



Supervisor Newsletter

Alcohol Abuse—Workplace Impact

Alcohol abuse poses significant social and economic costs to the workplace. The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD) reports that 15 million full-time employees in the U.S. are heavy drinkers. Among other problems, harmful drinking has a negative effect on the workplace through an increase in accident rates, absenteeism, and tardiness, and a reduction in productivity.

But it is not just alcoholics and heavy drinkers who create workplace problems. The majority of alcohol related work performance issues are associated with nondependent drinkers who occasionally drink too much. Drinking right before or during work hours (including drinking at lunch and at company functions), and heavy drinking the night before that causes hangovers during work the next day significantly contribute to work performance problems.

Alcohol Abuse Higher in Some Industries

What factors contribute to alcohol abuse in the workplace? Alcohol abuse is more prevalent in some industries than others due to environmental, cultural, peer pressure, and other workplace stressors. According to the 2014 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), the highest rate of workplace impacted drinking in the U.S. is among miners (17.5%) and construction workers (16.5%). Other heavy drinking occupations include food and hospitality workers (11.8%) and the entertainment industry (11.5%), followed by utilities, management, and manufacturing.

Workplace Related Alcohol Abuse Risk Factors

Some of the factors linked to workplace induced alcohol abuse are: shiftwork, a dirty or noisy environment, boring or extremely demanding work, unrealistic deadlines, inadequate training, bullying by coworkers and/or supervisors, and easy access to alcohol at work (i.e., restaurants and bars).

Other workplace stressors that contribute to a high level of alcohol misuse are: fear of losing one's job, conflict with coworkers, discrimination or prejudice, a high risk of personal injury or illness, poorly designed and difficult to use equipment,

and a lack of opportunity to participate in the decision making process.

Alcohol Abuse Protective Factors

Employers and supervisors who are able to identify the cultural and workplace stress factors that can contribute to excessive alcohol use, and then reduce those stress factors, are more likely to avoid the problems caused by workplace alcohol abuse.

Employees are less likely to develop workplace related alcohol problems if they are provided a safe and healthy workplace; well-organized, challenging, and rewarding work; proper supervisory support to deal with problems at work; and restricted access to alcohol in the workplace.

Maintaining a drug free workplace program—including a substance abuse policy that addresses alcohol use—is another important alcohol abuse protective factor. The goal of the alcohol policy should be prevention, education, treatment, and rehabilitation. The primary focus of the policy should be to reduce or eliminate the hazards associated with alcohol use in the workplace in a way that is consistent and fair to all employees.

Employee Alcohol Abuse Prevention/Education

It is important that all employees be made aware of the problems associated with harmful alcohol use. Employee training should include: what constitutes alcohol abuse, the effects of alcohol on health safety and work performance, statistics on workplace related alcohol fueled accidents, stressors that contribute to alcohol abuse, healthy stress reduction methods, ways of dealing with alcoholism, and the counseling and treatment services available through the workplace and in the community.

Alcohol Testing

Most company substance abuse policies empower supervisors to discipline or remove an employee from the job upon suspicion of drinking. However, if an employee is suspected of drinking based on evidence such as odor of alcohol or appearance of intoxication, the employee might object, which could lead to litigation.

When alcohol use is suspected, alcohol testing can be used to establish whether the employee was in fact drinking or not. Specific techniques include breath testing, oral fluid testing, and blood testing. But alcohol testing should only be used when there are existing state or federal laws that require it, or where employers, HR managers and safety directors, and workers and unions formally agree that it is warranted and where it can be held to be reasonable under the specific circumstances.

Alcohol testing is important in the workplace because drinking is distinctively linked to performance impairment, particularly when compared with other drugs. Alcohol testing is currently mandated for the transportation industry through federal regulations.

Alcohol testing is most commonly used in workplace settings when reasonable suspicion is established, particularly in response to on-the-job accidents. In such cases, alcohol testing is critical in establishing possible culpability, especially if injuries have occurred. When alcohol tests are positive, case dispositions may vary according to company policy, ranging from dismissal to the offering of counseling or treatment under the auspices of an Employee Assistance Program.

Employee Assistance Programs and Treatment

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) provide a confidential service to assist employees in resolving personal issues which may affect their work performance, and can add to the effectiveness of a workplace drug and alcohol policy. Workers who are identified by supervisors or themselves as having an alcohol problem should be assisted through recognized treatment or an EAP.

Workplaces that use an EAP often show indirect benefits with a reduction in accidents, sick leave, and absenteeism. However, be aware that a workplace alcohol policy must deal directly with unsafe working conditions and stressors and not rely solely upon the EAP, and use of the EAP should be consistent with existing agreements and other established counseling and progressive discipline measures which apply in the workplace.

A supervisor who believes that an employee's work performance is alcohol affected and raising safety or production concerns can suggest that the employee see an EAP counselor, but the employee is of course free to reject the offer. The company policy should detail the actions to be taken if an employee refuses treatment. Supervisors should be well trained on all aspects of the company's drug and alcohol policies and how to intervene when an employee suffers from alcohol abuse.

Supervisor Training

Supervisors who may someday have to approach an employee that is under the influence of alcohol should be properly trained in the most effective style of approach. Care needs to be taken when making this decision because the worker might be ill or injured, taking prescribed medication, or in some other form of distress, which may account for his or her behavior.

The approach taken when dealing with an employee whose work performance is affected by alcohol depends on the workplace culture, the position of the employee within the company, the personality of the employee, and whether it is a case of long-term use or a "one-time" situation.

The company substance abuse policy should cover the chain of responsibility for approaching an employee suspected of alcohol abuse and what actions should be taken if the employee responds in a negative or hostile way. Supervisors should always focus any discussion on alcohol abuse in terms of the negative impact it has on safety and work performance.

The Bottom Line

Employees suffering from alcohol abuse need a supervisor's compassion, but that compassion must be firm in order to protect the employee and the workplace. Workplace policies on alcohol are useful for employers and employees alike. By setting a clear policy on alcohol and offering programs for employees who are at risk or need treatment, employers and supervisors can create a safer, healthier, and more productive workplace.

To help us combat substance abuse, go to www.LiveDrugFree.org and click on "Donate!"