



Factors that predict propensity to use an Employee Assistance Program
by Laura Ashlee Schneider

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in
Applied Psychology
Montana State University
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Abstract:

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are designed to address several physical and mental health issues of employees. Employers who implement such a program have a responsibility to inform employees of the program and make them familiar with procedures to contact the EAP. Confidentiality of the program should also be assured.

An EAP that addresses these issues should have successful utilization rates. A questionnaire designed to assess factors hypothesized to predict propensity to use an Employee Assistance Program was administered to university faculty and staff (N=2,230) at a medium-sized western university. Based on a structural equations modeling analysis, a model of factors hypothesized to predict propensity to use an EAP was determined to be unidentified. However, a similar revised model adequately fit the data. Specifically, results revealed associations between (a) degree of familiarity with an EAP, (b) degree of confidence in an EAP, (c) perceived accessibility of an EAP, (d) perceived effectiveness of an EAP, (e) perceived purpose of an EAP, and (f) propensity to use an EAP. Results are discussed from an employee well-being perspective.

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ABSTRACT

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are designed to address several physical and mental health issues of employees. Employers who implement such a program have a responsibility to inform employees of the program and make them familiar with procedures to contact the EAP. Confidentiality of the program should also be assured. An EAP that addresses these issues should have successful utilization rates. A questionnaire designed to assess factors hypothesized to predict propensity to use an Employee Assistance Program was administered to university faculty and staff ($N=2,230$) at a medium-sized western university. Based on a structural equations modeling analysis, a model of factors hypothesized to predict propensity to use an EAP was determined to be unidentified. However, a similar revised model adequately fit the data. Specifically, results revealed associations between (a) degree of familiarity with an EAP, (b) degree of confidence in an EAP, (c) perceived accessibility of an EAP, (d) perceived effectiveness of an EAP, (e) perceived purpose of an EAP, and (f) propensity to use an EAP. Results are discussed from an employee well-being perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Stress and Well-being

Researchers have been concerned with employee well-being for several decades, as is evident by the abundance of literature addressing the topic. Well-being represents an appealing psychological state and is presumed to fluctuate in accordance with life events (Schmutte & Ryff, 1997). Well-being is operationalized through global measures of happiness and/or life satisfaction. Organizations and employees benefit when employees are happy (Leiter & Durup, 1996). Happiness can be negatively affected by many variables. For example, sickness, environmental factors, and stress can reduce feelings of happiness. Further, stress is known to reduce feelings of well-being (Edwards, 1992).

Stress has numerous causes, including heavy workloads and high task demands (Ganster & Schaubroeck, 1991). Family demands are also positively related to daily stressors (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989). Stress has even been shown to spillover from home to work and vice versa (Leiter & Durup, 1996; Williams & Alliger, 1994). The well-being of employees can lead to increased productivity and, thus, it is important for organizations to consider their employees' well-being when making decisions. Pressure and stress, regardless of what organization employees are a member of, can affect negatively their well-being. The manner in which stress is handled is of great importance. For example, self-disclosure seems to produce apparent health benefits (Pennebaker, 1990). Having someone available for an individual to discuss stressors with is beneficial in reducing the individual's stress. Therefore, one way to mediate this stress

is through an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) (Sullivan & Poverny, 1992).

Employee Assistance Programs

Definition

Employee Assistance Programs are defined as "...policies and procedures adopted by the employers in order to identify problem employees, including those with alcoholic involvement, as manifested by deteriorating job performance. Once identified, such employees are steered to a variety of agencies (both inside and outside the workplace) for the express purpose of receiving treatment or rehabilitation" (Shain & Groeneveld, 1990, p. 1). Similarly, Milne, Blum, and Roman (1994, p. 124) defined EAPs as "a formal intervention system that identifies and assists organizational members with a wide range of personal problems that may be affecting their job-related behaviors." A health promotion aspect should be added to these definitions to fully understand the intent of implementing an EAP (Lubin, Shanklin, & Polk, 1996). As it stands, it reads that troubled employees are sought out and rehabilitated only for the sake of productivity. In the true spirit of an EAP, these employees are rehabilitated to improve their overall health, which typically results in increased productivity (Csiernik, 1995). Furthermore, employees who have any type of problem, not just substance problems, are free to utilize an EAP.

Types of Programs

At present, 95% of EAPs are the broad brush type in which employees have access to a wide range of services, and not merely assistance with alcohol and drug abuse (Grosch, Duffy, & Hessink, 1996). Employee Assistance Programs can be offered internally or externally. An internal program has staff on site and can refer employees to outside agencies for long-term intensive programs. Large organizations are more likely than small organizations to have an internal EAP (Feinstein & Brown, 1982; Sonnenstuhl & Trice, 1986). An externally-operated program will contract out services. Grosch et al. (1996) ascertained that employers who used external EAPs had a significantly lower percentage of employees who used the program than employers who used internal EAPs. Sometimes it is the case that several organizations will combine their resources to develop a collaborative EAP (Dessler, 1997). For both internal and external EAPs, a telephone hot line may be set up for employees. Employees can call 24 hours a day with concerns or problems they would like to discuss. Regardless of the type of EAP, an individual can be referred to the program by a supervisor, coworker, family member, peer, or can enter voluntarily upon self-referral.

History

Employee Assistance Programs, in their current state, have been in operation for approximately 40 years (Holosko, 1988). They have their roots in the social betterment movement, personnel counseling, occupational mental health programs, and industrial alcoholism programs (Sonnenstuhl & Trice, 1986). The National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) coined the label Employee Assistance Program.

Certainly, businesses which are concerned about their employees' well-being, and which assume a social responsibility to the community, are more likely to adopt an EAP than businesses which are not concerned about employee well-being and the community (Roman, 1980; Trice & Beyer, 1984). A 1995 national survey indicated that 39% of all private worksites with 50 or more full-time employees have an EAP (French, Dunlap, Roman, & Steele, 1997). Furthermore, the majority of Fortune 500 companies are currently using an EAP (Major, 1990). Nevertheless, only 11% of U.S. colleges and universities implement an EAP (Mermis, 1994). The NIAAA was the impetus in the development of EAPs in university environments; funding from the NIAAA to implement EAPs in universities began in the mid-1970s (Roman, 1980).

Universities

The university environment is different from the prototypical business environment. The university environment usually involves more autonomy, flexibility, creativity, and individualism compared to a prototypical business environment (Sullivan & Poverny, 1992). However, university employees experience the same pressures as employees in a prototypical business environment. For example, both universities and prototypical businesses must deal with lower revenues while battling higher costs. In addition, similar to employees in a prototypical business environment, individual faculty are held accountable for remaining productive throughout their tenure (Sullivan & Poverny, 1992).

Previous Research

Previous research on EAPs has examined topics such as supervisor reactions to EAPs, employee reactions to EAPs (including propensity to use the program), EAP adoption and implementation, and EAP evaluation (Harris & Heft, 1992). Employee Assistance Programs arose out of a need to deal with alcohol and drug problems in the workplace. Thus, most research focuses on employees with chemical dependencies. The majority of studies on EAPs continue to focus on prototypical business environments rather than university environments. Overall, most of the research on EAPs indicates positive outcomes associated with the presence of an EAP. Examples of these positive outcomes include decreased absenteeism, increased well-being, and financial savings to the organization (Evans & Lair, 1983; Every & Leong, 1994; Gam, Sauser, Evans, & Lair, 1983; Klarreich, DiGiuseppe, & DiMattia, 1987; McClellan & Miller, 1988).

Employee Assistance Programs are similar to other health-related programs (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous) in that many factors contribute to employees' reported willingness to seek help. McKirnan (1980) found that familiarity with and perceptions of effectiveness of such a program are related to self-reported propensity to use the program. Many times, utilizing a program like an EAP carries certain stigmas. Seeking help can be viewed as a product of moral weakness which, in turn, could cause embarrassment to the individual and decrease the likelihood of that individual utilizing an EAP (Harris & Fennell, 1988).

Cost-effectiveness

An annual loss of 132 million working days are due to stress-related illnesses (Feinstein & Brown, 1982). Harris and Heft (1992) noted that nearly \$90 billion of lost productivity is due to illegal drug use and alcohol abuse. Employee Assistance Programs are designed to address, among other factors, issues of illegal drug use and alcohol abuse and help an employee deal with these issues most effectively. Employees who do nothing to address their problems may become dissatisfied with their jobs, families, or lives in general. Maintaining satisfied employees benefits an employer's bottom line by reducing absenteeism and health care costs (Gam et al., 1983; McClellan & Miller, 1988).

Although research indicates how valuable an EAP can be to an organization, it is always more difficult to convince an organization to spend money, time, and resources to implement a program. Previous research indicates that EAPs are cost-effective (Evans & Lair, 1983; Every & Leong, 1994; Gam et al., 1983). Reports on the overall cost effectiveness of an EAP indicate that organizations can save between \$2.74 and \$8.00 per dollar spent on an EAP (Klarreich et al., 1987).

The key to saving this money is utilization. The higher the percentage of total employees utilizing an EAP, the more likely it is that those who will benefit most are those who are using the program. As a result, the organization will save money (Every & Leong, 1994). One study indicated a 70% reduction in absenteeism due to utilization of an EAP (Klarreich et al., 1987). Employee Assistance Programs also have the potential to improve employee well-being through self-disclosure. That is, merely talking about

one's problems may increase an individual's sense of personal well-being. Therefore, it is important to examine factors that influence an employee's propensity to use an EAP.

Theoretical Framework

Two social psychological theories provided the framework for developing the present study's hypotheses. The first, social comparison, involves assessing one's opinions and attitudes by comparing oneself to others (Myers, 1990). Further, when an individual categorizes others as a group and expects to join them (e.g., starting a new job), they perceive the group norm to be more extreme than if they did not intend on joining the group (Mackie, 1986). If the norms of the organization include negative attitudes toward the EAP, these negative attitudes will be perceived as more extreme than they actually are. Attitudes are one important factor that people use in the group categorization process (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Therefore, if people want to feel comfortable categorizing themselves as part of the group, they are likely to adopt the same attitudes that others hold toward the EAP and, subsequently, the attitudes may be exaggerated. Therefore, it is of much importance to assure the EAP is running correctly and possesses positive attributes so that employees will develop positive attitudes toward the EAP.

A second theory used to develop the hypotheses of the present study is expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964). Expectancy theory states that individuals will expend energy on activities that lead to desired outcomes (Muchinsky, 1997). In this sense, a person must want to get better; that is, solve his or her problems. The individual must

also believe there is a relationship between using the EAP and achieving this desired outcome. Finally, the person must perceive that attempting to contact the EAP will get them an appointment with someone who is willing to help them. These theoretical foundations, as well as the following background of the present study, provided the framework for developing the hypotheses in this study.

Background of Present Study

Studies have shown that employees' awareness of or familiarity with an EAP (Frost, 1990; Harris & Fennell, 1988; Park, 1992; Sonnenstuhl & Trice, 1986; Steele & Hubbard, 1985), and perceptions of trustworthiness or confidentiality of an EAP (Harris & Fennell, 1988; Park, 1992; Sonnenstuhl & Trice, 1986), are positively associated with propensity to use an EAP. Milne et al. (1994) conducted a study on factors that affect employees' propensity to use an EAP. They ascertained that familiarity with an EAP, perception of top management support for an EAP, perception of supervisory support for an EAP, and perception of accessibility of an EAP were positively associated with perceived confidence in the EAP. Perceived confidence was measured as a function of perceived confidentiality and credibility of the program. Milne et al.'s (1994) results further indicated that confidence in the EAP was positively associated with propensity to use the EAP. Thus, confidence in the EAP seems to mediate an individual's perceptions of the EAP and propensity to use the EAP. Milne et al.'s study did not examine perceived effectiveness of the EAP, although these authors stated that if confidence is lacking in the EAP, it cannot be an effective or successful program.

Although many variables have been identified as being associated with propensity to use an EAP, perceived effectiveness of an EAP is one variable that has received relatively little attention. Data reveal that somewhere between 70% and 85% of employees who use an EAP are self-referred (Blum & Roman, 1989; Grosch et al., 1996). It seems likely that an employee who utilizes an EAP voluntarily does so because he or she believes the EAP to be effective. Familiarity with an EAP precedes perceptions of accessibility and confidence in the program. In turn, perceptions of accessibility and confidence in an EAP are associated with perceptions of effectiveness. Thus, before a program is considered effective, it must contain positive qualities that would lead one to perceive it as effective. These positive qualities would include perceiving the program as accessible, confidential, and credible. In addition, a program that employees perceive as benefiting the employee will perhaps be more likely to be used compared to a program that has a perceived purpose of benefiting the employer (cf. McClellan & Miller, 1988).

Based on the foregoing assertions and results from previous research, a structural model was developed that incorporates factors hypothesized to be associated with employees' propensity to use an EAP (see Figure 1). As depicted in the hypothesized model shown in Figure 1, it is predicted that (a) familiarity with an EAP is positively associated with confidence in and perceived accessibility of the EAP, (b) accessibility of an EAP is positively associated with confidence in the EAP, (c) confidence in and perceived accessibility of an EAP are positively associated with perceived effectiveness of the EAP, (d) confidence in and perceived effectiveness of an EAP are positively associated with propensity to use the EAP, and (e) perceived purpose of an EAP is associated with propensity to use the EAP.

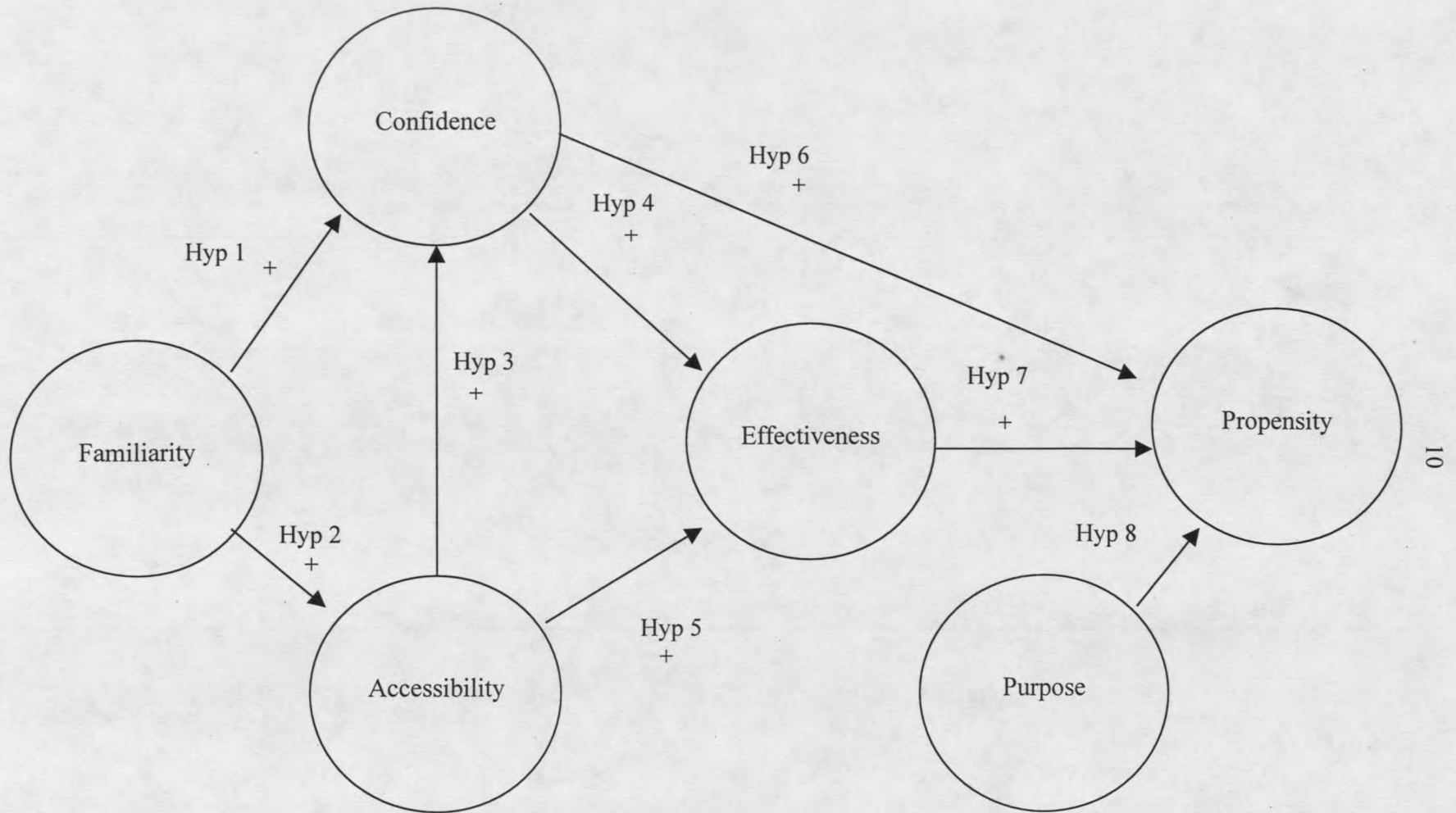


Figure 1. Model of Factors Hypothesized to Predict Propensity to Use an Employee Assistance Program.

Hypotheses

In sum, the following hypotheses were tested in the present study:

Hypothesis 1: Employees' familiarity with an EAP is positively associated with their confidence in the EAP.

Hypothesis 2: Employees' familiarity with an EAP is positively associated with their perceived accessibility of the EAP.

Hypothesis 3: Employees' perceived accessibility of an EAP is positively associated with their confidence in the EAP.

Hypothesis 4: Employees' confidence in an EAP is positively associated with their perceived effectiveness of the EAP.

Hypothesis 5: Employees' perceived accessibility of an EAP is positively associated with their perceived effectiveness of the EAP.

Hypothesis 6: Employees' confidence in an EAP is positively associated with their propensity to use the EAP.

Hypothesis 7: Employees' perceived effectiveness of an EAP is positively associated with their propensity to use the EAP.

Hypothesis 8: Employees' perceived purpose of an EAP is associated with their propensity to use the EAP, such that employees who believe the purpose of the EAP is to benefit the employee will have a greater propensity to use the program compared to employees who believe the purpose of the EAP is to benefit the employer.

METHOD

Participants

All faculty, staff, and administration at Montana State University-Bozeman ($N = 2,230$) had the opportunity to participate in this study. The Faculty Staff Assistance Program (FSAP) at Montana State University-Bozeman is an external EAP and has a representative on campus one day per week. All employees covered by the university's health plan (94% of the population) have access to this assistance program.

Procedure

A 4-page questionnaire designed to assess familiarity with, perceptions of, and propensity to use the FSAP was sent via campus mail. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured for all questionnaire responses, and a \$50.00 random lottery was offered to those who returned a completed questionnaire.

A response rate of 35% was obtained ($n = 768$). A 30% to 40% return rate is typical in the social sciences (Berdie, Anderson, & Niebuhr, 1986). Demographic information was obtained for all university employees to determine the representativeness of the sample of 768 respondents to its corresponding population.

Measures of Study Variables

The 4-page questionnaire administered, including the cover letter and each of the measures described next, can be found in the Appendix.

Familiarity

Two measures of familiarity were used. The dichotomous variable labeled Heard2 was a single-item measure from Frost (1990) asking if respondents had heard of the FSAP (yes/no). The variable labeled Familiar was a five-item measure from Milne et al. (1994) assessing level of familiarity with the FSAP. Respondents rated these items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree). Example items include "I know how to contact the FSAP" and "I would be able to contact the FSAP."

Confidence

Perceived confidence in the FSAP was assessed with two measures. Confid1 is a three-item measure adapted from Milne et al. (1994) and Confid2 is a two item measure from Frost (1990). Both are measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree). Example items include "Things that I would say to an FSAP consultant would not get back to fellow employees" and "The FSAP can be trusted to keep information confidential."

Accessibility

A 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree) was used for two items that assess perceived accessibility (Milne et al., 1994). Example items include “The FSAP is adequately accessible to employees” and “The FSAP is adequately visible to employees.”

Effectiveness

A two-item measure from Frost (1990) was used to measure perceived effectiveness. On a 4-point Likert scale (1 = to no extent to 4 = great extent), respondents indicated to what extent using the FSAP would help solve their problems. Example items include “To what extent do you think talking to someone at the FSAP would help make a change” and “To what extent do you think you would want to solve these problems on your own.”

Purpose

The two-item scale used to assess perceptions of the purpose of the FSAP was modeled after McClellan and Miller (1988). Respondents indicated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = to no extent to 4 = great extent) the extent to which they believed the FSAP to be a benefit to employees and to the employer. The items used were “To what extent do you believe the FSAP benefits employees” and “To what extent do you believe the FSAP benefits the employer?”

Propensity to Use

From Frost (1990), one item, labeled Likeuse, asked respondents how likely they would be to use the FSAP (1 = not at all likely to 4 = very likely). Another two-item measure from Frost (1990), labeled Propens1, asked about respondents' comfort level in dealing with the FSAP (1 = not comfortable to 4 = very comfortable). Finally, Propens2, a two-item measure from Milne et al. (1994), used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree) to measure propensity to use the program. Example items include "I would not hesitate to contact the FSAP with a personal problem of my own" and "I would not hesitate to contact the FSAP with a personal problem affecting my spouse, children, or family member."

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 reports means, standard deviations, and the range of values for participants' (a) age in years, (b) number of months employed by the university, and (c) gross annual income. In addition, Table 1 shows frequencies and percents for participants' (a) sex, (b) ethnic background, (c) marital status, and (d) job title.

As can be seen in Table 1, the majority of study participants were (a) between the ages of 34 and 53, (b) married, (c) Caucasian, and (d) staff members. With respect to sex, there were more females ($n = 458$; 59.6%) than males ($n = 306$; 39.8%) in the sample:

The population of Montana State University-Bozeman employees is 51% female (49% male), 60% staff (35% faculty, 5% administration), and 97.5% Caucasian (1% Native American, 1% Asian, .5% Black or Hispanic). Their average age is 45.8 years and average length of time with the university is 10 years. The present sample was highly representative of the population with respect to gender, ethnicity, age, and length of time with the university. In addition, the sample was closely representative of the population with respect to job title, such that the sample slightly under-represented faculty and slightly over-represented administration. Overall, in terms of demographics, the present sample of university employees is representative of the population of university employees and, thus, does not appear to be biased.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Demographic Variables

Variable	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	Range
Age in Years	43.62	9.69	20 – 68
Months Employed with University	112.80	94.21	2 – 456
Gross Annual Income in Dollars	31,262.40	19,307.66	1,223 – 150,000

	<u>n</u>	<u>% of N</u>
Sex		
Male	306	39.8
Female	458	59.6
Missing	4	0.6
Ethnic Background		
Asian	6	.8
Black	3	.4
Caucasian	726	94.5
Native American	13	1.7
Other	9	1.2
Missing	11	1.4
Marital Status		
Single	118	15.3
Married	550	71.6
Divorced	75	9.8
Separated	7	.9
Widowed	9	1.2
Missing	9	1.2
Job Title		
Assistant Professor	51	6.6
Associate Professor	60	7.8
Full Professor	55	7.2
Clerical	125	16.3
Staff	327	42.6
Other	133	17.3
Missing	17	2.2

Note. "Job Title-Other" includes upper-level administrative staff.

Correlation Matrix of Study Variables

Table 2 reports means, standard deviations, internal consistency estimates, and intercorrelations for all focal study variables. As can be seen in this table, each measure was internally consistent, with the exception of the two-item measure of effectiveness. In order to test Hypotheses 1-8, this correlation matrix and the respective standard deviations for each variable were entered into AMOS 3.6 (Arbuckle, 1994) to conduct a structural equations modeling analysis. AMOS 3.6 computes and conducts the analysis using a covariance matrix for the study variables.

Structural Equations Modeling

The hypothesized model shown in Figure 1 was tested using maximum likelihood estimation in AMOS 3.6 using a marker variable approach to define the metric of each latent variable. Cases with missing data were deleted on a listwise basis. The hypothesized model was unidentified by AMOS 3.6.

The revised model shown in Figure 2 was also tested using maximum likelihood estimation in AMOS 3.6 using a marker variable approach to define the metric of each latent variable. Cases with missing data were deleted on a listwise basis. AMOS 3.6 required that the parameter estimate between accessibility and effectiveness be constrained to zero. In addition, purpose and familiarity were allowed to covary ($r = .50$). The proportion of variance accounted for in each latent variable by their respective observed measures ranged from .16 to .83, though the majority were greater than .50.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, Internal Consistency Estimates, and Intercorrelations for Study Variables

Variable	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Heard2	---	---	---										
2. Familiarity	2.42	1.02	.499**	(.88)									
3. Confidence #1	3.21	.69	.337**	.560**	(.88)								
4. Confidence #2	3.33	.83	.303**	.499**	.812**	(.97)							
5. Accessibility	2.90	.90	.373**	.596**	.516**	.466**	(.78)						
6. Effectiveness	2.34	.77	.128**	.279**	.283**	.315**	.187**	(.46)					
7. Benefit Employee	2.50	.81	.248**	.410**	.409**	.402**	.361**	.588**	---				
8. Benefit Employer	2.51	.86	.184**	.363**	.333**	.353**	.287**	.529**	.818**	---			
9. Likely to Use	1.78	.86	.180**	.397**	.415**	.397**	.285**	.562**	.576**	.526**	---		
10. Propensity #1	2.94	1.10	.185**	.448**	.595**	.571**	.381**	.462**	.499**	.443**	.611**	(.96)	
11. Propensity #2	1.91	.87	.148**	.359**	.421**	.424**	.286**	.478**	.484**	.446**	.659**	.590**	(.92)

Cronbach's alphas appear in bold on the main diagonal in parentheses. N ranged from 684 to 760.

**p < .01.

Measurement errors for each observed measure ranged from .11 to .59. In short, each measure served as an adequate indicator of its underlying latent variable.

The revised model shown in Figure 2 offered an acceptable but not outstanding fit to the data, $\chi^2 (41, N = 643) = 573.69, p < .01$; goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = .84, adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) = .74, comparative fit index (CFI) = .87, normed fit index (NFI) = .86, and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .14.

As shown in Figure 2, in support of Hypothesis 1, results reveal that familiarity with the FSAP is significantly positively associated with confidence in the program ($\beta = 1.00, p < .01$, Beta (β) is measured in z-score units). In support of Hypothesis 2, familiarity with the FSAP is significantly positively associated with perceptions of accessibility of the program ($\beta = 1.00, p < .01$). Hypothesis 3 was not supported, such that perceived accessibility of the FSAP was not significantly associated with confidence in the program. In support of Hypothesis 4, perceived confidence in the FSAP is significantly positively associated with perceived effectiveness of the program ($\beta = .12, p < .05$). Hypothesis 5 was not supported, such that perceived accessibility of the FSAP was not significantly associated with perceived effectiveness of the program. Hypothesis 6 was also not supported, such that confidence in the FSAP was not significantly associated with propensity to use the program. In support of Hypothesis 7, perceived effectiveness of the FSAP is significantly positively associated with propensity to use the program ($\beta = 4.54, p < .05$). Finally, Hypothesis 8 was not supported, such that no significant relationship was found between perceived purpose of the FSAP and

