

# How employee health works for you

**A** well-run employee wellness programme will provide a positive return on investment. The average cost-to-benefit ratio is estimated at between 1:3 and 1:5 – for every \$1 invested, there is a realised benefit of \$3 to \$5. In other words, a return on investment of between 300% and 500%.

"In Africa, the ROI is a little lower," says Rochelle Mountany, General Manager for Business Risk Intelligence and Technology at ICAS Southern Africa, "closer to 1:2 or 1:3. But it's still a return. Most managers don't believe me when I show them the figures. For them, a 15% or 20% ROI is good. So 300% looks excessive." ICAS (Independent Counselling and Advisory Services) provides professional assistance to nearly 40 000 Standard Bank Group employees in Africa.

Employee assistance programmes or EAPs have been around since the 1940s. Early programmes typically focused on workplace and production problems related to alcohol use and abuse; over time, this was broadened "to include other personal issues that negatively affect job performance"<sup>1</sup>. Global industrialisation has also changed the nature and importance of employee wellness: work is increasingly sedentary, meaning employee populations are at greater risk of developing chronic diseases; and the workplace is an increasingly stressful environment – whether it's job-related anxiety caused

## EAPs in Africa need to be more community focused, and less organisation-focused

by the global economic downturn, or the challenges of maintaining a healthy work-life balance in the age of technology and the expectations of 24-7 availability.

"The modern workplace is a totally artificial environment," Mountany says. "You ask people to spend eight or nine hours a day at a desk; they have to deal with an unnatural internal hierarchy, and personal reasons are not considered good reasons for missing your performance targets... You have to balance the scale somehow. This is where EAPs come in," says Mountany.

In the United States, mental health (including stress and depression) and substance abuse are the leading cause of illness and lost productivity in the workplace<sup>2</sup>. A significant number of employers also emphasise the role of EAPs in the management of critical incident stress – employees witnessing an armed robbery, for example – and disaster planning (responding to large-scale events like Hurricane Katrina, or the 9/11 terrorist attacks). In a study commissioned by the National Business Group on Health, when businesses were asked to describe the future role of their internal EAPs, the majority of employers defined it as an "employee counselling

service". Less than 18% of employers focused on healthcare benefits, and just 15% on workplace performance. The report commented, critically, that most employers "do not integrate behavioural healthcare benefits offered through the health plan with behavioural health benefits offered through disability management, employee assistance or health promotion programmes."<sup>3</sup> The result, it continued, was that "employer-sponsored behavioural benefits and broader health systems of care become fragmented, uncoordinated, duplicative and uneven in terms of cost and quality."

In Africa the EAP model is, of necessity, compelled to integrate health and wellness objectives; to a large extent this is due to the impact of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria on both the workforce and the communities in which they live and operate. A sizeable portion of EAP funding is also sourced from HIV initiatives. Lack of access to primary healthcare is another driving factor, particularly as multinational companies try and match benefits for their employees, irrespective of geographic location. This has practical implications for the roll-out and application of employee programmes. "In the west, you use an 'assess and refer' model," explains Mountany. "In Africa, you often have nowhere to refer to. EAP practice is very different, because you actually have to do the job yourself. In some countries there are added difficulties – for example, healthcare practitioners may