

Dealing with Drug and Alcohol Abuse in the Workplace

By BNET Editorial

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Drug and alcohol abuse is a serious workplace issue. Of the 16.7 million illicit drug users aged 18 or older, 12.4 million (74.3%) were employed either full or part time, according to the U.S. government. More than one in three (38%) workers between the ages of 18 and 25 are binge drinkers. By occupation, the highest rates of current illicit drug use and heavy drinking were reported by food preparation workers, waiters, waitresses and bartenders (19%); construction workers (14%); service occupations (13%); and transportation and material moving workers (10%).

Employers are increasingly taking action to address the costs of substance abuse in terms of employees' health and productivity.

Six out of ten adults know someone who has reported for work while under the influence of drink or drugs, according to the Hazeldon Foundation. The impact on those with the problem as well as their colleagues is enormous. In financial terms, alcohol and drug abuse is thought to cost U.S. business over \$81 billion annually in lost productivity, and causes employers to incur a 300% increase in medical costs and benefits. In human terms, up to 40% of industrial fatalities and 47% of industrial injuries can be linked to alcohol consumption and alcoholism. Substance abusers are five times more likely to file worker's compensation claims, and likely to use two-and-a-half times more medical benefits.

According to the Labor Department, five million of the country's estimated nine million employed substance abusers work for small companies.

Many employers see alcoholism and drug abuse by associates as illness and opt to help the employees to seek treatment rather than fire them outright.

What You Need to Know

One of my staff has begun to perform poorly, which is unusual. I think she may be drinking excessively. What can I do to help her?

The best first step is to share your observations with your team member, remembering that your purpose is to address her performance, not to accuse or even mention your suspicions at this stage. Give the person an opportunity to allay your fears without becoming defensive. Elicit an explanation for the performance in question. You may hear an explanation that puts your mind at rest. Failing this you may want to discuss the organization's alcohol policy (see next question) and, if it has one, its employee assistance program.

What is the most effective way of dealing with substance abuse at work?

The Occupational Safety & Health Administration suggests a comprehensive drug-free workforce approach includes five components—a policy, supervisor training, employee education, employee assistance, and drug testing. Such programs, especially when drug testing is included, must be reasonable and take into consideration employee rights to privacy. It may be helpful to create a substance abuse policy (if none exists) to provide clear guidelines for dealing with alcohol and/or drug abuse at your workplace. Having such a policy and specifying related procedures can help assure those battling these issues that they will be encouraged to seek help and supported appropriately.

I have had some experience in spotting the signs of alcohol abuse, but I'm less familiar with the signs of drug abuse. What are the signs that indicate someone is taking illegal drugs?

The symptoms are not unlike those related to excessive consumption of alcohol. They include:

- mood swings or uncharacteristic behavior;
- a tendency to become confused and irritable;
- the development of problematical relationships;
- a drop in work performance;
- an inability to arrive at work on time and increased absenteeism.

Heavy drinking correlates strongly with illicit drug use. Of 12.4 million heavy drinkers, 30.5% are also current illicit drug users, according to the federal government. If you observe these signals you may wish to schedule a performance review, during which you should concentrate on the behavior you have observed and the likely reasons for these changes.

What to Do

Face Up to the Implications of Substance Abuse at Work

Alcohol and drug abuse not only affects the individual concerned, but also endangers the circle of people surrounding the abuser, and has the potential to destroy the person's career and relationships. Alcohol impairs the brain's proper function. It reduces the ability to make sound judgments and decisions, and increases the likelihood of mistakes through the loss of spatial awareness and control of the body. As heavy drinkers or drug users become more unreliable, their absenteeism increases while their productivity diminishes. While these issues will have a negative impact on any workplace

over time, they are particularly damaging in industries where employees' physical safety may be at risk from others, such as in construction or distribution.

In terms of spotting the problem, those who have alcohol or drug problems are likely to be identified through a drop in performance, increased absenteeism, or behavior that requires disciplinary procedures. Their behavior may appear erratic or out of character, they may take extended lunch breaks, or they may disappear inexplicably at odd times throughout the day.

Look at the Legal Position

Many organizations now operate a workplace alcohol and drug policy that encourages sobriety and freedom from drugs.

There are fairly uniform state laws and some federal regulations prohibiting use of intoxicating substances of any sort while operating motorized vehicles. Likewise, there are federal and state laws about the possession and sale of illicit drugs, but there aren't such laws that cover intoxication in the workplace. Nevertheless, both federal and state laws also require safe workplaces, thus encouraging organizations to implement policies to address the problem of alcohol and drug dependent employees. Most employers regard alcoholism and drug abuse as an illness, encouraging employees with substance abuse problems to seek appropriate treatment.

Tackle the Issue as an Organization

Much can be done from the organizational perspective to raise awareness of the issue of drug and alcohol abuse:

- Create a substance abuse policy for your workplace including: the reasons the policy is being implemented; a clear description of prohibited behaviors; an explanation of the consequences for violating the policy; an overview of the help that is available to those who feel they have a problem.
- Publish the rules about alcohol consumption and drug use at work. Notify employees that the unlawful manufacture, distribution, dispensing, possession or use of a controlled substance is prohibited in the workplace, and describe what actions will be taken against employees for violations. Make sure that the message is clearly displayed in places where employees enter the workplace and where people gather.
- Post drug and alcohol information and embark on an education program to ensure that everyone is aware of the issues.
- Outline the potential health and safety dangers to substance abusers and their coworkers. You may wish to state that the organization sees drug and alcohol abuse in the same light as any other disease, and that it will be treated in the same way. Encourage early identification of employees at risk.

- Offer advice and assistance to those who feel they have a substance problem. You may offer a combination of external and internal resources such as medical assistance, counseling services, or your employee assistance program.
- Ensure confidentiality for anyone who seeks advice or assistance.
- Publish guidelines for disciplinary procedures for on-the-job substance abuse; make clear what provision will be made for medical leave for treatment.
- Define the basis on which an individual may return to the same job after treatment, and the company's level of tolerance for repeated offenses.
- Regularly review the organization's stance on drug and alcohol abuse.
- Check the laws and regulations in your state regarding any requirements for treatment of those with abuse problems as well as the relevant regulations about employment termination. If, for example, an employee has lost productivity on the job due to an injury or chronic illness, and the drug prescribed for alleviating pain is the cause of the poor performance, it may be a different set of laws (in this case, the Americans with Disabilities Act) that would define your options, rather than dealing merely with a case of alcohol or illicit drug dependency.

Some organizations perform drugs tests prior to a final decision to hire a job candidate; others periodically test employees. Whatever your policy, make sure that it is known to all your employees and applied uniformly and fairly by all supervisors and managers.

What to Do As a Friend or Coworker

- If you witness a friend or coworker drinking excessively or under the influence of drugs, intervene. This may involve a simple action such as calling a taxi to take the person home. Although this might feel intrusive, you might prevent the person's immediate exposure to personal injury or a serious accident.
- Once your friend is restored to full control, you might want to have a talk with him or her and give the person feedback on their behavior.
- Offer support, but avoid assuming the role of counselor . Helping someone manage an addiction requires professional expertise. The journey to recovery can be rocky, and by taking on too much responsibility you could be jeopardizing a good friendship and taking on a large and very serious burden for which you are not prepared.
- You may wish to express your concerns to the individual's manager or to the human resources department. Try not to think of it as a betrayal, but as a signal of concern for your friend's welfare.

What to Avoid

You Don't Provide a Clear Policy

Organizations often don't consider drawing up an alcohol or drug policy until they actually have to deal with someone for whom drugs or alcohol has become a problem. Since these forms of addiction are becoming increasingly commonplace, it's wise to be prepared with a clear policy. Circulating information about alcohol and drug abuse signals the organization's intention to treat drug and alcohol abuse seriously—and may help keep some employees from straying too far in the first place.

You Don't Take Action Quickly Enough

Tackling drug or alcohol abuse is difficult, and many people leave it too long before taking action. Avoiding the problem only endangers the individual and his or her colleagues, so it's important not to let things drift. Besides, inaction sends a powerful message to others, who may feel safe in drinking or taking drugs at work because they believe that the organization doesn't take substance abuse seriously. If you are dealing with an individual as their manager or supervisor, schedule an interim performance review and explore the reasons behind the behavior you've observed. Once these are out in the open, the next logical step is to provide the right kind of help.

You Don't Call In Professional Help

Being a supportive friend to drug or alcohol abusers may not serve them in the long run and is no substitute for professional help. Dealing with addiction is a delicate business and should be facilitated by a trained counselor. There may be someone in human resources who has experience with this form of highly specialized counseling, but it's almost always preferable to enlist the help of a local professional whose practice is focused on substance abuse.

Where to Learn More

Web Sites:

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism: www.niaaa.nih.gov

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Abuse Information, Workplace Resource Center: <http://ncadi.samhsa.gov/features/workplace>

U.S. Department of Labor: www.dol.gov/asp/programs/drugs/workingpartners/stats/wi.asp

Substance Abuse Issues for Small Business, U.S. Occupational Safety & Health Administration:
www.osha.gov/SLTC/substanceabuse/smallbusiness.html

“Substance Abuse in the Workplace,” About.com:
<http://alcoholism.about.com/cs/work/a/aa990120.htm>

“You’re Not the Person I Hired: How to Handle the Substance-Abusing Employee,” WorkRelationships.com:
www.workrelationships.com/site/articles/substance_abuse_in_workplace.htm

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