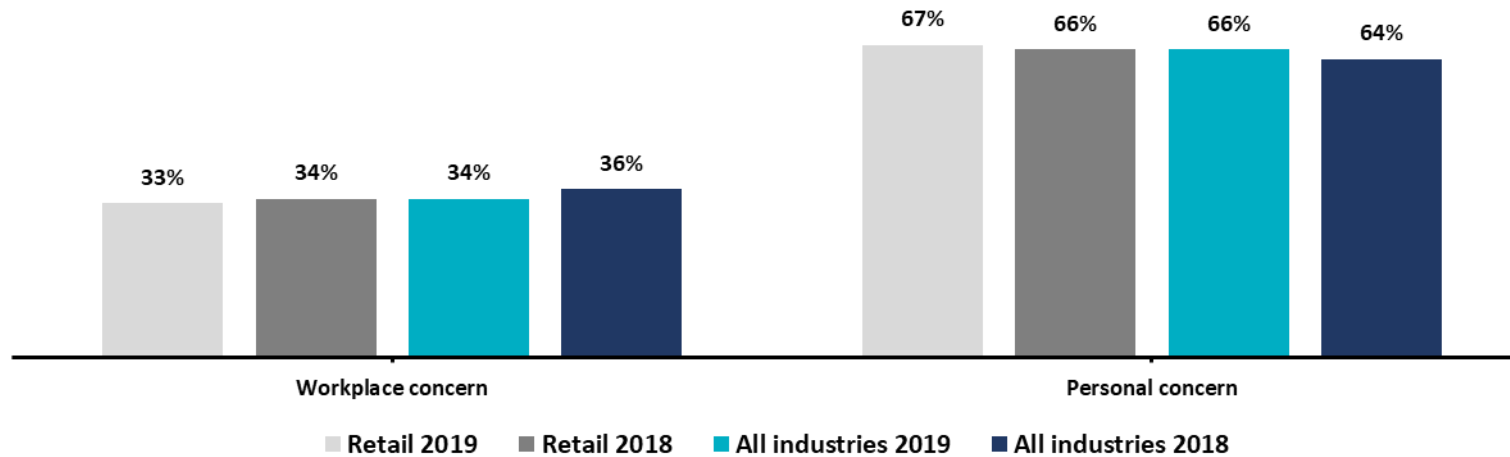


How learnt of EAP? (as % of all clients)

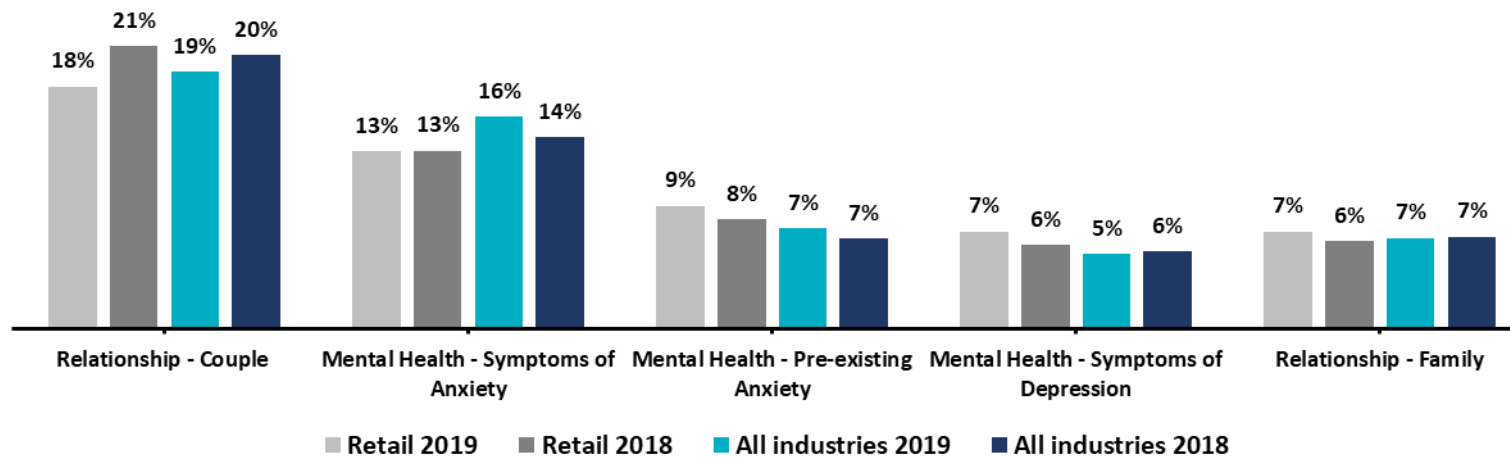


WHY HAVE PEOPLE BEEN ACCESSING EAP?

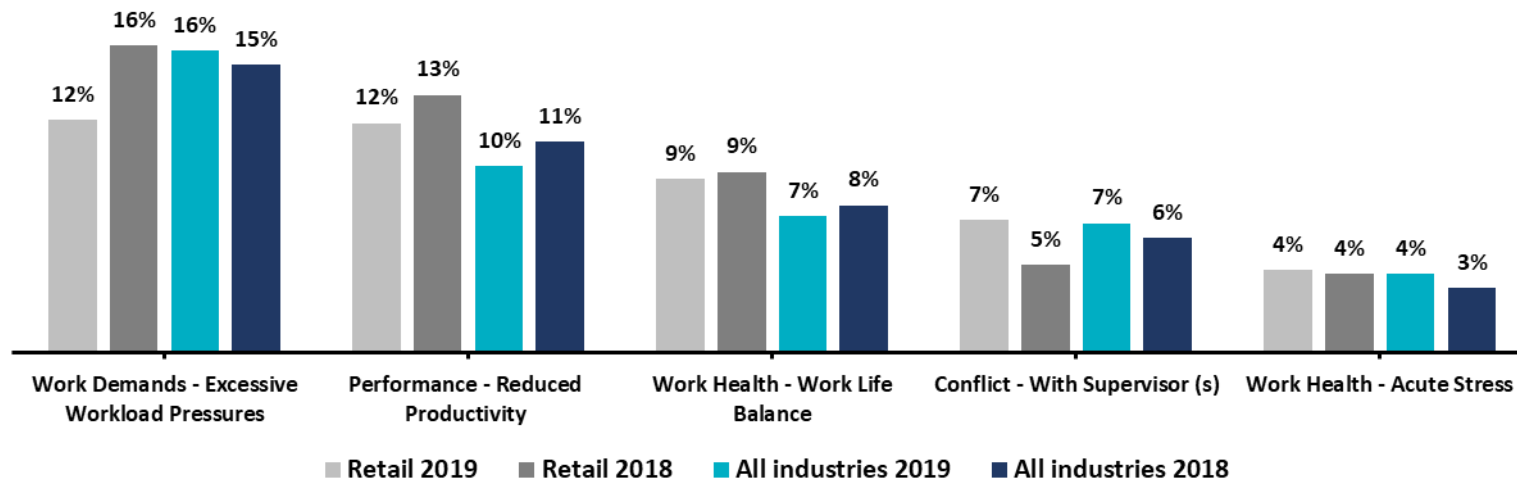
Primary presenting concern (as % of all clients)



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)

