

TROUBLED EMPLOYEES TURN TO LIFE-SAVING JOB BENEFIT: EAPs

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After more than 20 years working at the Philadelphia *Inquirer* and *Daily News*, Ron C. drank himself out of a job.

A couple of years later, he got that job back. And then, with the help of the same bosses who were forced to fire him while he was drinking, Ron got the help he needed to stay sober.

"They've helped me out tremendously," said Ron, who asked that his full name not be used in this story. "I'm just glad that I had the opportunity to get back. I'm very grateful."

Ron got his life back through the *Inquirer's* employee assistance program, or EAP. Increasingly common among businesses both large and small, company-provided EAPs can be used to help employees quit smoking, get their finances in order, save a marriage or, as in the case of Ron and many others, overcome an addiction to alcohol or drugs.

The programs obviously hold advantages for workers, but advocates also say they make good business sense. At the same time that EAPs are helping workers overcome a potentially devastating life issue, they are also saving companies the trouble, and cost, of finding, hiring and training a new worker.

Additionally, many employees who receive life-changing treatment on the company dime report feeling an increased sense of loyalty to their employer afterward -- and, as a result, are more productive than ever before.

"Twenty-five or 30 years ago, there was very little awareness in the industry of how to help employees," said Joe Curran, director of business development for the [Livengrin Foundation](#), a Bensalem-based drug and alcohol treatment center that works closely with many local companies through their EAPs. "There were some EAPs, but there weren't many, so certainly, the field has developed and industry is starting to realize that workers who have problems cost them a lot of money. It's good business to get somebody help if they need it, and not lose them as an employee."

The earliest EAPs arrived in the 1970s, grew steadily in popularity through the 1980s and, in the years since, have evolved into a thriving niche of the massive human resources market.

Nearly 70 percent of U.S. companies offer EAPs, according to one recent report.

Advocates say the reason is simple: Companies pay a modest premium for EAP services and get valuable services, and even cost savings, in return.

The annual cost of an EAP ranges from \$9 per employee to more than \$80 per employee, according to a 2004 report by Brookfield, Wis.-based education association International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans.

The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that employers get up to a \$16 return on investment for each dollar spent on EAPs.

Studies have shown that EAPs can reduce absenteeism by 30 percent, sick pay by 60 percent and workplace accidents by 70 percent, and are especially helpful in the treatment of alcohol and drug abuse.

That was certainly the case for Ron, who admitted that, at the time he was fired by the Inquirer, he wasn't ready to seek help.

"I wasn't really ready to accept the fact that my drinking days were over," he said. "I didn't want to believe that. [After I was fired], I was still dithering and dabbling. I didn't want to stop hanging out with those coworkers I used to drink with. I really felt I had no problem."

But fate intervened, and Ron ended up getting a job with a delivery company that, by coincidence, served the Inquirer. Ron's delivery route included a weekly stop at his old workplace, which allowed him to maintain contact with his former employers and union boss.

When he eventually got sober and got his job back, his bosses made sure Ron stayed on the straight and narrow. Through the company EAP, they gave Ron all the counseling and support he needed to make his meetings and avoid his old habits. Today, Ron has been sober nearly 20 years, and he says the company EAP is a big reason why.

"It really did help me out a lot," he said. "It helped me with the idea of moving on with my life without drinking."

Ron's story is a best-case-scenario resolution to a common workplace problem. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), one of every 13 American adults is an alcoholic.

Many addicts have jobs, and their impact on their workplace is not a small one. Alcohol abuse alone costs companies anywhere between \$33 billion and \$68 billion per year, according to federal statistics. Addicts are four to eight times more likely to miss work than other workers, and also can drag down productivity and morale.

"It absolutely has an impact on an entire organization, which is the way alcohol and drug addiction works," Curran said. "If one employee has a problem, they will affect six to eight others. If somebody you work with has a problem, it's likely you're going to be affected. You'll have to pick up the slack for them, cover for them, lend them money, and just be part of the drama."

The disturbance is enough to compel many companies to simply part ways with the problem worker. Certainly it may seem to be the easiest way out. Though Curran points out it's illegal to fire someone for having a drinking problem, it's not illegal to fire them for poor performance. Still, getting employees help, Curran said, can really pay off.

"My experience is that if [companies get workers help] ... the company will get back a very loyal employee who will be very appreciative of the opportunity," Curran said. "So I think many small businesses are now not looking to terminate employees, but rather trying to look at these problems as, 'How can I not lose this person?'"

One of those companies is Philadelphia Gas Works, said John Rooney, manager of EAP and labor relations for the utility. Originally launched by the company's workers 20 years ago, PGW's EAP was

rebuilt 10 years ago as a joint effort of management and the union. It has been a monumental success, Rooney said. Management promotes the program heavily and workers trust that, if they approach their managers and admit to a problem, they will be treated fairly.

The program has helped several employees keep their jobs and straighten out their lives. It's also saved the company an untold amount of money, Rooney said. "The employee comes back and they work harder," Rooney said. "They say to themselves, 'The company looked out for me, and gave me a second chance, and now I have to prove I'm worth it.' ... A lot of money goes into training these employees. So when they hit a bump in the road, you want to help them, because you want to keep them."