

Warren Shepell

The heart behind a well workplace

By Janet White



Warren Shepell often tells the story of a fire in a Toronto mental health institution about 25 years ago. Workers were forced to move everyone to another building, and in the middle of the night, they shuffled patients to safety with paper bags over their heads.

Shepell uses the event to illustrate just how far society has come in accepting mental health issues—especially in the workplace. “Now we’ve got presidents of companies writing to their employees saying: ‘if you’ve got an emotional difficulty, please go for help. We will accept you the way you are, but we want to provide this help for you,’” says Shepell.

By all accounts, Shepell is a pioneer in the employee assistance program (EAP) industry. Since starting up Warren Shepell Associates in 1979, he has dedicated his career to helping employers understand that employees don’t leave their problems at the door when they come to work.

Over the years, the company has launched programs that offer counselling in areas such as emotional

health, homecare, personal finances, childcare, eldercare, legal advice, trauma response, work-life balance, relocation counselling, conflict resolution and disability management.

More recently, it has broken new ground by blending technology and personal assistance, offering an e-counselling service that provides private, one-on-one counselling over the Internet, as well as an extensive health and wellness Web site.

VAST REACH

Growing up in a farming community 100 miles north of Winnipeg, Shepell was acutely aware of the lack of services in remote areas. “I always wanted to make sure that

anything I did would be available to all people no matter where they are located,” he says.

Trained as a psychologist, Shepell originally wanted to pursue a career in child psychology, but became interested in the potential applications of industrial psychology while doing his Masters at the University of Waterloo in Waterloo, Ont. After finishing his Ph.D. in counselling psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, Shepell worked as a consulting psychologist at such firms as Stevenson & Kellogg, The Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce and the Manitoba Penitentiary before heading out on his own.

The Legacy

- Started Warren Shepell Consultants in 1979. The company’s employer-sponsored EAP programs are available to about 2.8 million workers and their families in Canada and 55 countries around the world.
- Contributed a chapter to *Disability Claims Management*, a popular industry book.
- Warren Shepell was chosen as one of the “50 Best Managed Private Companies,” in 1998, 1999 and 2000 by Arthur Andersen, CIBC and the *National Post*.



Shepell's reach is vast. He employs 360 full-time people at his Toronto-based office. In the past year, alone, Shepell counsellors have helped 85,000 people. The company's employer-sponsored EAP programs are available to about 2.8 million workers and their families in Canada and 55 countries around the world.

"Warren has a genius about him in recognizing how to [use] the talents that he and others have in new ways," says Aaron Milrad of Toronto-based national law firm Fraser Milner Casgrain, who has been Shepell's lawyer and friend for the last 30 years. "He was able to anticipate the often unspoken needs of people who were outside the norm of being able to go to social workers or psychologists, and to have corporations understand that by providing this service, they would end up better off."

The perceived need for EAP services was not always there. Shepell and partner Morris Berchard (now vice-chair of the firm) had a tough fight in the early years. "We had to

educate the presidents and the financial people that family physicians don't help in the area of emotional health very effectively," says Shepell. "We had to convince them that this was not available in the marketplace."

Back then there was no data to back up their claims. "We would do presentations and meet with people over and over again," says Shepell. "We would develop relationships. If they rejected us the first time we'd call back in two or three months, or send them an article or go out for lunch."

IBM was one such company with which Shepell built credibility. Back in 1989, Ralph Stevens was personnel services manager and spearheaded an EAP at the Markham, Ont.-based computer giant. Stevens decided to use Shepell's company simply because of Shepell himself. "From the start I was impressed with his dedication," says Stevens. Shepell still provides EAP services to some 20,000 IBM employees across the country.

In the end, it is Shepell's passion for what he does that resonates with

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—Ralph Stevens, IBM

clients and friends. "The human side of Warren is what makes him successful," adds Stevens.

Reflecting on his own success, Shepell credits his innovation, ability to take risks and, most importantly, persistence for his achievements. "I always had a strong belief that things would work. I'd give things time and hang in there."

His colleagues say it's a winning combination. "He's a great leader," says Milrad. "He gets excited about things and carries people along with him. He's a man of vision and integrity, and he has a fabulous charm."

For Shepell, it's all in a day's work. "I've always been driven to provide help to people who normally would not have it. I've always had a compassion for others and I still do." **BC**