



## EAP in France – Growing *Savoir Faire*

| By John Maynard, PhD, CEAP

**R**enowned for its cuisine, cultural history, and physical beauty, France is ranked among the world's leaders in education, health care, and life expectancy. It has the 5<sup>th</sup>-largest economy in the world and is the 4<sup>th</sup>-wealthiest nation. Economically, culturally, and politically, it has long been among the most influential countries on both the European and world stage.

France is also the world's most popular tourist destination. My wife and I added our names to the other 83 million or so annual foreign visitors, when we spent several days in and around Paris in December 2017. While there, we also had the opportunity to visit several French EAP firms and talk with leading EA professionals about the state of the profession in France.

### EAP Begins Slowly

The first EAPs in France appeared in the early 2000s. Prior to that, in the 1980s and 1990s, a few psychological support phone services had been established by companies or insurance plans, but they weren't called EAPs, nor did they provide more than limited support or brief counseling for individual callers.

In 2002-2004, with impetus from new European Union regulations, the French government

began holding workplaces more accountable for prevention and mitigation of psychosocial risks, including stress and interpersonal conflicts. By 2005, when the first book about EAP in France (Angel et al., 2005) appeared, the authors noted that EAPs were beginning to emerge, but were still limited to a few large public sector companies, in addition to the French divisions of multinational companies that already had EAPs in their other locations.

### Suicides Quicken the Pace

EAP awareness and growth accelerated in 2008, following a series of suicides at prominent French companies, including *France Télécom* (now called "Orange"), *Renault*, and others. These highly publicized suicides shocked the country. Within the next two years, the French government passed legislation requiring that companies with more than 1,000 employees develop and implement specific plans to identify and manage psychosocial risks, including stress and harassment.

To help define and maintain the professionalism of the rapidly growing market for psychosocial risk intervention, including psychological support, several psychosocial risk-related firms created, in 2011, a professional association

called *Fédération des Intervenants en Risques Psychosociaux* (FIRPS). Today, FIRPS has 18 member firms and focuses on developing professional guidelines and providing a forum for sharing information. Some, but not all, of the founding and current member firms provide EAP services.

Between 2008 and 2012, many companies in France conducted psychosocial risk assessments and began to implement EAPs as part of their mitigation plans. The demand for company risk analysis and assessment has declined since then; however, the interest and demand for EAP services have continued to fuel the growth of the profession in France.

Although statistics are hard to come by, the general consensus of French professionals is that most of the largest French companies today have functioning EAPs. Smaller companies are less likely to have implemented a program, but interest in EAP is continuing to grow at all company-size levels.

### Vive la Différence

A few interesting differences emerged between EAP firms in France and those in most of the other countries I've written about in this column. Whereas in many countries, much of the local EAP business is still subcontracted from



large multinational EAP firms, in France the majority of EAP business is generated by direct contracts with French companies.

For the portion of the French EAP market that *is* subcontracted from the global EAP vendors, there appear to be far fewer exclusive agreements. In other words, in most countries a global vendor will identify a particular local EA provider to handle its EA business in that country or region. In France, several of the local EA providers mentioned subcontracting with the same global EA firms. This means that those global providers are working with multiple local firms in the same geographical area.

### Challenges and Opportunities

Culturally, the French tend to maintain a clear distinction between work and personal life. This mindset creates reluctance on the part of many employers to address personal issues with workplace programs. EAP and related services continue to be driven forward more by legislation and the after-the-fact need for response to critical incidents, than by employer understanding of the potential return on investment they might achieve from a full suite of EA services.

From an employee perspective, the distinction between work and personal life can increase people's reluctance to use services offered through the workplace. This is compounded by the still prominent association of counseling and therapy with psychoanalysis in France. Although awareness is growing of brief, more

practical-oriented counseling and therapy approaches, psychological help for the wealthy is still associated with analysis, while most other people depend on medication. In fact, France is one of the world's largest consumers of psychotropic medication.

The challenge most often mentioned by EA professionals in France is the pressure toward lower prices, even though the market remains far from saturated. The vicious cycle of lower prices leading to lower employer expectations and ultimately to commodification of a professional service is, of course, not unique to France. However, it can be particularly damaging when it occurs so early in the development phase of EAP within a given country.

On the other hand, the fact that the market still has so much room to grow offers great opportunity for EAP in France. The psychosocial risk legislation that helped jump-start EAP awareness and development ten years ago continues to evolve and support strong EAP market momentum.

The sad reality of the increasing need for critical incident preparation and response in France, as in other countries, is also contributing to the growing awareness and perception of EAP value. Simultaneously, technology is improving EAPs' ability to deliver services outside Paris and making individual access to services more convenient and potentially more confidential.

Taken together, changing environmental factors, such as legis-

lation and highly visible critical incidents, along with gradually shifting public attitudes toward accepting psychological support, as well as evolving technological abilities to deliver services, have set the stage for significant growth of the EAP field in France. This trend is likely to continue and even accelerate. ♦

### Let's Continue the Discussion

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*Dr. John Maynard served as CEO of EAPA from 2004 through 2015. Prior to that, he was President of SPIRE Health Consultants, Inc., a global consulting firm specializing in EA strategic planning, program design, and quality improvement. In both roles, he had the opportunity to observe, meet, and exchange ideas with EA professionals in countries around the world. He currently accepts speaking engagements and consulting projects where he can make a positive difference. He can be reached at johnmaynard@spirehealth.com.*

### References

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