

Engaging Youth in the Workplace: Grant Update

The entry of young Americans, ages 16-24, into the workforce poses unique challenges for employers to effectively design benefits and programs that address the needs of Generation Y.

For example, consider this new trend in drug abuse: The 17th annual survey of the Partnership for a Drug-Free America found more teens had abused a prescription drug such as Vicodin, OxyContin or Ritalin in 2004 than Ecstasy, cocaine or LSD. Marijuana remained the drug of choice, although researchers found a decline in the number of teens trying it.

What other issues will be troublesome for young workers? How can an EAP best reach this population with its educational messages and service offerings? How can organizations best harness the tremendous potential of this creative, well-educated and inclusive generation?

Understanding younger workers' preferences

As EAPs have evolved to meet the needs of each generation — from occupational alcoholism programs for the Traditional Generation, to short-term counseling for Baby Boomers, to work/life services for Generation X— so must they respond to the needs of Generation Y.

Recognizing this need, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) awarded ValueOptions and its partners—Health and Performance Resources (HPR) and George Washington University (GWU)—in the fall of 2004 with a Young Adults in the Workplace (YIW) grant to create EAP services that more effectively reach younger workers.

ValueOptions has begun using sophisticated geodemographic segmentation systems and data mining techniques to identify lifestyle clusters within the younger workforce. This is the same technology used by businesses to conduct market research to sell everything from hand soap to gourmet coffee, and to determine the best placement for new locations of bank branch offices or supermarkets. ValueOptions' database of sociodemographic and clinical service information from millions of client care episodes will be used in conjunction with the geodemographic segmentation systems to develop strategies to “market” the EAP to young employees.

Adapting EAP services to effectively reach younger workers

To date, ValueOptions has conducted a prospective risk assessment of employees eligible for EAP services, isolating and comparing those individuals who are ages 16-24 against the rest of the working population. The objective is to develop an initial view of important human capital challenges—lifestyle risks, behavioral health risks and medical risks—which will be developed for individual work groups, or possibly the total workforce.

Based on this analysis, we will adapt EAP services that reach young workers with media, messages and processes of care that match their problems and preferences. A task force within ValueOptions is developing a CD-ROM consultative guide and tool kit, similar to those of previous prevention initiatives, with a specific focus on designing and implementing EAP strategies to more effectively engage a younger workforce.

PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

In the fall of 2005, ValueOptions will work with a few of its corporate customers to create and pilot the prototype EAP outreach to young workers. After testing and refinement in Phase I, Phase II will replicate and extend the program to ValueOptions' entire EAP book of business.