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How employee assistance programs (EAP) influence employee stress levels through quality of work life

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the relationship between Employee Assistance Program (EAP), Quality of Work Life (QWL), and employee work stress levels at PT. Delta Artha Bahari Nusantara. The study used a quantitative approach with a survey method of 108 permanent and contract employees. The variables analyzed include EAP as an independent variable, QWL as a mediating variable, and work stress levels as a dependent variable. Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the relationship between variables. The results showed that EAP had a significant positive effect on QWL with a t value = 10.033 ($p < 0.05$), but did not have a significant direct effect on work stress with a t value = 0.208 with $p = 0.835$ ($p > 0.05$). Conversely, QWL had a significant effect in reducing work stress levels with $t = 12.993$ ($p < 0.05$). In addition, QWL significantly mediated the effect of EAP on work stress with $t = 7.128$ ($p < 0.05$). Descriptive analysis showed that very high work stress was still found even though EAP was frequently implemented, highlighting the need to improve the effectiveness of the program. It can be concluded that improving QWL plays an important role in reducing work stress, while EAP significantly contributes to improving QWL. Therefore, companies need to integrate the implementation of EAP with QWL improvement strategies to create a healthier, more productive, and more supportive work environment for employee well-being.

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1. Introduction

PT. Delta Artha Bahari Nusantara (PT. DABN) is a Port Business Entity (BUP) that plays a strategic role in supporting logistics and distribution activities in the East Java region, especially through the Port of Probolinggo which is a company owned by the East Java Provincial Government. For several years, this company has experienced a deficit so that in 2024 an evaluation was carried out which found that the number of employees exceeded the ideal number compared to their workload, so this company faced quite a lot of losses in each year-end book report. In addition, it raises problems in providing quality port services amidst complex and competitive operational demands.

One of the main challenges faced by PT. DABN is work stress that arises due to organizational changes, such as human resource (HR) competency standardization programs, which include upgrades, downgrades, mutations, rotations, and demotions. These changes can cause uncertainty in roles, increased workloads, and incompatibility with new positions, which in turn increase employee stress levels. Poorly managed work stress can have a negative impact on employees' quality of work life (QWL), which includes factors such as physical and mental well-being, social relationships in the workplace (Basalamah et al., 2023; Sabella, 2018; Sri Andriyani et al., 2024), and work-life balance. This decrease in QWL can worsen work

stress levels, creating a detrimental cycle for both employees and the company (Kurniawati et al., 2018; Mustikasari & Frianto, 2023; Suwaji, 2023; Yoo, 2022).

To address these challenges, PT. DABN has implemented an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to provide psychological support and assistance for employees dealing with work stress while also offering counseling services for employees undergoing transfers or demotions (Ananda & Mayangsari, 2022; Azmi & Elizabeth, 2022; Harmen & Sunjaya, 2022). However, the persistence of work stress despite the implementation of EAP may be attributed to several factors, including the limited customization of the program to address individual employee needs, excessive workloads, and unclear job roles. Additionally, organizational culture significantly influences the effectiveness of EAP. For instance, a culture that stigmatizes seeking help for mental health issues can discourage employees from utilizing the program, whereas a supportive culture that prioritizes employee well-being can enhance EAP uptake and outcomes.

Research gaps also exist in understanding the relationship between EAP, QWL, and work stress. While several studies highlight the importance of EAP in managing work stress, many focus on shipyard and hospitality sectors (Azmi & Elizabeth, 2022; Basalamah et al., 2023; Bouzikos et al., 2022). Research by (Setiawan et al., 2023) and (Mustikasari & Frianto, 2023) demonstrates the role of work stress and work-life balance (WLB) as mediators of organizational behavior and employee performance, but few studies directly examine how EAP influences these variables. Furthermore, although WLB is recognized as a critical intervening variable (Basalamah et al., 2023; Urba & Soetjiningsih, 2022), its role in strengthening the relationship between work stress and psychological well-being within the EAP framework remains underexplored (Febriana et al., 2022; Halim Secapramana et al., 2020).

Additionally, while turnover intention research (Basalamah et al., 2023) provides insight into work stress factors, limited studies have examined how EAP influences turnover reduction through its indirect impact on QWL and employee performance. These gaps emphasize the need for further research on the interplay between EAP, QWL, and work stress in diverse organizational contexts, particularly in industries with high stress levels like logistics and manufacturing (Baskar, 2021; Wang & Shahnaz Sheibani, 2024).

The urgency of this research lies in exploring how EAP can effectively reduce work stress and improve QWL, particularly by addressing external factors such as organizational culture and workload, and leveraging intervening variables like WLB. This study aims to provide actionable insights for industries grappling with similar challenges while contributing to the growing body of literature on employee well-being and stress management.

2. Research Method

This study uses a quantitative approach with a survey method to collect data from employees of PT. Delta Artha Bahari Nusantara (PT. DABN) in Probolinggo, East Java. The variables studied include Employee Assistance Programs (Katema & Hapunda, 2024) as independent variables, Quality of Work Life (Halim Secapramana et al., 2020) as intervening variables, and employee work stress levels (Arif et al., 2021) as dependent variables. The instrument used was a questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale to measure respondents' perceptions of the indicators of each variable. The research sample was taken using a survey technique (total population study), namely all permanent and contract employees totaling 108 people. This technique allows for complete and accurate data related to the influence of EAP and QWL on employee work stress at PT. DABN Probolinggo.

To ensure that respondents' answers reflect real conditions (internal validity), the questionnaire items were carefully developed based on validated instruments used in previous studies (Katema & Hapunda, 2024; Halim Secapramana et al., 2020; Arif et al., 2021), with adjustments made to match the specific context of the research setting. A pre-test was conducted on a small subset of employees to evaluate clarity, relevance, and comprehensibility of the items. In addition, a triangulation approach was implemented by comparing survey results with secondary data, such as employee performance records and HR reports, to validate the accuracy of the responses (Hamali et al., 2023).

Data analysis was performed using Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS), which consists of two main stages: evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) and the structural model (inner model). Evaluation of the measurement model aims to test the validity and reliability of indicators against latent variables, while the structural model is used to test the causal relationship between variables. The analysis process was carried out using SmartPLS software, with bootstrapping testing to

estimate the significance of the relationship in the model. This technique was chosen because it is able to handle non-normally distributed data and models with complex structures.

To enhance the quality of the research instrument, additional validity tests were conducted, including convergent validity (average variance extracted > 0.5) and discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion and cross-loading analysis). Internal consistency reliability was also evaluated using composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha. These steps ensured that the research instrument could accurately measure the constructs and improve the reliability of the findings.

3. Result and Discussion

The object of this research is the employees of PT. Delta Artha Bahari Nusantara (PT. DABN), a Port Business Entity (BUP) operating in the port sector in East Java, especially Probolinggo Port. This research focuses on the influence of Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) and Quality of Work Life (QWL) on the level of work stress experienced by the company's employees. Based on the data collected, the following is a description of employees at PT. DABN.

Table 1. Length of service and age of employees

Years of service	Age		
	30-38	39-47	48-56
1-5 years	12	8	2
6-10 years	10	26	12
11-15 years	1	24	3
Over 15 years		2	8
Amount	23	60	25

Of the total 108 respondents, the distribution based on work period and age shows that in the 1-5 year work period (20.37%), there are 5.56% at the age of 30-38, 3.70% at the age of 39-47, and 0.93% at the age of 48-56. The 6-10 year work period (44.44%) is dominated by the age of 39-47 at 12.04%, followed by the age of 48-56 at 5.56%, and the age of 30-38 at 4.63%. For the 11-15 year work period (25.93%), the most respondents are aged 39-47 at 11.11%, aged 48-56 at 1.39%, and aged 30-38 at 0.46%. In terms of work period of more than 15 years (9.26%), respondents aged 39-47 contributed 0.93%, while those aged 48-56 contributed 3.70%, and there were no respondents aged 30-38.

From the collected data, it can be seen the level of employee stress compared to the implementation of QWL as shown in the following figure.

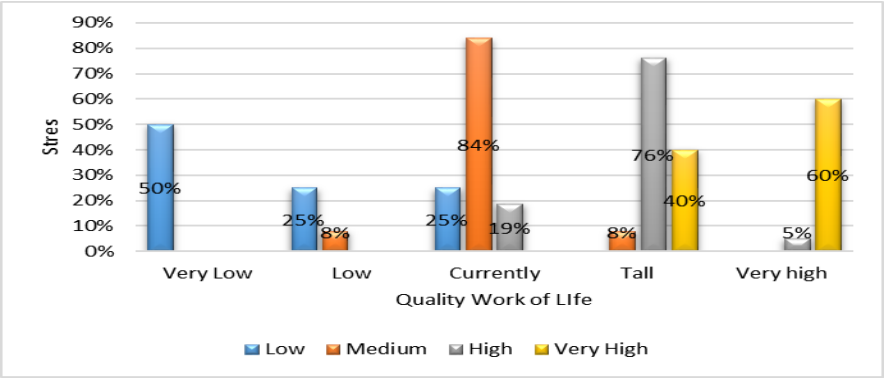

Figure 1. Implementation of QWL with employee stress levels

From the cross-table results, it can be seen that the very high level of work stress (Very High) is most experienced by employees with very high QWL (Very High) at 60%, followed by employees with high QWL (Tall) at 40%. Conversely, the lowest level of work stress (Very Low) is most often found in employees with very low QWL (Very Low) at 50%, followed by employees with low QWL (Low) at 25%. This pattern shows that although high QWL is generally associated with increased work quality, work stress can still increase due to the possibility of greater demands or higher expectations on employees at that level. Conversely, low QWL is often accompanied by lower levels of stress, perhaps due to lower expectations or

work demands in this group. This indicates the importance of not only increasing QWL, but also managing work demands that are in accordance with employee capacity.

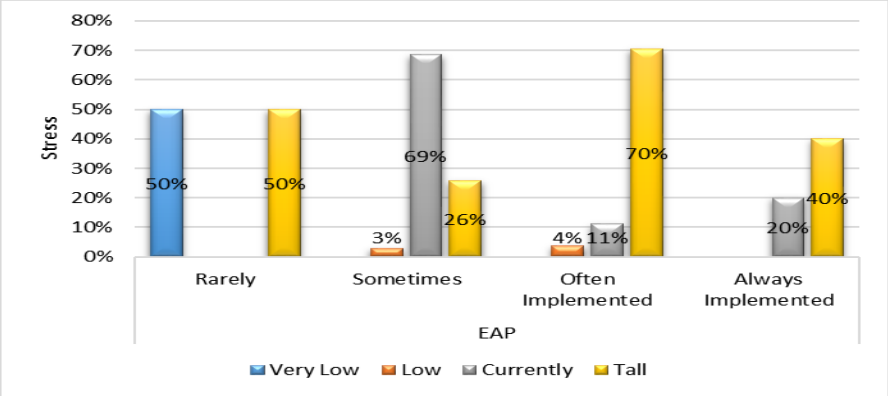

Figure 2. Implementation of EAP with employee stress levels

The table results show the relationship between the level of work stress and the frequency of implementation of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). At a very low level of work stress (Very Low), 50% of respondents are in the category of EAP rarely implemented (Rarely). For a low stress level (Low), 3% and 4% of employees are in the category of EAP sometimes implemented (Sometimes) and often implemented (Often Implemented). The majority of employees with moderate stress levels (Currently) are in the category of EAP sometimes implemented (Sometimes) at 69%, followed by often implemented at 11%, and always implemented (Always Implemented) at 20%.

At high stress level (Tall), the majority are in the category of EAP often applied at 70%, followed by always applied at 40%, and rarely applied at 50%. Meanwhile, the very high stress level (Very High) mostly occurs in the category of EAP always applied at 40%, followed by often applied at 15%, and sometimes applied at 3%. These data indicate that even though EAP is applied more often, high levels of work stress are still found, indicating the need to evaluate the effectiveness of EAP in reducing work stress. Furthermore, the results of the construct validity test can be stated as follows.

Table 2. Validity and reliability test results

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
EAP	0.763	0.776	0.838	0.511
QWL	0.904	0.916	0.928	0.686
Stress	0.896	0.903	0.924	0.708

Based on the reliability and construct validity table, all constructs show good levels of reliability and validity. The EAP construct has a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.763, rho_A of 0.776, and Composite Reliability of 0.838, which reflects quite good reliability, with an AVE of 0.511 slightly above the minimum threshold of 0.5. The QWL construct shows very strong reliability with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.904, rho_A of 0.916, and Composite Reliability of 0.928, and an AVE of 0.686 indicating strong convergent validity. The Stress construct also has very good reliability with Cronbach's Alpha of 0.896, rho_A of 0.903, and Composite Reliability of 0.924, and AVE of 0.708 indicating very good convergent validity. Overall, the QWL and Stress constructs have very strong reliability and validity, while EAP is quite good in meeting the minimum criteria.

Furthermore, the outer loading value measures how strong the relationship is between the indicator variable and the latent construct it represents. This value ranges from 0 to 1, where a higher value indicates a better ability of the indicator to represent the latent construct, with the following results.

Table 3. Outer louding values in research indicators

Variables	Code	Indicator	Outer Loading
EAP	PSY	Psychological Support	0.712
	FA	Financial Assistance	0.792
	HS	Health Services	0.724

Variables	Code	Indicator	Outer Loading
	SMT	Stress Management Training	0.621
	PA	Accessibility Program	0.714
QWL	SHWE	Safe and Healthy Work Environment	0.845
	SRW	Social Relationships at Work	0.901
	CD	Career Development	0.895
	WLB	Work-Life Balance	0.879
	FC	Fair Compensation	0.819
	PDM	Participation in Decision-Making	0.585
Stres	WP	Work Pressure	0.779
	EE	Emotional Exhaustion	0.859
	LM	Loss of Motivation	0.891
	PSY	Physical Symptoms	0.912
	EAW	Excessive Anxiety or Worry	0.756

In general, values above 0.7 are considered good, although values between 0.5 and 0.7 are still acceptable if the indicator has strong theoretical significance. The Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) construct performed quite well, with indicators such as Psychological Support (0.712), Financial Assistance (0.792), Health Services (0.724), and Program Accessibility (0.714) having adequate representation. However, Stress Management Training (0.621) only showed a moderate relationship, so further evaluation is needed. For the Quality of Work Life (QWL) construct, most indicators had very good outer loading values, such as Safe and Healthy Work Environment (0.845), Social Relationships at Work (0.901), and Career Development (0.895). However, Participation in Decision-Making (0.585) had a moderate relationship, which could be a focus for improvement. The Stress construct has a strong representation through indicators such as Physical Symptoms (0.912) and Loss of Motivation (0.891), while Excessive Anxiety or Worry (0.756) remains relevant even with a lower value. Overall, this model has good indicators, but some variables with moderate values can be further evaluated to improve the model fit. The results of the model feasibility test analysis are as follows.

Table 4. Model fit test results

	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.091	0.091
d_ULS	1,123	1,123
d_G	0.617	0.617
Chi-Square	328,514	328,514
NFI	0.757	0.757

The results of the analysis show that the model has a varying level of fit based on several indicators. The SRMR value (0.091) indicates a mismatch between the expected and observed covariance matrices, although it is still within the tolerance limit. Distance indicators such as d_ULS (1.123) and d_G (0.617) show a relatively good fit without specific value limits. However, the high Chi-Square (328.514) indicates a potential fit problem, although it should be noted that this value is sensitive to sample size. In addition, the NFI (0.757) indicates a sufficient but not optimal model fit because it is below the threshold of 0.90. Meanwhile, the rms Theta (0.196) indicates an insignificant measurement error. Overall, although the model shows adequate fit on several metrics, improvements are needed, especially in the structure of the relationship between variables or the validity of the indicators, to achieve a model that is more in accordance with the data.

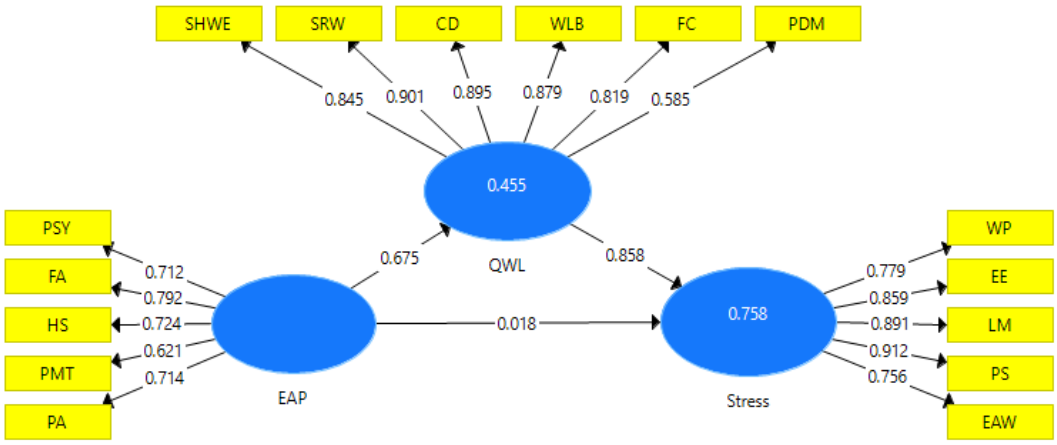

Figure 2. Construction of feasibility model

This figure shows the diagram of the analysis results using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) based on Partial Least Squares (PLS), which describes the relationship between constructs or latent variables measured through specific indicators. The EAP (Employee Assistance Program) construct is measured by the indicators Psychological Support (PSY), Financial Assistance (FA), Health Services (HS), Stress Management Training (SMT), and Program Accessibility (PA). The highest outer loading value was found in FA with a value of 0.792, indicating that financial assistance plays an important role in creating an effective employee assistance program. The QWL (Quality of Work Life) construct is related to the indicators Safe and Healthy Work Environment (SHWE), Social Relationships at Work (SRW), Career Development (CD), Work-Life Balance (WLB), Fair Compensation (FC), and Participation in Decision-Making (PDM). SRW has the highest outer loading with a value of 0.901, indicating that positive social relationships in the workplace greatly affect the quality of employees' work life. Stress constructs are measured using indicators of Work Pressure (WP), Emotional Exhaustion (EE), Loss of Motivation (LM), Physical Symptoms (PS), and Excessive Anxiety or Worry (EAW). LM has the highest outer loading value with a value of 0.891, reflecting that loss of motivation is the most significant indicator of work stress.

From the relationship between constructs, EAP has a direct influence on QWL with a value of 0.455 and on Stress with a value of 0.675. QWL acts as a mediator between EAP and Stress, although with a smaller influence (value of 0.018). This model underlines the complexity of the relationship between EAP, QWL, and Stress, and shows the importance of employee support programs that are integrated with supportive work environment factors. These findings are relevant to organizations seeking to improve employee well-being in the workplace.

The results of the SEM PLS test analysis show the total and specific effects between the variables EAP, QWL, and Stress. In the total effect, EAP has an indirect effect of 0.579 on Stress through QWL. The specific effect analysis shows that the EAP -> QWL -> Stress path has a value of 0.579, indicating that QWL is a mediator in the relationship between EAP and Stress. In addition, in the direct effect, EAP has a direct effect of 0.675 on QWL and 0.597 on Stress, while QWL has a direct effect of 0.858 on Stress. These results indicate that QWL plays a significant role as a mediator in the relationship between EAP and Stress, while also having a strong direct effect on Stress. This shows the importance of paying attention to QWL in managing the relationship between EAP and stress levels.

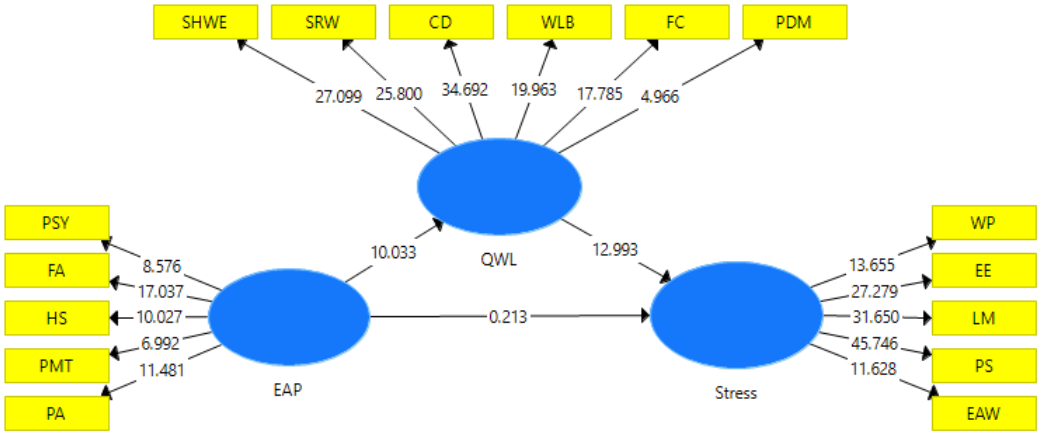

Figure 4. Results of hypothesis analysis test

The results of the hypothesis test analysis using SEM Smart PLS as shown in the image can be presented in the following table.

Table 5. Results of hypothesis test analysis

	Original Sample	Sample Mean	Standard Deviation	T Statistics	P Values
EAP -> QWL	0.675	0.684	0.069	10,033	0,000
EAP -> Stress	0.018	0.016	0.087	0.213	0.835
QWL -> Stress	0.858	0.862	0.067	12,993	0,000
EAP --> QWL --> Stress	0.579	0.588	0.081	7,128	0,000

The results of this hypothesis test indicate that not all paths tested in the SEM PLS model have a significant effect. This can be explained as follows.

a. The effect of EAP on QWL obtained the original sample value (O) of 0.675, with a t-statistics value of 10.033 which is greater than 1.96, and a p-value of 0.000 (p <0.05). This shows that the relationship between EAP (Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)) and QWL (Quality of Work Life) is very significant. The influence of Employee Assistance Programs on Quality of Work Life shows significant results with a probability value of 0.000 (p <0.05) indicating that EAP has a positive and significant effect on the quality of employee work life, which means that the implementation of EAP can improve factors that affect QWL, such as employee welfare and job satisfaction at PT. DABN. This finding supports previous studies which state that employee support programs contribute to improving work quality and welfare (Azmi & Elizabeth, 2022; Baskar et al., 2021).

b. The Effect of EAP on Stress from the results of the hypothesis test analysis with the value of EAP → Stress showing the original sample (O) = 0.018, t-statistics = 0.208, and p-value = 0.835 (p>0.05), it can be concluded that the relationship between Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) (EAP) and Stress is not significant. The t-statistics value which is smaller than 1.96 and the p-value which is greater than 0.05 indicate that this hypothesis is not supported by the data. In other words, EAP does not have a significant effect on employee stress levels at PT. Delta Artha Bahari Nusantara (PT. DABN). This could be caused by various factors, such as perhaps the EAP program in the company has not had a direct enough effect on employee stress management, or there are other variables that are more dominant in influencing work stress. Therefore, further research is needed to identify more relevant factors or to strengthen the EAP program in reducing employee stress. This is in line with research by (Azmi & Elizabeth, 2022) which states that although EAP can provide benefits to employees in terms of improving psychological well-being, its direct effect on work stress is not necessarily immediately realized, especially if the program implemented does not include aspects that directly affect the mental and emotional well-being of employees. In addition, (Baskar, 2021) also noted that the success of EAP in reducing work stress is highly dependent on consistent implementation and in accordance with psychological needs and the existing work environment. Therefore, although EAP has the potential to provide benefits, its impact on employee stress needs to be further considered by considering other

variables such as the quality of program implementation, employee participation levels, and work environment factors that can moderate these effects (Azmi & Elizabeth, 2022).

c. The effect of QWL on Stress obtained the original sample value (O) is 0.858, with a t-statistics value of 12.993 which is much greater than 1.96 and a p-value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$). This means that there is a significant effect between QWL (Quality of Work Life) and Stress. The results of the analysis show that the better the quality of work life of PT. DABN employees, the lower the level of stress they experience. A better quality of work life, including a good work-life balance and social support, can reduce the level of stress felt by employees, in accordance with the findings in previous studies (Setiawan et al., 2023).

d. The effect of EAP through QWL on Stress obtained the original sample value (O) is 0.579, with a t-statistics value of 7.128 and a p-value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$), indicating a significant effect through the mediation pathway between EAP (Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)) and Stress through QWL (Quality of Work Life). The results of the hypothesis test analysis indicate that EAP not only has a direct effect on stress, but also through improving the quality of work life, which in turn can reduce the stress of PT. DABN employees. This finding shows the importance of a holistic approach to stress management, where EAP can be integrated with efforts to improve QWL for more effective results in reducing stress (Wang & Shahnaz Sheibani, 2024).

From the description of the research results, it can be seen that attention to EAP can increase QWL, which in turn reduces employee stress levels, although EAP does not have a significant direct impact on stress. Therefore, companies should focus more on improving the quality of work life as a more effective means of reducing stress and improving employee well-being. Analysis of these conclusions shows that although Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) (EAP) do not directly affect employee stress levels, programs related to achieving environmental performance (such as EAP) have been shown to increase Quality of Work Life (QWL), which in turn can reduce employee stress. These results are consistent with the findings of studies stating that managing the quality of work life (QWL) can function as a mechanism to relieve stress experienced by employees in the workplace (Azmi & Elizabeth, 2022; Sarinah, 2023). In addition, improving the quality of work life has been shown to improve psychological well-being and reduce the negative impact of work stress (Elshifa & Info, 2024).

The results of this study are also in line with previous studies showing that EAP can improve the quality of employees' work life and help reduce stress levels, although the direct effect of EAP on employee stress is not significant (Baskar, 2021). For example, in the context of work in the port sector, where stress can be a significant problem due to the complexity of tasks and high operational demands, companies that implement better EAP programs can create a supportive work atmosphere (Setiawan et al., 2023). In this case, EAP serves as one approach to improving the quality of work life, which has a direct impact on reducing stress.

This study strengthens the importance of Quality of Work Life (QWL) as a mediating variable in reducing stress. The test results showing that QWL has a significant effect on stress indicate that a good working atmosphere can play a major role in reducing the pressure experienced by employees, in line with the theory that a supportive work environment has a positive impact on employee well-being and reduces the stress they experience (Urba & Soetjiningsih, 2022). Overall, this study highlights that although EAP does not directly affect stress, the program can improve QWL, which is an important factor in stress management. It can be said that Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) indirectly play a role in reducing employee stress levels by increasing Quality of Work Life (QWL) as a mediator. The implementation of EAP has been shown to have a significant effect on QWL, which in turn directly contributes to reducing work stress levels. However, the direct effect of EAP on stress is not proven, which confirms that the success of EAP in managing employee stress is highly dependent on its role in creating better QWL. So that EAP which is designed comprehensively and supported by a quality work environment becomes a strategic combination in managing employee welfare and reducing work pressure in the company.

4. Conclusion

This study shows that the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) significantly contributes to improving the Quality of Work Life (QWL), which in turn can reduce employee work stress levels. However, this study cannot prove a direct effect of EAP on work stress, which underscores the importance of QWL as a mediating variable. Thus, QWL becomes a key factor that links the effectiveness of EAP with work stress

management efforts. Overall, these results confirm that to reduce work stress, companies need to focus on strategies that not only support the implementation of EAP programs but also simultaneously strengthen the quality of employee work life. This will help create a healthier work environment and support employee productivity.

Future studies should expand the research scope by including employees from multiple companies or industries to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies could also be conducted to observe the long-term impact of EAP and QWL on employee work stress. Additionally, researchers may explore other potential mediators or moderators, such as organizational culture or leadership style, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing work stress and to establish a clearer connection between EAP and employee well-being.

Companies should improve the implementation of Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) by ensuring accessibility for all employees and tailoring the programs to meet their specific needs. This includes conducting regular needs assessments, integrating EAP with existing wellness initiatives, and ensuring participant confidentiality. Furthermore, enhancing the Quality of Work Life (QWL) should be a priority by fostering a supportive workplace culture, offering competitive benefits, recognizing employee contributions, and maintaining a balanced workload. Organizations should also implement mental health support programs, such as stress management workshops and professional counseling, to create a healthier work environment and reduce stress.

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