

Online EFAP service offerings: Re-examining user demographics and access patterns

Research report

Table of contents

- Introduction..... 2**
- Additional research 2**
 - Digital access patterns in Canada 2
 - Digital access patterns globally 3
 - Trends in Internet usage 3
 - The effectiveness of online multi-dimensional counselling 4
- Methodology 5**
 - Timeframe and sample 5
 - Study methods 5
 - Study limitations 5
- Findings 5**
 - EFAP access patterns 6
 - Trends in EFAP usage 7
- Conclusion 11**
 - Your take away 12
 - Why Morneau Shepell is a leader in EFAPs 12
 - Authors and researchers 13
- Glossary 14**
- References 15**

Introduction

As Employee and Family Assistance Programs (EFAPs) continue to show their effectiveness in helping workers deal with emotional, mental and physical-related stressors that may limit productivity on the job, an increasing number of employers are facilitating access to these programs to support their workforce's wellness needs. Consequently, providers of EFAPs are being challenged with new ways in which to enhance available support, especially when it comes to accessibility.

One such leader in EFAP clinical best practices and innovation, Morneau Shepell, examined user demographic, access and usage patterns in their February 2013 report, *The digital age: How people are accessing EFAP services*. Results showed the value of offering employee assistance services digitally and provided insight into the future potential of online behavioural health strategies, programs and services; namely, the ability to reach new users and a younger demographic (Veder, Dunmarra, Beaudoin, Marchese and Chartrand 2013).

In this paper, the most up-to-date data is used to re-examine *The digital age's* findings, providing human resource professionals with insight into:

- the latest digital and traditional EFAP service usage trends across age, gender and delivery channel; and
- the impact digital channels have in the realm of EFAP support.

This study also includes an examination of Morneau Shepell's newest program, Fitness Coach Connects. An addition to Morneau Shepell's current digital roster, Fitness Coach Connects is an individually customized health engagement plan that combines technological activity monitoring and online tools with real-time feedback from a personal coach.

Given the continuing escalation of digital growth, both in Canada and internationally, and the corresponding demand for digital service options and online access, it is important to assess the capacity these expanded digital services have for making EFAPs more accessible and engaging for today's employees.

Additional research

Digital access patterns in Canada

The ways in which Canadians are accessing the Internet continues to change:

- While laptops (74%) and desktop (62%) computers remain Canadians' device of choice when going online (with some individuals choosing both devices), Canadians are increasingly accessing the Internet from home using wireless handheld devices (Statistics Canada 2013a).
- In 2010, 35% of individuals used wireless handheld devices to connect to the Internet, compared with 59% in 2012. Also of interest, in 2012, 69% of Canadians with Internet access used more than one type of device to go online at home (Statistics Canada 2013a).
- Location continues to impact Canadians' access to the Internet. While broadband connectivity is available in 100% of urban areas, only 85% of rural Canada has access; however, this gap is decreasing (CIRA 2014).
- Income level also impacts Internet accessibility. As reported by the Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA), 95% of Canadians in the highest income bracket and only 62% in the lowest bracket are connected to the Internet. This may be due to the fact that Canadians pay one of the highest prices for Internet — ranking 25th out of 31 countries in terms of pricing for Internet access (CIRA 2014).

Digital access patterns globally

While this study focuses on Canadian findings, the implications can be applied to information and communication technologies (ICTs) worldwide.

Reputable statistical bodies such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) branch of the United Nations collect and report on ICTs from participating countries and dependent states, and various sources. In 2014, the ITU looked at ICT developments of 228 countries over a 13-year period. Overall, they found an increasing demand for communication services in both developed and developing countries. This is shown through a rise in Internet access and wired and mobile subscriptions, and a decrease in wired telephone subscriptions, as more people are now using their phones to access the Internet around the world (ITU 2014).

There exists an increasing demand for communication services worldwide.

Summary

Canadians are embracing new ways to access the Internet, using multiple devices. This in turn creates a demand for services available across all devices.

These findings also demonstrate the ongoing presence of a digital divide in Canada, and the consequential need to offer a wide range of both digital and non-digital mental health service modalities in order to ensure service is accessible regardless of access tool, geography and income.

Trends in Internet usage

By age

Canadians' Internet usage has continued to increase across the population since 2010, most notably in the 16+ and 65+ age groups:

- the percentage of users aged 16+ years old has grown from 80% in 2010 to 83% in 2012; and
- the percentage of users aged 65+ years old has increased from 40% in 2010 to 48% in 2012 (a significant growth in a short period of time) (Statistics Canada 2013c).

Individuals are also becoming increasingly comfortable with and accustomed to both digital synchronous, real-time communication (such as text or video chat messaging) and asynchronous communication (such as email), and expect health care services to be accessible online as well. While most notable in younger generations, this holds true for older generations as well (Snowdon, Shell, and Leitch 2011).

By activity

Of course, the reasons why individuals are accessing the Internet differ somewhat by age group:

- 80% of individuals aged 15 to 24 years old watch videos;
- 68% of individuals aged 25 to 44 years old search for medical and health-related information; and
- 63% of individuals aged 45 to 64 years old search for medical and health-related information (Statistics Canada 2013b).

Overall, the percentage of users who go online to look for medical and health-related information grew from 64% in 2010 to 67% in 2012. Compared with its previous standing as the seventh most popular online activity in 2010, survey results reported that searching for medical and health-related information tied with social media access as the fifth most popular online activity in 2012 (Statistics Canada 2013c).

It is to be noted, however, that even though Canada continues to be one of the most connected countries in the world, with 87% of all Canadian households having Internet access, and while there exists an evident demand for online medical and health-related information, Canadian companies have been slow to create an online business footprint: Only 45.5% of Canadian businesses actually have a website (CIRA 2014).

By gender

Researchers have also uncovered unique online usage patterns among males and females.

One study found that, on the whole, Canadian men perform more tasks online (67%) than women (57%) (Fallows 2005). On the other hand, more women go online to seek help for a number of different mental and physical health related concerns — findings consistent with EFAP user demographics (Veder et al. 2013).

Offering online health information and resources helps to reduce the barriers people may face when trying to access assistance.

For those men who do go online for health support, one study uncovered younger males' (ages 16 to 24) preference for action-oriented self-help interventions, as well as satisfaction with the information and help they received via digital means. These findings demonstrate that young men may be more likely to access online help regarding mental health concerns *if* digital self-help resources or tools are available (Ellis, Collin, Hurley, Davenport, Burns and Hickie 2013).

Additional studies also show the value that these Internet resources play in information gathering: while not a replacement for health providers, Internet resources do increase the availability of information, and as individuals vary in their ability and desire to utilize online information, health providers should be adaptive in providing users with multiple options of accessing information (Percheski and Hargittai 2011). Furthermore, offering health information and resources online helps to reduce the barriers people may face when trying to access assistance. Digital delivery helps reduce stigma, supports privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity concerns; can present a larger quantity of information; and increases ease, speed and availability of access (Horgan 2010).

The effectiveness of online multi-dimensional counselling

EFAP providers that take it one step further by, for example, creating programs that take a multi-dimensional approach (i.e., are delivered in-person with an online program as well as an activity tracker, or online with additional telephonic coaching) experience even greater success in improving user retention rates and overall program results (Pellegrini, Verba, Otto, Helsel, Davis and Jakicic 2011). It has also been proven that groups that use this strategy and that utilize technology have significantly lower program drop-out rates and greater results in physical activity changes. While these programs are not only successful in reaching existing clients in new ways, technology also attracts new users who have not previously accessed EFAP services (Veder, Byrne, Beaudoin, Bettencourt, Fasciano, Marinos and Ritchie 2014).

When designing support options, it's important to remember that variables such as lifestyle, learning style, time constraints, age, gender and/or personal preference for either digital or traditional methods of counselling can influence which modality best suits an individual and facilitates the most effective EFAP experience (Berger, Caspar, Richardson, Kneubühler, Sutter and Andersson 2011). As the needs of employees change, so should the options available to individuals seeking help.

Summary

Regardless of age and sex, Canadians are looking online for information regarding their health, further supporting the need to augment existing and create new multi-dimensional traditional and digital health solutions.

Methodology

The research in this study was supported in part by MITACS-Accelerate's grant, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada's (NSERC) discovery grant, and York University's Department of Mathematics and Statistics.

Timeframe and sample

Specifically for this study, Morneau Shepell gathered demographic data collected during client registrations from all telephonic (via the call centre) and online (via E-Counselling, Video Counselling, Online Access, First Chat, and mobile application) access points, from January 1, 2013 to December 31, 2013, and provided it to York University's statistical team.

Study methods

Expanding on the research conducted in our first study, Morneau Shepell first analyzed data taken from 2013 and then compared it with our 2012 results to evaluate digital and traditional EFAP service usage trends.

Then, to assess the impact of the mid-year introduction of the new Fitness Coach Connects program, data for all EFAP services was pro-rated to June 1, 2013 (the time of Fitness Coach Connects' launch) to isolate and allow for a consistent comparison of Fitness Coach Connects data with other service delivery option data.

Study limitations

As digital services are only provided to users aged 18 or older, this study does not include data for individuals 17 years old or younger who were re-directed to alternate support options.

Users who did not disclose their age were excluded from this study and account for less than 0.5% of participant data.

Findings

The results of this study are broken down into two sections. The first section focuses on points of access and highlights the finding that younger users are increasingly employing online channels to access EFAP services. The second section provides year-over-year comparisons as well as pro-rated usage data from the period following the mid-year launch of the Fitness Coach Connects program to examine overall digital service usage across age and gender groups. All data are accurate to within 1%.

EFAP access patterns

In Figure 1, we see that at 11.58%, the younger demographic (18 to 29-year-olds) are the highest users of online channels; that is 8.30% more than the 50+ age group.

Figure 1: Access points by age group

Age	Traditional (%)	Digital (%)	Total (%)
18-29	88.42	11.58	100
30-39	91.80	8.20	100
40-49	94.64	5.36	100
50+	96.72	3.28	100
All ages	93.43	6.57	100

Since the study sample does not contain equal numbers of participants in each category, age distribution by access type is broken down below. Figure 2 indicates that:

- again, younger users (39 years old and under) are more likely to access services online compared with those in the 40+ user group;
- 30 to 49-year-olds account for 62.40% of all access points; and
- traditional access is highest among the 40 to 49-year-old age group.

Figure 2: Age distribution by access type

Age	Traditional (%)	Digital (%)	Total (%)
18-29	12.66	23.58	13.38
30-39	30.49	38.73	31.03
40-49	31.78	25.60	31.37
50+	25.08	12.08	24.22
All ages	100	100	100

Figure 3 shows that:

- females access more services across all age groups compared with males — accounting for 66.00% of traditional users and 73.70% of online users; and
- females in the 18 to 29 age group and males aged 40 to 49 have the highest combined digital usage.

Figure 3: Access points by percentage of age and gender groups

Age	Traditional (%)		Digital (%)		Total (%)	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
18-29	67.93	32.07	78.05	21.95	69.10	30.90
30-39	66.65	33.35	72.99	27.01	67.17	32.83
40-49	64.77	35.23	71.00	29.00	65.11	34.89
50+	65.77	34.23	73.20	26.80	66.01	33.99
All ages	66.00	34.00	73.70	26.30	66.50	33.50

Trends in EFAP usage

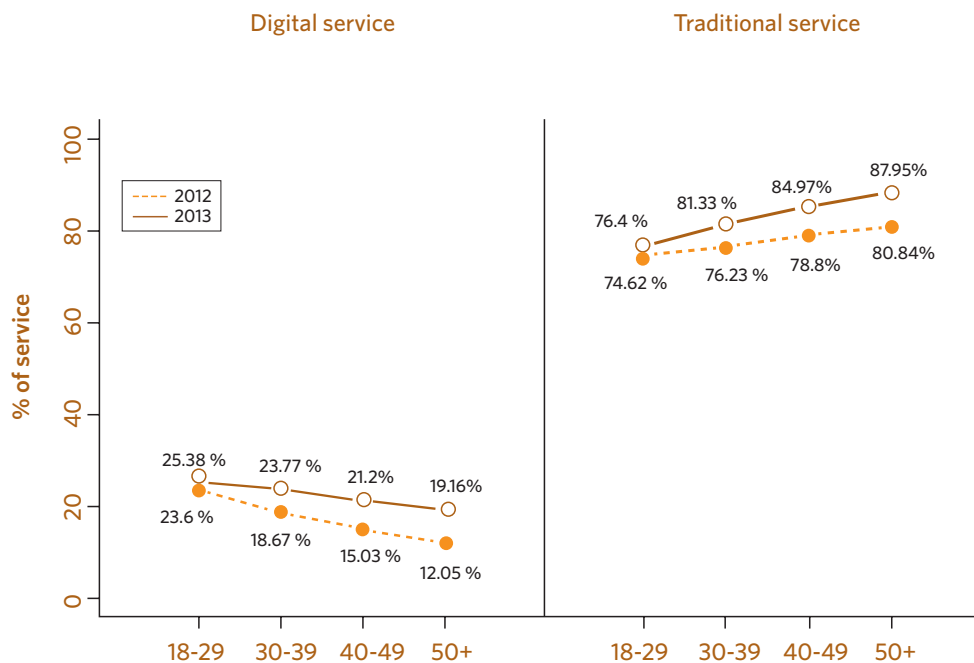
Looking at Figures 4 and 5 we see that:

- from 2012 to 2013, there was a significant increase in digital versus traditional service usage across all age groups: First Chat, Video Counselling, and Online Programs utilization rose while E-Counselling and traditional access declined; and
- even though there is an increase in case utilization within the 18 to 29 age group, the proportion of individuals accessing traditional service channels was down compared with digital service channels (76.4% in 2012 to 74.62% in 2013).

Figure 4: Year-over-year service usage

Services	2012 (%)	2013 (%)
First Chat	0.60	0.80
Online Programs	11.81	16.90
E-Counselling	4.79	3.98
Video Counselling	0.36	0.68
Traditional	82.44	77.64
Total	100	100

Figure 5: Comparison of 2012 and 2013 services by age group



As previously mentioned, Fitness Coach Connects was launched on June 1, and researchers noticed successful pickup of the program at 2.91%, as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Pre-and post-Fitness Coach Connects service usage

Services	Jan. – May 2013 (%)	Jun. – Dec. 2013 (%)
First Chat	0.88	0.73
Online Programs	14.35	18.14
E-Counselling	3.86	3.96
Video Counselling	0.74	0.61
Traditional	80.17	73.65
Fitness Coach Connects	NA	2.91
Total	100	100

Looking at channel usage, as illustrated in Figure 7, from 2012 to 2013 we see that:

- the percentage of people accessing digital services increased across all age groups and overall by 5.75%; and
- the highest user group for digital services was 30 to 39-year-olds, and 40 to 49-year-olds for traditional services.

Figure 7: Year-over-year service distribution by age group

Age	2012 (%)			2013 (%)		
	Traditional	Digital	Total	Traditional	Digital	Total
18-29	10.35	3.20	13.55	12.60	4.29	16.88
30-39	24.03	5.52	29.55	23.67	7.38	31.05
40-49	26.84	4.75	31.59	23.97	6.45	30.42
50+	22.26	3.05	25.31	17.50	4.15	21.65
Total	83.49	16.51	100	77.74	22.26	100

Not surprisingly, if you include Fitness Coach Connects data, you see an increase across all age groups in digital service usage, with Figure 8 showing a new overall ratio of 24.63% in digital utilization.

Figure 8: Jun. 1 to Dec. 31, 2013 service distribution by age group

Age	Traditional (%)	Digital (%)	Total (%)
18-29	12.21	4.56	16.78
30-39	22.95	8.25	31.18
40-49	23.24	7.10	30.33
50+	16.97	4.74	21.71
Total	75.37	24.63	100

Figures 9 and 10 illustrate that:

- there was a consistent increase in digital service utilization from 2012 to 2013 across all age groups, with the largest change in the 50+ year-old age category;

- there were negative rates of change with E-Counselling for all age groups except with 18 to 29-year-olds, who experienced a growth of 27.46% from 2012 to 2013. The 50+ age group had the largest decline in E-Counselling, at 13.45%; and
- the greatest rate of change in services was observed with First Chat with an increase of 414.56% in the 50+ age group. The second largest increase was 421.74% in the 40 to 49 age group.

Figure 9: Digital service increase rate of change by age group

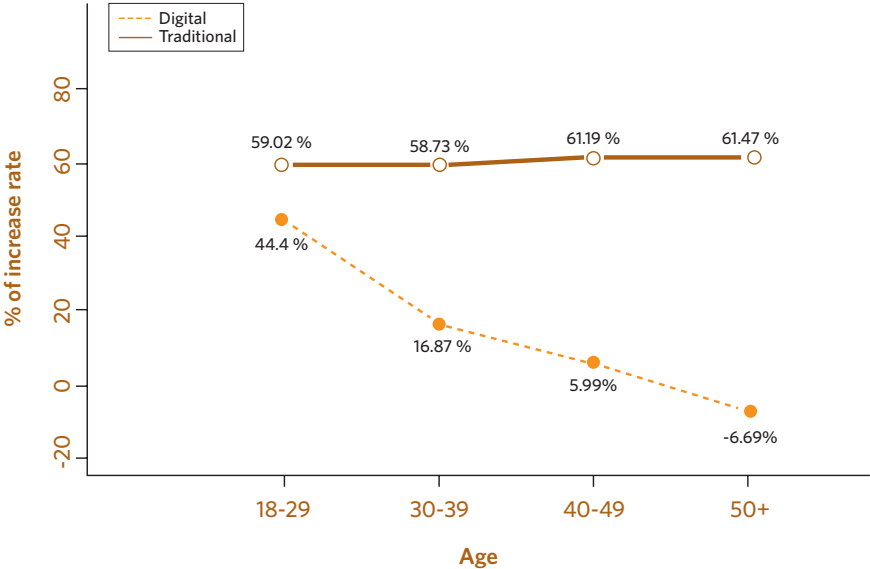
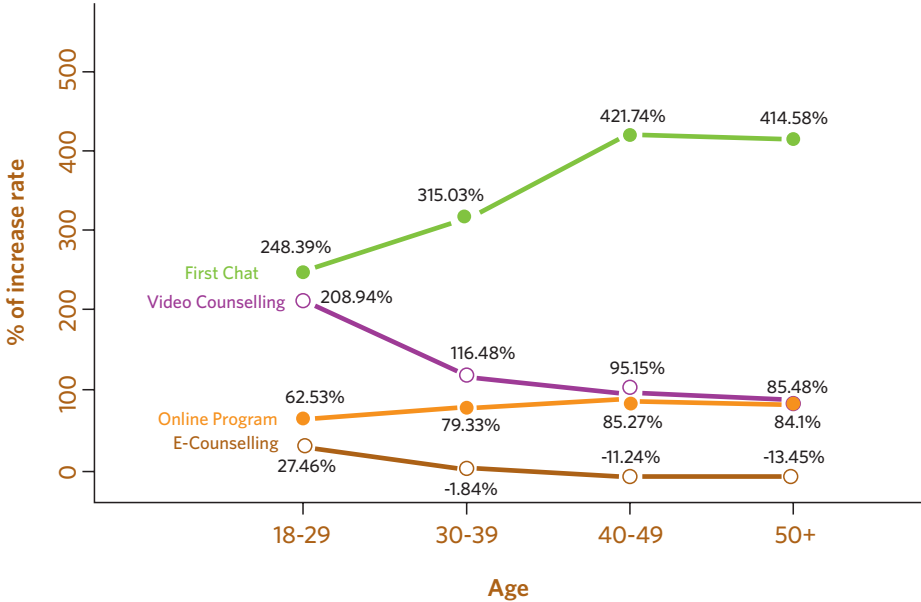


Figure 10: Rate of increase for digital services by age group



When you examine the services in the context of gender and age demographics, you can see in Figure 11 that:

- females continued to comprise the largest proportion of EFAP users across all age groups from 2012 to 2013; and
- older males (aged 40+) and younger females (aged 18 to 39) who formed the largest proportion of users.

Figure 11: Gender by service and age group (year-over-year)

Age	Year	Traditional (%)		First Chat (%)		Online Programs (%)		Video Counselling (%)		E-Counselling (%)	
		Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
18-29	2012	68.50	31.50	75.81	24.19	68.99	31.01	72.36	27.64	83.99	16.01
	2013	68.47	31.53	75.46	24.54	69.37	30.63	67.89	32.11	80.11	19.89
30-39	2012	66.00	34.00	68.79	31.21	64.00	36.00	70.11	29.89	79.01	20.99
	2013	66.46	33.54	75.07	24.93	63.66	36.34	68.85	31.15	75.93	24.07
40-49	2012	64.00	36.00	68.48	31.52	62.00	38.00	62.14	37.86	76.52	23.48
	2013	64.72	35.28	70.21	29.79	61.09	38.91	62.44	37.56	74.60	25.40
50+	2012	64.00	36.00	66.67	33.33	64.00	36.00	66.94	33.06	79.02	20.98
	2013	65.17	34.83	70.45	29.55	63.21	36.79	61.30	38.70	74.80	25.20

That being said, when you re-examine the gender and age demographics to include Fitness Coach Connects, you can see in Figure 12 a male/female usage pattern similar to what we have seen historically, with the exception of the Fitness Coach Connects program's usage distribution, where the largest percentage of male users is in the 30 to 39 age group.

These results are very exciting as this is the first time that Morneau Shepell has seen this age group dominate a service offering we believe that it is the combined digital and physical focus of Fitness Coach Connects (i.e., the presence of a digital pedometer and online program in addition to a fitness coach) that has attracted this outlying demographic.

Figure 12: Gender by service and age group (June 1 to December 31, 2013)

Age	Traditional (%)		First Chat (%)		Online Programs (%)		Video Counselling (%)		E-Counselling (%)		Fitness Coach Connects (%)	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
18-29	68.47	31.53	75.33	24.67	69.37	30.63	68.00	32.00	80.10	19.90	75.82	24.18
30-39	66.46	33.54	75.07	24.93	63.66	36.34	68.79	31.21	75.93	24.07	70.75	29.25
40-49	64.72	35.28	70.24	29.76	61.09	38.91	62.56	37.44	74.58	25.42	73.84	26.16
50+	65.17	34.83	70.54	29.46	63.20	36.80	61.16	38.84	74.82	25.18	74.83	25.17
All ages	65.96	34.04	73.30	26.70	63.80	36.20	65.90	34.10	76.45	23.55	73.24	26.76

Lastly, Figure 13 illustrates the ratio of females and males (by age group) that are accessing digital versus traditional services (pro-rated to reflect the data after the introduction of Fitness Coach Connects).

Data confirms that EFAP gender user groups for both digital and traditional services continue, as we have seen historically, to be comprised of a larger proportion of older males (vs. younger) and younger females (vs. older).

Figure 13: Digital vs. traditional service usage by age and gender (June 1 to December 31, 2013)

Age	Digital (%)		Traditional (%)		Total (%)	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
18-29	19.93	15.66	16.82	15.01	17.60	15.16
30-39	33.38	33.55	30.67	30.00	31.35	30.85
40-49	27.70	31.04	30.26	31.95	29.62	31.73
50+	18.99	19.75	22.25	23.04	21.43	22.25
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Conclusion

As Canadians' digital access and usage patterns continue to evolve and change, so too are the ways in which users are electing to access EFAP service offerings.

This study's results confirm that:

- Online access points are favoured by younger users (the 18 to 39 age group), while users aged 40 years and older prefer to connect telephonically when requesting services. We also continue to see the highest overall rate of EFAP access in users aged 30 to 49. The dramatic increase in smartphone and other mobile device usage as well as individuals' growing comfort with accessing information and support online appears to carry over into the realm of EFAP, a trend we expect to see increase moving forward.
- Female users, consistently the highest percentage of EFAP users across all service channels, continue to make up the largest proportion of both traditional and online access groups.
- While traditional services continue to be the primary service selected, we are seeing a significant increase in digital usage in 2013 over 2012, notably after the June introduction of Fitness Coach Connects. Year-over-year analysis demonstrates the growing popularity of digital services among all user age and gender groups, and considering the global position of Canadians as Internet super-users, our steadily rising use of mobile devices, and the younger generation's comfort with both digital and traditional services, we expect to see this trend continue.**
- Digital usage is flourishing across all age categories, and we continue to see increased digital usage rates in the 18 to 39 age groups. As the proportion of digital users is small relative to the overall volume of EFAP, the rate of change we are seeing is significant. While younger users account for the largest percentage of online users, it's interesting to note that users in the 50+ age group saw the highest rate of change over 2012, with a 61.47% increase in digital service usage — perhaps due to the notable increase in Internet and mobile access in this age group, and their overall adaptation to digital modes of information gathering and service delivery.**
- Regardless of age, Canadians (women more so than men) are accessing online information and services that relate to health, a trend that likewise plays a role in shifting EFAP usage patterns.
- In the face of the overall increase in digital EFAP usage, traditional as well as E-Counselling usage rates are showing a decline. A review of the data indicates that the highest rate of decline for E-Counselling services was in the 50+ age group, which may be attributed to this age demographics' increasing level of comfort with technology above and beyond 'traditional' email interactions. The proliferation of technology and digital access options in daily life, coupled with the introduction and availability of a wider variety of digital EFAP service delivery options to users interested in non-traditional service interventions, is also thought to have influenced service selection across all age groups and therefore would account for the decline.

- The impact of the June 2013 launch of Fitness Coach Connects brings to light a very exciting development: While females comprise the highest percentage of users across all services, for the first time ever, with Fitness Coach Connects there is an increase in the number of males requesting this specific service, most notably those aged 30 to 39, a demographic that has historically been the most difficult to engage in EFAP services. As studies indicate that men tend to prefer online tools that are action-oriented and self-guided, we expect that the introduction of like programs will result in an even greater increase in the ratio of males accessing online EFAP services.

Your take away

The convenience and efficiency of using digital means to seek information and assistance continues to influence Canadians' EFAP access and usage patterns, and is attracting a younger, historically more difficult to engage demographic of users. There is no doubt that there is great potential for the adoption and development of digital technology within the EFAP industry, and for expanding EFAPs' capacity to provide anytime, anywhere services to users via channels that best suit their learning styles, lifestyle and work-life circumstances.

Why Morneau Shepell is a leader in EFAPs

Frontrunners in the development and evolution of employee mental and physical health support services, Morneau Shepell is committed to making EFAPs more accessible by continuing to expand and enhance digital delivery methods while maintaining traditional service delivery. Our service offerings include the following:

- **Video Counselling:** Launched September 2011, Video Counselling is best for people who may have geographic or logistical challenges but are more comfortable with a face-to-face exchange via video who may have geographic or logistical challenges.
- **Online programs:** Digital programs including Stress Management, Smoking Cessation, Financial Support, Enhancing Your Relationship, and Separation and Divorce enables users to access support at their own pace, and when and where they feel the most comfortable.
- **First Chat:** Launched in September 2011 and added to the My EAP app in November 2012, First Chat provides instant, easy, private and fast support — highly attractive to busy individuals that don't feel they have time for traditional service deliveries.
- **My EAP:** The My EAP mobile device application, introduced in May 2011 and released with additional value services in 2012, offers 24/7 mobile access to EFAP support, videos and articles.
- **E-Counselling:** Offered to EFAP clients since 2000, E-Counselling gives people the opportunity to express themselves in secure email and is ideal for those more comfortable with written communication.
- **Telephonic counselling:** This service is ideal for those who are more comfortable with a verbal exchange and who may have geographic or travel limitations.
- **In-person counselling:** In-person counselling is best for those who are comfortable with a face-to-face exchange and are able to get to a counselling office.

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Glossary

Access point	How users choose to connect with EFAP services. All requests for EFAP service follow a well-defined process. Each user's request for service and the presenting issue(s) are assessed by intake advisors to ensure that appropriate service recommendations are made. The user is then matched with the service and delivery channel that best meets his/her needs and goals. A few considerations during the registration process include, but are not limited to: clinical best practices, age, employment status, lifestyle and learning style.
Digital/online EFAP services	Confidential and secure services offered to EFAP users via the Internet, including Fitness Coach Connects, Stress Management, Enhancing Your Relationship, Smoking Cessation, Financial, and Separation and Divorce.
E-Counselling	An asynchronous, professional, confidential counselling service available directly through a secure web-based platform.
Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP)	Services purchased by the employer as part of the employee's benefits package; integrated health and productivity solutions that address the mental, physical and social health issues affecting the workplace, the employees, and their families.
First Chat	A secure, synchronous, live counselling chat tool used to provide users with immediate clinical and/or intake support in an EFAP setting.
Fitness Coach Connects	A multi-dimensional service consisting of three components: an online program, a wireless activity tracker (digital pedometer) and three scheduled sessions with a fitness coach via online or telephonic access.
Information and communication technology (ICT)	Unified communications and the integration of telecommunications (telephone lines and wireless signals), computers as well as enterprise software, middleware, storage and audio-visual systems, which enable users to access, store, transmit and manipulate information.
International Telecommunication Union (ITU)	The leading United Nations agency for information and communication technology. ITU coordinates the shared global use of the radio spectrum, promotes international cooperation in assigning satellite orbits, works to improve communication infrastructure in the developing world, and establishes the worldwide standards that foster seamless interconnection of a vast range of communications systems.
Online Access	A confidential, customized website where users can identify their concern, educate themselves on the support services available to them, choose the EFAP service that best suits their needs and lifestyle and complete the service request entirely online.
Telephonic	A way to access the EFAP. Users phone the 1-800 phone number to reach the call centre, where an intake advisor directs them to the appropriate service.
Traditional EFAP services	In-person counselling and telephonic counselling.
Video Counselling	The user and counsellor communicate using a webcam, landline and encrypted customized Internet software. Both parties are able to see and hear each other and participants are able to create and share documents in real time.

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