



Utilities

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 Utilities 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 Utilities Sector, Assure provides EAP services to 12 organisations, totalling 20,000 employees plus their families. In 2019 Assure provided 4,500 counselling sessions and 400 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

Traditionally, the Utilities Sector (comprising several areas of service provision including water, sewage services, electricity, dams, and natural gas) has largely focused on the management of environmental and physical risks with links to industrial accidents and unsafe workplace behaviour, such as working at heights or in confined spaces, lifting heavy materials, working with electrical sources, and exposure to other physical hazards. However, substantial evidence now suggests that the management of psychosocial risks is equally as important, given the capacity for efforts in this area to predict positive employee engagement and productivity.

Work in the Utilities Sector requires organisations and the employees working for them to keep their services running in a consistently safe and reliable manner. This may include the need to demonstrate continuous vigilance regarding issues of safety and compliance, as well as the need to continuously concentrate and remain focussed for extended periods.

Although society's needs for electricity, gas and water are constant and ongoing in nature, fluctuations in climate or adverse environmental conditions (e.g., heavy storms, bushfires) or limitations regarding the availability of physical infrastructure, consumables and resources may place additional demands on workers, leading to heightened strain as a result. Equipping staff with the skills needed to juggle complex project requirements whilst managing their risk of fatigue and safeguarding their wellbeing is therefore likely to be of great importance.

The nature of projects in the Utilities Sector may also pose limitations to employee autonomy and task variety. For example, employees may need to engage in monotonous or repetitious tasks in some roles, with minimal control over how their day-to-day work is carried out and over the specific tasks they undertake over the course of their work day. Although this is important from the perspective of regulation and standardisation, restrictions to a person's degree of personal autonomy and decision-making latitude can also have a detrimental effect on job satisfaction, employee engagement, and wellbeing.

Further to this, the remote location of a worksite or the need to commute regularly between multiple sites could mean that employees are required to travel great distances in order to complete projects in the Utilities Sector, either in the same city or in the form of fly-in-fly-out work. These working conditions may increase an employee's risk of loneliness, social isolation, anxiety, stress and suicidal thoughts, especially for workers whose work frequently separates them from family and loved ones. Providing employees with the support needed to manage these demands effectively is an important component of creating a psychologically safe and healthy workplace.

COMMENTARY

Although society's needs for electricity, gas and water are constant and ongoing in nature, fluctuations in climate or adverse environmental conditions (e.g., heavy storms, bushfires) or limitations regarding the availability of physical infrastructure, consumables and resources all have the potential to place additional strain on workers.

With this combination of stressors, we should not be surprised that the Utilities Sector has 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 Utilities Sector over the past two years, in comparison with all other sectors. We can make the following observations and insights:

- Overall utilisation increased from 8.01% in 2018 to 9.90% in 2019, compared to 8.15% for the all-sector average in 2019. This increasing degree of utilisation reflects growing levels of awareness and acceptance of mental health issues between 2018 and 2019. It is notable that overall utilisation in the Utilities Sector is high compared to other sectors, presenting an opportunity in 2020 and beyond to continue the positive trajectory regarding the awareness and acceptance of mental health issues.
- The most common age of clients (31% aged 30-39) is consistent with other sectors, and was more or less consistent between 2018 and 2019 (33%). Notably, a greater proportion of clients aged 40 and over accessed EAP in the Utilities Sector (49%) compared to other sectors (39%). 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).
- 32% of clients were in their first 4 years of tenure, which was similar to the previous year (34%), but substantially higher than in other sectors (56%). By way of contrast, 48% of clients had been employed for over 8 years, which was substantially greater than in other sectors during 2019 (25%). This may be reflective of the longstanding commitment that many personnel in this sector make to the Utilities Sector over the course of their career. It could also corroborate the potentially greater need for support later in life for employees in this sector.
- Substantially more clients were male (51%) than for other sectors (37%). This may be consistent with the overall gender mix of employees in this sector, and also highlights the importance of addressing mental health stigma in male-dominated workplaces within the Utilities Sector.
- Access by family members was higher in 2019 (21%) than in 2018 (19%), and overall was substantially higher than the rate of utilisation across all sectors (13%). Ensuring that the families of these workers are aware about the availability of Assure's EAP service for them is thus of critical importance, particularly in the case of employees undertaking FIFO work.
- Employee awareness about their EAP service comes most commonly from family members (20%), which was substantially higher than in other sectors (11%) and also higher than the previous year (14%). This suggests that efforts to ensure that the families of workers in this sector are aware about the availability of Assure's EAP service for them is of critical importance, given their important role in referring workers on to the service (and vice versa). This was followed by HR or People & Culture (20%) and one's supervisor (16%), which were more or less comparable to other sectors (22% and 20% respectively).
- The mix of workplace concerns (28%) and personal concerns (72%) reflected a greater skew towards personal concerns in the Utilities Sector than in other sectors (34% and 66% respectively). 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, relationship issues regarding couples, families and parenting were the most commonly reported concern (37%), which was higher than the all-sector average (31%). This was followed by symptoms of anxiety and depression (21%), which was comparable to the all-sector average (also 21%).
- Among workplace concerns, concerns about performance and reduced productivity (13%), excessive workload pressures (12%), work life balance (9%) and conflict with supervisors (7%) were the most common. Most of these concerns were reported with similar frequency in other sectors (10%, 16%, 7% and 7% respectively).
- Access to Assure's Manager Support Program was primarily to help employees through change, critical incidents and other stressful situations (33%), which was comparable to the frequency observed during 2018 (34%) and also in other industries (33%). This was followed by advice about on referring employees to EAP (27%, up from 14%) and managing a distressed employee or colleague (21%, down from 26%).



Mental Health & Wellbeing Strategies

Assure has been working with a number of its customers in the Utilities 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
- Change management
- Leading resilient teams, including helping leaders to promote resilience in workers operating in a fly-in-fly-out context
- Handling direct or vicarious trauma, such as a major safety incident or an accident involving fatality
- 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.

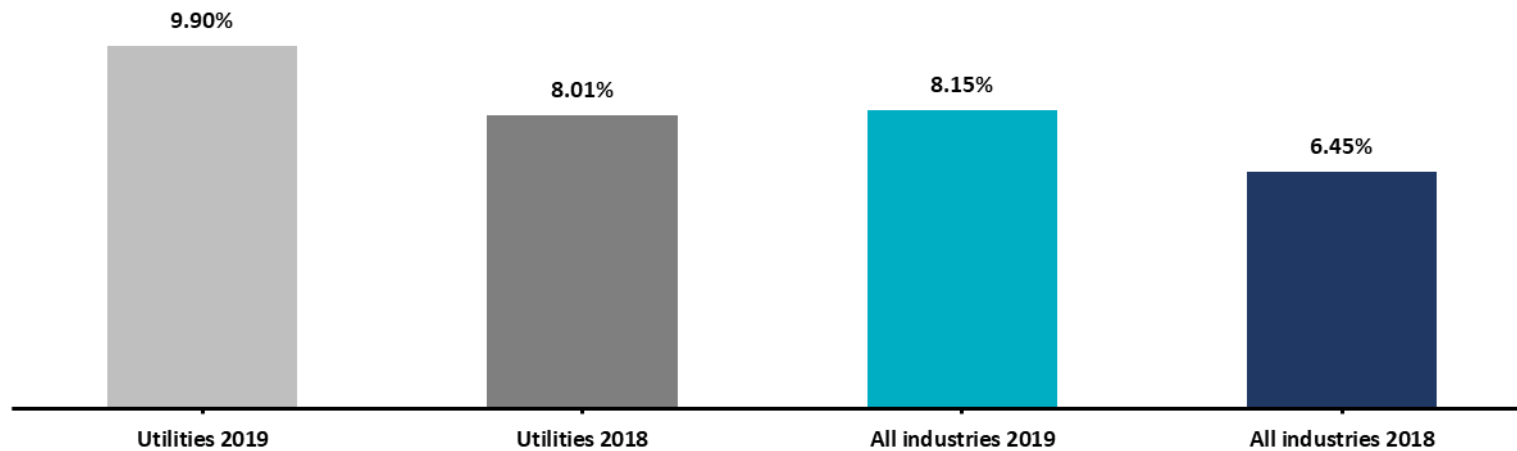
Resilience and self-care: Noting the increasingly complex and uncertain environment within the modern workplace, the need to build a resilient and agile workforce is critical. Research tells us that one-off resilience training simply does not cut it, so how can we create sustained behaviour change to 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.

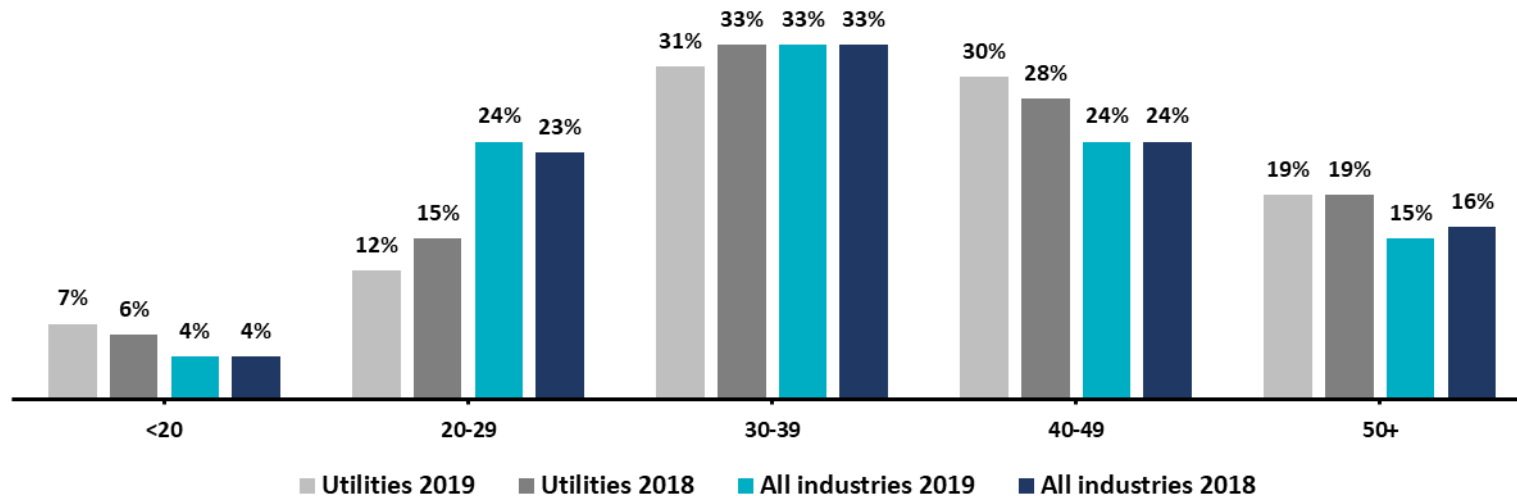
If you would like to discuss your strategy for proactively improving the mental health and wellbeing of your organisation, please talk to your Assure Programs Customer Care Manager or call (07) 3211 8919.

WHO HAS BEEN ACCESSING EAP?

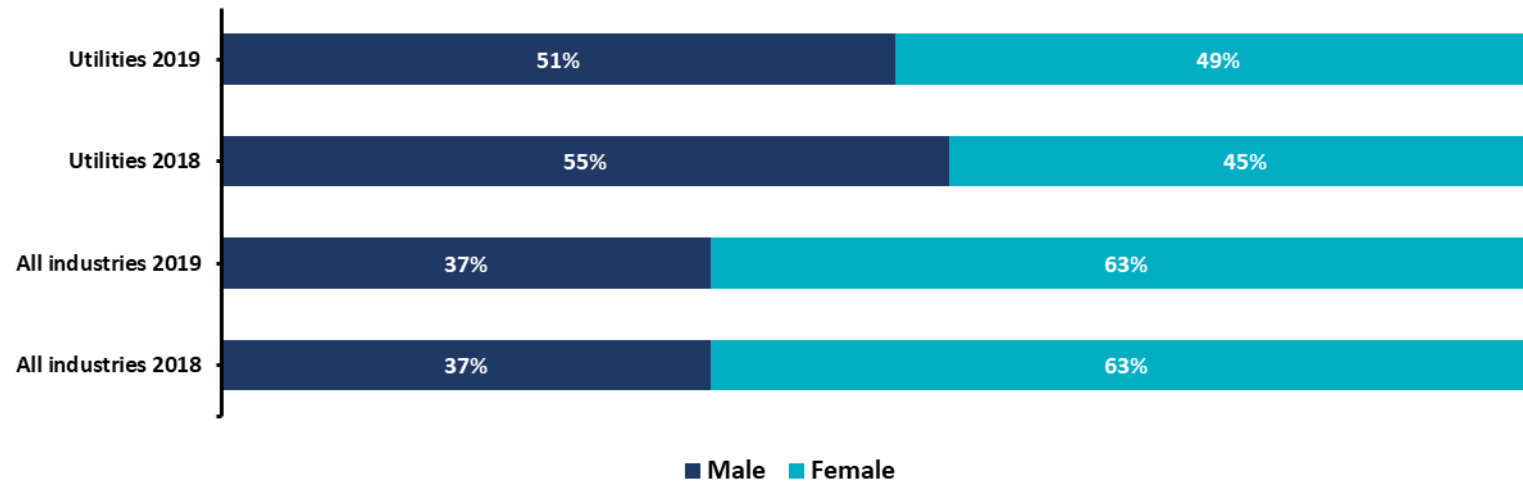
EAP Utilisation



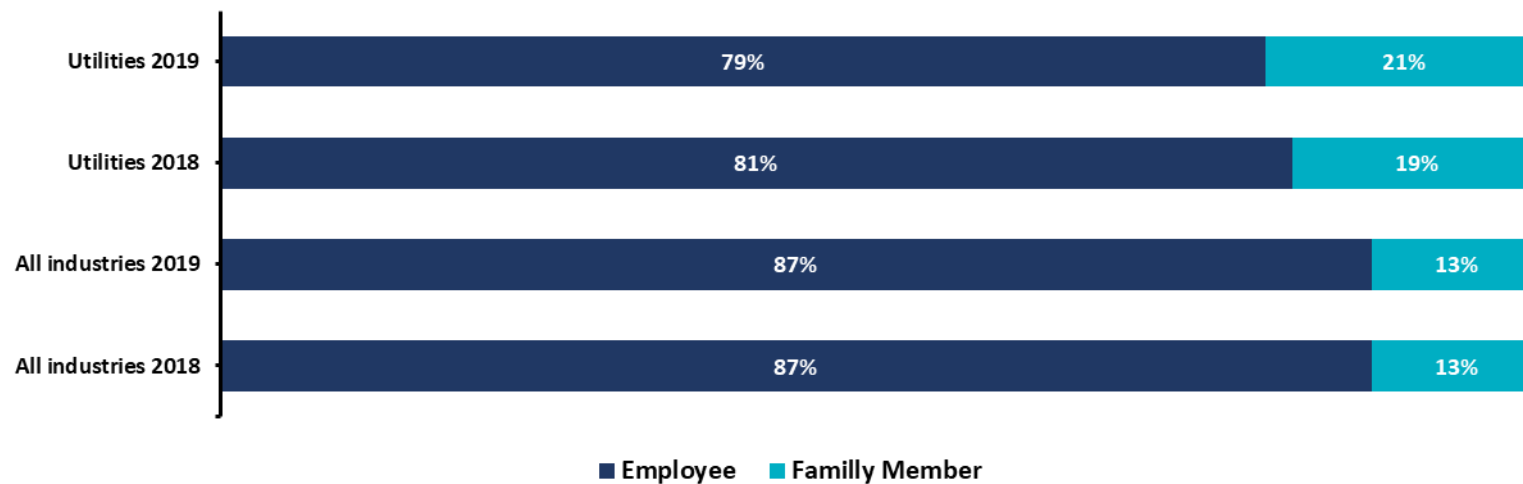
EAP client age (as % of all clients)



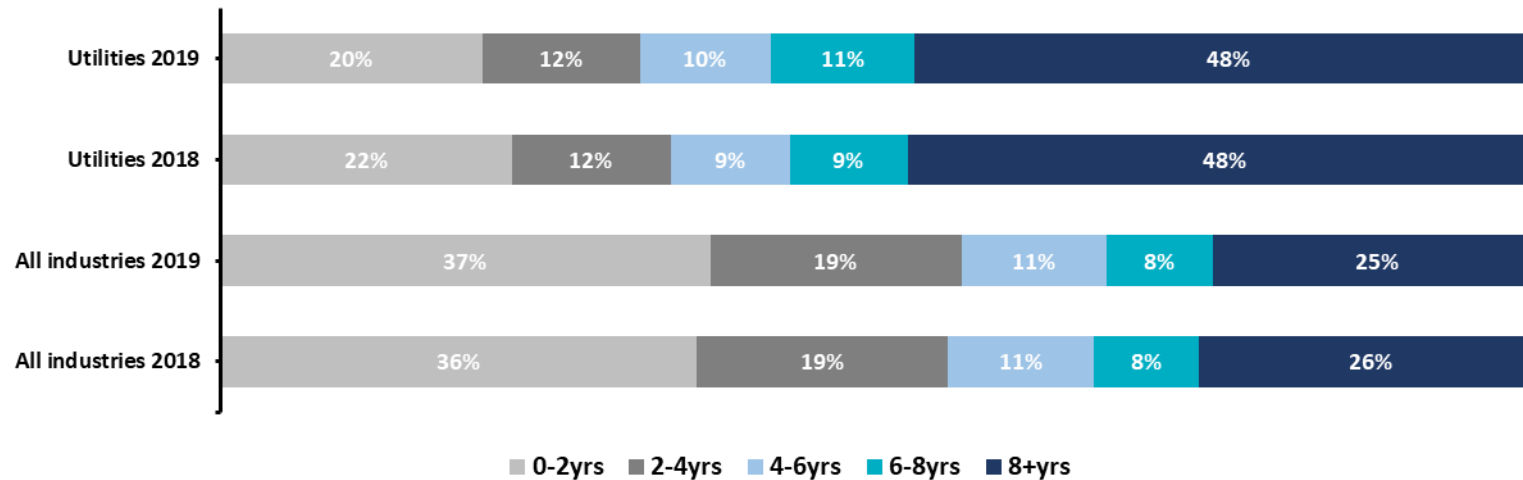
EAP client gender (as % of all clients)



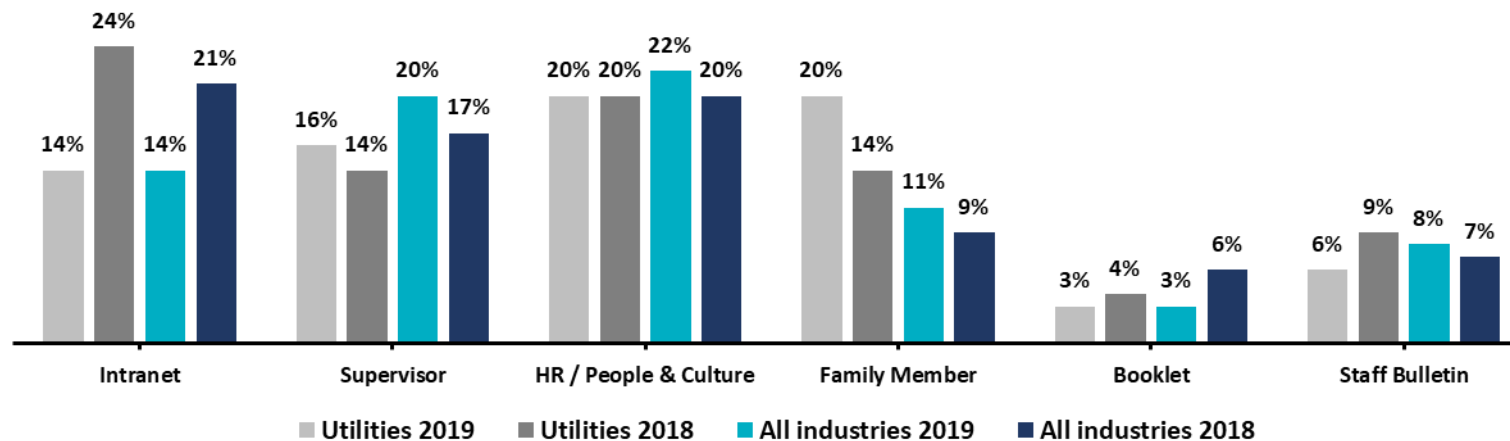
EAP client type (as % of all clients)



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

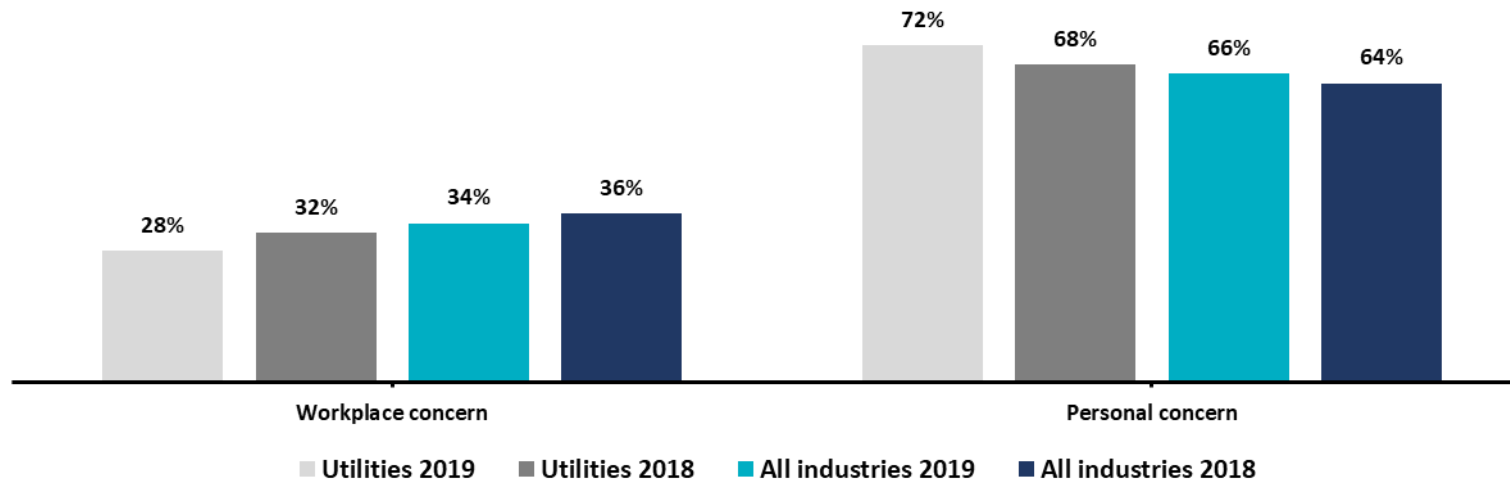


How learnt of EAP? (as % of all clients)

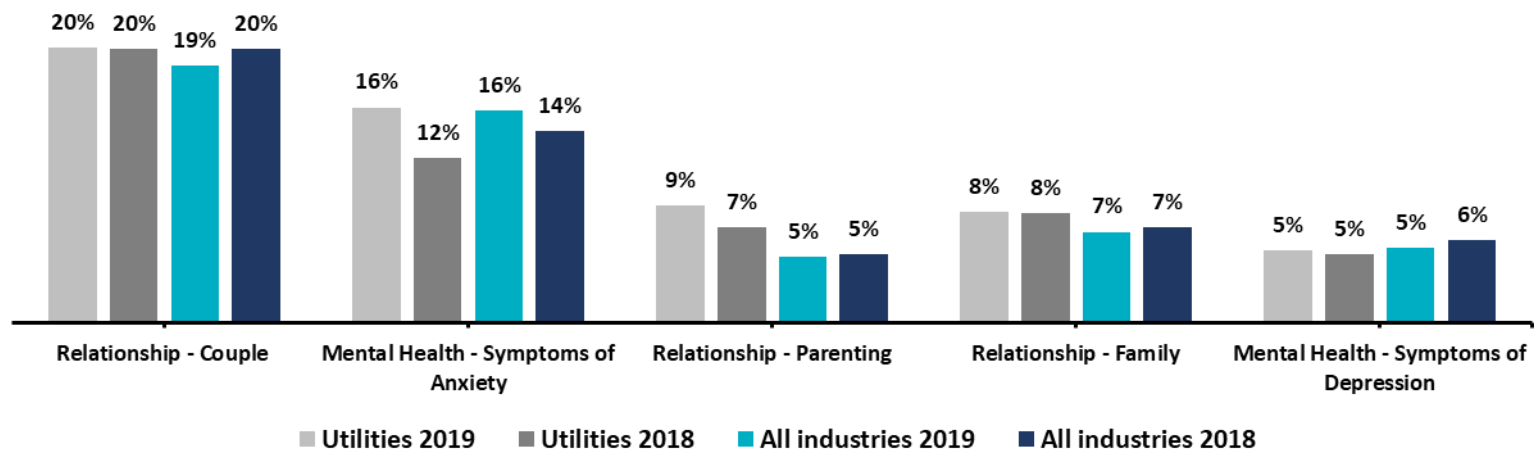


WHY HAVE PEOPLE BEEN ACCESSING EAP?

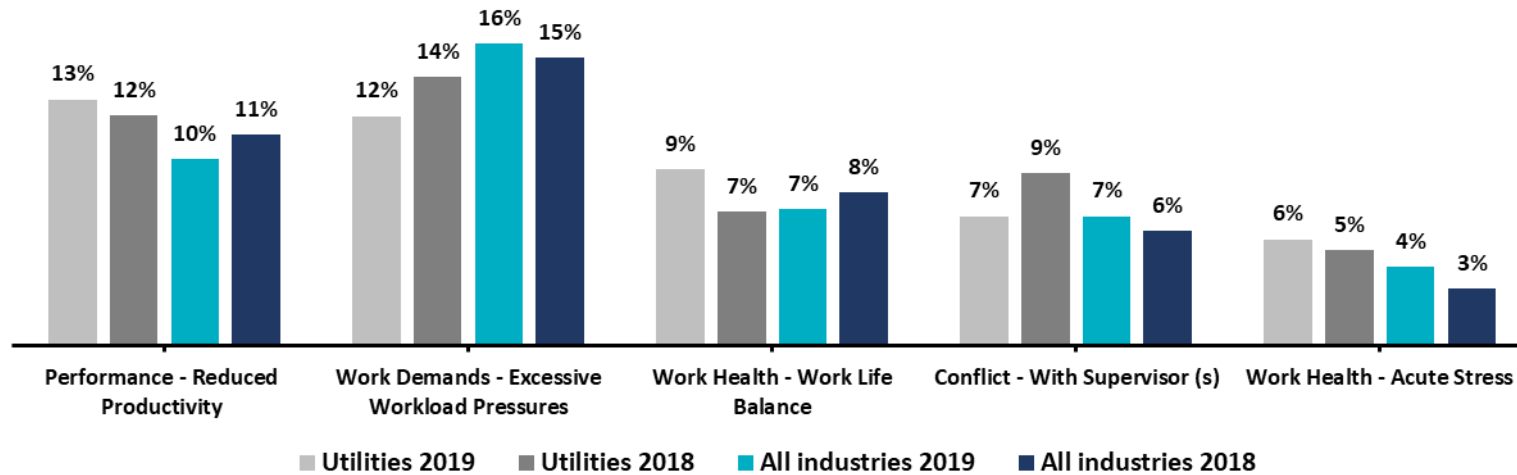
Primary presenting concern (as % of all clients)



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)

