



Cards that can pull your people out of hot water

Business or Pleasure

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE SCHEMES

Initiatives for staff care can cover the exotic as well as the mundane, says **Rhymer Rigby**

Rescuers discovered a man washed up on a South Pacific beach. He had been attacked by a shark and was in need of medical attention. But the only identification anyone could find was an employee assistance programme card in his pocket: this was sufficient detail for emergency treatment to swing into action.

"We were contacted and authorised treatment and made sure the company was informed," says Jeremy Garman, sales and marketing director at Axa Icas, an occupational health services company. "Twenty-four hours later we realised he needed microsurgery on the [Australian] mainland so we authorised an airlift. He got the surgery which almost certainly saved his life."

David Smith, secretary of the Employee Assistance Professionals Association, recalls another rescue operation – a man became separated from his tour group in

data back and if, for example, we see a peak in financial enquiries, we can put on money management seminars."

Louise Boston, Eon's occupational health manager, adds: "Certain parts of the population will not seek advice, but if you put people out there they will talk to them." So Eon sends specialist workers into its offices to talk to staff about everything from good nutrition and posture to using a Nintendo Wii game console to get fit.

Vicky Lloyd, human resources manager at the legal firm Mills & Reeve, says that the company's EAP is better described as a well-being programme: "It's very comprehensive. We have areas like life management – everything from financial services to advice on schools – and counselling services." Staff can have five counselling sessions: "We had someone who phoned for a face-to-face session and within an hour they were seeing a counsellor."

While such schemes might be popular among staff, research by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development suggests that only one-third of UK companies have taken them up. Mr Garman says EAPs are more prevalent in the US and there is an increasing trend to offer support to employees wherever they are, whether it is the

another rescue operation – a man became separated from his tour group in a game park in Tanzania's Serengeti; he called his EAP with his mobile and, after liaising with the park rangers, they managed to locate him and ensure his safe return to the lodge.

These are exotic examples of the kind of support that employee assistance, or well-being, programmes provide. Typically, services on offer range from relationship counselling and financial advice to information on schools for people moving to a new area. The idea is that by looking after your employees, absenteeism and stress is reduced and productivity increases.

Neil Budworth, corporate health and safety manager at Eon, the Germany-based energy group, says that about 12 per cent of the company's 17,000 employees have used their scheme: "We get around 500 legal enquiries a month and 400 requests for information – everything from how to lose weight to how to argue effectively."

Mr Budworth says the scheme can be responsive, too: "It is only part of the solution and provides a shallow safety net. Every six months we get

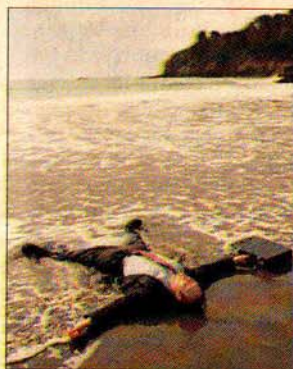
support to employees wherever they are, whether it is the metaphorically shark-infested waters of the City or the literally shark-infested waters of the South Pacific.

"Employers need to recognise the business case," says Ben Willmott, employee relations adviser at the CIPD. "I imagine as the link between offering support and retention and absenteeism becomes clearer there will be more."

Ms Boston agrees, pointing to Eon's own experience as proof of the scheme's value: "During the 2007 norovirus outbreak, employees who spoke to the nurse on the phone and took advice came back to work significantly earlier. It made a real difference."

A recent report by Dame Carol Black, UK national director for work and health, noted: "A shift in attitudes is necessary to ensure that employers and employees recognise not only the importance of preventing ill-health, but also the key role the workplace can play in promoting health and well-being."

Mr Willmott, however, warns that these schemes must be part of a broader strategy: "There is no point in providing an EAP or well-being scheme if people are dreading coming to work because they are being bullied by a manager. EAPs are not the answer by themselves – line managers play a crucial role in detecting early problems. By the time someone phones the employee assistance scheme, they're already at crisis point." Though, it is hoped, not the kind that involves a shark.



Medical assistance needed