

Workplace Substance Abuse



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Workplace substance abuse

Substance abuse places a major burden on all segments of American society, including the workplace. The good news, however, is that experience demonstrates that employers have enormous potential to protect their businesses from the negative impact of substance abuse by educating employees and encouraging individuals with substance abuse problems to seek help.

Alcohol and drug abuse in America

No business, regardless of size or location, is immune to the countless problems that alcohol and drug abuse can cause. Most individuals who abuse alcohol and other drugs are employed, and when they arrive for work, they don't leave their problems outside the door.

Although overall rates have not increased over the past several years, alcohol and drug abuse continues to afflict American society. The following statistics are evidence of this abuse:

- An estimated 14.8 million Americans are current illicit drug users.
- Nearly 11 percent of youths between the ages of 12 and 17 are current illicit drug users. Among this population, marijuana is the most prevalent drug of use.
- Young adults between the ages of 18 and 20 have the highest rate of current illicit drug use at roughly 20 percent.
- Heavy drinking occurs most frequently among young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 (13.3 percent), peaking at age 21 (17.4 percent).
- The rate of current illicit drug use is higher among men (8.7 percent) than women (4.9 percent).
- Heavy drinking correlates strongly with illicit drug use. Of 12.4 million heavy drinkers, 30.5 percent are also current illicit drug users.
- Although the *rate* of current illicit drug use is higher among unemployed individuals, the vast majority of current illicit drug users in this country are employed. Of 12.3 million adult current illicit drug users, 9.4 million (77 percent) work.
- An estimated 6.5 percent of full-time and 8.6 percent of part-time workers are current illicit drug users.
- Alcohol is the most widely abused drug among working adults. An estimated 6.2 percent of adults working full-time are heavy drinkers.
- More than one in three (38 percent) workers between the ages of 18 and 25 are binge drinkers.
- Among employed adults, the highest rates of heavy drinking and current illicit drug use are reported by white, non-Hispanic males who are between the ages of 18 and 25 and have less than a high school education.
- By occupation, the highest rates of current illicit drug use and heavy drinking were reported by food preparation workers, waiters, waitresses, and bartenders (19 percent); construction workers (14 percent); service occupations (13 percent); and transportation and material moving workers (10 percent).

- More than 60 percent of adults know someone who has reported for work under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.

Everyone bears the impact

Everyone involved in running a business — both employers and employees — suffer when there is workplace alcohol or drug abuse. Some costs are obvious, such as increased absences, accidents, and errors. Others, such as low morale and high illness rates, are less so, but the effects are equally harmful.

- One in five workers report that they have had to work harder, redo work, cover for a coworker, or have been put in danger or injured as a result of a fellow employee's drinking.
- Up to 40 percent of industrial fatalities and 47 percent of industrial injuries can be linked to alcohol consumption and alcoholism.
- Alcohol and drug abuse has been estimated to cost American businesses roughly 81 billion dollars in lost productivity in just one year — 37 billion due to premature death and 44 billion due to illness. Of these combined costs, 86 percent are attributed to drinking.
- Alcoholism is estimated to cause 500 million lost workdays annually.
- Individuals who are current illicit drug users are more than twice as likely (9.3 percent) than those who are not (4.3 percent) to have changed employers three or more times in the past year.
- Individuals who are current illicit drug users are also more likely (12.9 percent) than those who are not (5 percent) to have skipped one or more work days in the past month.
- Similarly, individuals who are current heavy alcohol users are more likely (8 percent) than those who are not (4.4 percent) to have changed employers three or more times in the past year.
- Individuals who are current heavy alcohol users are also more likely (11.3 percent) than those who are not (5.1 percent) to have skipped one or more work days in the past month.
- Results from a U.S. Postal Service study revealed that employees who tested positive in a pre-employment drug test are 66 percent more likely to be absent and 77 percent more likely to be discharged within three years than those who tested negative.
- Of callers to the National Cocaine Helpline, 75 percent admit to having used drugs on the job, 64 percent report that drugs have adversely affected their job performance, 44 percent say they have sold drugs to fellow employees, and 18 percent say they have stolen from coworkers to support their drug habit.

Small businesses most vulnerable

When it comes to workplace substance abuse, small businesses have big disadvantages. They are less likely to have programs in place to combat the problem, yet they are more likely to be the "employer-of-choice" for illicit drug users. Individuals who can't adhere to a drug-free workplace policy seek employment at firms that don't have one, and the cost of just one error caused by an impaired employee can devastate a small company.

Among the population of full-time employed current illicit drug users:

- 44 percent work for small establishments (1-24 employees).
- 43 percent work for medium establishments (25-499 employees).

- 13 percent work for large establishments (500 or more employees).

Among the population of full-time employed heavy drinkers:

- 36 percent work for small establishments.
- 47 percent work for medium establishments.
- 17 percent work for large establishments.

Employee performance

If substance abuse is contributing to an employee's poor performance, ignoring or avoiding the issue will not help the situation. An employee's use of alcohol or drugs may be the root of the performance problem; however, substance abuse on the part of someone close to the employee also could be the source. Regardless, abuse of alcohol or other drugs inevitably leads to costly and potentially dangerous consequences in the workplace unless action is taken to confront the issue.

It is important to note that diagnosis of an alcohol or other drug problem is *not* the job of a supervisor. However, remaining alert to changes in employee performance and working to improve employee productivity is a core component of every supervisor's job. Because substance abuse seriously affects an employee's ability to fulfill his/her responsibilities, supervisors play a key role in keeping a workplace alcohol and drug free.

To carry out this responsibility, a supervisor must clearly understand a company's drug-free workplace policy and have the ability to identify performance problems that may be the result of alcohol and drug abuse. Furthermore, a supervisor should be capable of making appropriate referrals to employees in need of assistance for alcohol- or drug-related problems.

Symptoms

The following performance and behavior problems are common to many employed individuals who abuse alcohol and/or other drugs. It is important to note that if an employee displays these symptoms, it **does not** necessarily mean he or she has a substance abuse problem.

Performance-related symptoms can include the following:

- Inconsistent work quality,
- Poor concentration,
- Lowered productivity,
- Increased absenteeism,
- Unexplained disappearances from the workplace,
- Carelessness,
- Mistakes,
- Errors in judgment,
- Needless risk taking,
- Disregard for safety, and
- Extended lunch periods and early departures.

Behavior-related symptoms often include the following:

- Frequent financial problems,
- Avoidance of friends and colleagues,
- Blaming others for own problems and shortcomings,
- Complaints about problems at home,
- Deterioration in personal appearance, and
- Complaints and excuses of vaguely-defined illnesses.

Intervention

When an employee's performance deteriorates for whatever reason, his/her supervisor has an obligation to intervene. The supervisor does not need to be an expert on alcohol and drug abuse to do so, because the intervention should be focused on the employee's performance problem.

The following three principles of intervention may be followed by supervisors who need to confront a staff member about a performance problem that may be related to substance abuse.

1. Maintain control
 - Stick to the facts as they affect work performance.
 - Do not rely on memory; have all supporting documents and records available.
 - Do not discuss alcohol or drug use.
2. Be clear and firm
 - Explain company policy concerning performance.
 - Explain company drug-free workplace policy.
 - Explain consequences if performance expectations are not met.
3. Be supportive, but avoid emotional involvement
 - Offer help in resolving performance problems.
 - Identify resources for help in addressing personal problems.

How do employees benefit from an alcohol- and drug-free workplace?

Working for a company that is alcohol and drug free has a lot of advantages. Employers who maintain alcohol- and drug-free workplaces do more than just protect their business assets — they contribute to the improved safety, health, and well-being of their workforce. Employees benefit from knowing that a drug-free workplace program applies not only to them, but to all the coworkers and managers on whom their safety and security depends. Take a moment to consider the positive impact a drug-free environment has on the following:

Safety

Employees in drug-free environments have greater confidence that their workplaces are **safe**...Think about the construction contractor whose personal safety depends on his fellow workers being alert and focused at all times.

Health

Employees in drug-free environments take comfort in knowing that their workplace is **healthy**...Consider the restaurant server who knows his own health won't be compromised because he has to work a double shift to cover for a colleague who regularly calls in sick due to a hangover.

Productivity

Employees in drug-free environments are reassured that their workplaces are **productive**...Think about the high-tech worker who knows he won't miss an important deadline because he's covering for a colleague whose output lags due to drug abuse.

Morale

Employees in drug-free workplaces are pleased to be part of a team that gets the job done and enjoy the benefits of higher **morale**...Picture the nurse who arrives for work each day with the knowledge that the level of patient care won't suffer due to a coworker's abuse of alcohol or other drugs.

Security

Employees in drug-free workplaces appreciate that their employer's policies make them more **secure**...Consider the electronics store sales associate who doesn't worry that the cash register she shares will be short at the end of the day because a coworker steals to support a drug habit.

Well-being

Employees in drug-free workplaces feel an enhanced sense of **well-being**...Think about the accountant who worked hard to achieve recovery and finds that his supportive work environment plays an important role in his continued sobriety and success.

How do employers benefit from an alcohol- and drug-free workplace?

As an employer, the benefits of an alcohol- and drug-free workplace are considerable in both financially measurable and non-measurable terms. You should see an increase in the following:

- Staff morale,
- Employee motivation,
- Employee creativity,
- Customer satisfaction,
- Customer retention,
- Positive public image,
- Savings through incentive programs offered by insurance carriers, and
- Savings through fewer accidents and property damage.

You will probably notice a decrease in the following:

- Accidents,
- Errors,
- Incidents requiring disciplinary action,
- Absenteeism,
- Tardiness,
- Employee theft and fraud,
- Legal expenses,
- Insurance claims,
- Staff turnover,
- Chances of hiring substance abusers, and
- Workers' compensation costs.

What can you do to protect your company and employees?

To protect against the negative impact of workplace drug and alcohol abuse, many businesses implement drug-free workplace programs. A comprehensive program generally includes five components:

- Drug-free workplace policy
- Supervisor training
- Employee education
- Employee assistance
- Drug testing

Drug-free workplace program

Although employers may choose not to include all five components, it is recommended that all be explored and considered when developing a drug-free workplace program. Research does show a positive relationship between the number of components included and a program's overall effectiveness. However, it should be noted that drug testing is only one part of a comprehensive drug-free workplace program and is not a required component in many work sites.

Below is a brief summary of what each of the five components entails.

Drug-free workplace policy

A written drug-free workplace policy is the foundation of an organization's drug-free workplace program. Every organization's written policy should be unique and tailored to meet its specific needs; however, all effective policies have a few aspects in common.

First, a written policy should clearly state why the policy or drug-free workplace program is being implemented. Rationale can be as simple as a company being committed to protecting the safety, health, and well-being of its employees and patrons and recognizing that abuse of alcohol and other drugs compromises this dedication.

The second core element of an effective written policy is a clear description of behaviors that are prohibited. At a minimum, this should include a statement that the “use, possession, transfer, or sale of illegal drugs or controlled substances by employees is prohibited.”

The third fundamental element is a thorough explanation of the consequences for violating the policy. Consequences may include discipline up to and including termination and/or referral for assistance. Consequences should be consistent with other existing personnel policies and procedures and any applicable state laws. Employers should note that sharing their policy with all company employees is an essential part of a drug-free workplace program. Many companies find it helpful to ask for feedback from employees during the initial policy development stage.

Supervisor training

After developing a written drug-free workplace policy, an organization should train those individuals closest to the workforce — supervisors. Supervisor training is an integral part of every drug-free workplace program. At a minimum, supervisor training should include a review of:

- The organization’s drug-free workplace policy,
- Supervisors’ specific responsibilities in implementing the policy, and
- Ways to recognize and deal with employees who have job performance problems that may be related to alcohol and other drugs.

In relation to an organization’s drug-free workplace program, supervisors’ responsibilities should include monitoring employees’ job performance, staying alert to performance problems, documenting performance problems, and enforcing the policy. Supervisors should **not**, however, be expected to diagnose alcohol- and drug-related problems or provide counseling to employees who may have them. Rather, training should focus on ensuring that supervisors:

- Understand the company’s drug-free workplace policy,
- Can identify and attempt to resolve employee performance problems, and
- Know how to refer employees to available assistance.

In addition, if supervisors are responsible for making referrals for testing based on reasonable suspicion, they must also be thoroughly trained on how to make that determination.

Employee education

A drug and alcohol education program is a systematic approach to providing employees with the information they need to fully understand, cooperate with, and benefit from their organization’s drug-free workplace program. Effective employee education programs provide company-specific information, such as details of the drug-free workplace policy and program, as well as more generalized information about the nature of alcohol and drug abuse; its impact on work performance, health, and personal and family life; and what types of help are available for individuals with alcohol- and drug-related problems, either through the organization or community-based service providers.

All company employees should be required to participate in the drug and alcohol education program. The message should be delivered on an ongoing basis through a variety of means, not as a one-time

effort. Forums for employee education may include home mailings, posters and displays in the workplace, brown-bag lunches, guest speakers, seminars, and sessions at new employee orientation.

Providing employee assistance

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are an extremely effective vehicle for addressing and resolving poor workplace performance that may stem from an employee's personal problems, including alcohol and drug abuse.

In addition to short-term counseling and referrals, many EAPs offer additional drug- and alcohol-related services that benefit employees and the company, such as supervisor training and employee education. Businesses with financial constraints may be able to join a consortium to offer their workers EAP services or, at a minimum, should provide a resource file from which employees can access information about treatment programs and helplines.

EAPs are an excellent benefit to employees and their families. They clearly demonstrate employers' responsiveness and respect for their staff. EAPs also offer an alternative to dismissal and minimize an employer's legal vulnerability because they clearly show a company's effort to accommodate troubled employees.

Alcohol and drug testing

Despite their controversial nature, alcohol and drug tests are increasingly standard components of many drug-free workplace programs. However, before deciding whether or not to include testing as part of their organization's program, employers should consider a number of factors:

Who will be tested?

Possibilities include: all employees, job applicants, and/or employees in safety-sensitive positions.

When will tests be conducted?

Possibilities include: pre-employment, upon reasonable suspicion or for-cause, post-accident, randomly, periodically, and post-rehabilitation.

Which drugs will be tested for?

Possibilities include: the five drugs required for testing by many federal government agencies (marijuana, opiates, amphetamines, cocaine, and PCP) or a broader range of substances, including alcohol or prescription drugs.

How will tests be conducted?

A number of testing modes are available, including urinalysis, saliva tests, hair tests, breath-alcohol tests, sweat patches, and blood tests. Many states have laws that dictate the types of testing modes that may and may not be used. All Federal drug-testing programs must conduct tests in accordance with the *Guidelines for Federal Workplace Drug Testing Programs* published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (available on the Internet at www.health.org/workplace/ or by calling the National Clearinghouse for Drug and Alcohol Information at (800) 729-6686).

State and federal laws

It is essential that employers familiarize themselves with existing local, state and federal laws that may impact when, where, and how drug and alcohol testing is performed. It is strongly recommended that legal counsel be sought prior to implementing any testing program.

Success stories

The following three stories are real-world examples of companies that recognized substance abuse problems and resolved to correct them.

Example #1

Training supervisors: A critical link in a successful substance abuse prevention program

On August 28, 1991, a New York subway operator crashed his train near a station in lower Manhattan. Tragically, five people were killed and more than 200 others were injured. After the accident the operator was tested for drugs and alcohol. He tested positive for alcohol with a blood alcohol content level of .21, more than twice the legal limit in the state of New York.

The next day the *New York Times* ran a story that quoted two of the operator's supervisors who admitted that they knew the man had a substance abuse problem, but they didn't know what to do about it.

Supervisors and managers are critical links between the implementation of a workplace substance abuse program and its successful maintenance. Without their commitment to the program, your objectives (a safe, healthy workforce, and a more productive and profitable business) will go unrealized. However, for supervisors to demonstrate solid commitment to the program they must first understand what the program is, what it requires, and their role — they must be trained.

Many of the problems encountered when implementing and maintaining a workplace substance abuse program can be avoided if you have the full support and participation of your supervisors and managers. In concert with employee drug education, a thorough, ongoing supervisor training program will support your company's policy statement and, if included, make your drug testing and employee assistance programs more effective.

Where to start

The first step in beginning a training program is to consider what you want to accomplish. An effective training program should allow supervisors to do the following:

- Know the company's policy and understand their role in its implementation and maintenance.
- Observe and document unsatisfactory job performance.
- Confront workers about unsatisfactory job performance according to company procedures.
- Understand and be able to recognize the effects of substance abuse in the workplace.
- Know how to refer an employee suspected of having a substance abuse problem to those who are qualified to make a specific diagnosis and to offer assistance.

Supervisors' role

Supervisors are generally in the best position to know if one of your employees is having a performance problem. Of course, the problem may be caused by any number of reasons, one of which could be substance abuse. The important point for supervisors to understand is that the company does not expect them to diagnose substance abuse problems. Rather, supervisors are responsible for monitoring job performance and, when a problem arises, follow established company procedures.

Supervisors cannot afford to get involved emotionally in workers' problems; to do so could compromise their ability to effectively deal with the troubled employees. Also, supervisors should be trained not to enable substance abuse problems to continue by looking the other way, lying and covering up for workers, failing to document performance problems, or choosing not to confront employees directly.

The signs of substance abuse

The signs and symptoms of substance abuse are sometimes identical to those of other performance problems such as marital, family, financial, or gambling. Nonetheless, supervisors should be trained to recognize these symptoms and know that they could be related to substance abuse.

Generally, these signs and symptoms may be reflected by changes in performance, behavior, and appearance, and safety. Performance issues may involve an employee's quality of work, work pace, ability to follow instructions, and successful completion of assignments. Supervisors should look for mistakes, errors in judgment, inability to meet deadlines, sick leave usage, and absenteeism patterns (e.g., Mondays, Fridays, following paydays).

Sudden behavioral changes may be a sign that an employee is experiencing personal problems. Supervisors should be on the alert for employees who are irritable, moody, argumentative with coworkers, or insubordinate. Troubled workers may lose interest in their appearance or begin receiving complaints about their attitude or appearance from customers, clients, coworkers, or other supervisors.

Unsafe behavior on the job should always be addressed immediately. Substance-abusing workers tend to be involved in more accidents than their coworkers, though they are not always the ones injured. Careless or other risky behavior needs to be addressed before an accident occurs.

All such signs and symptoms should be identified and documented.

Who to turn to

For supervisors to effectively carry out a substance abuse policy, there must be a source of help to which they can turn. Who provides that help may depend on the size of the company and how you have set up your program. For example, if your company has few employees, problems may be referred directly to you as the employer. If you have an internal or outside employee assistance service, supervisors would be instructed to refer matters to that service.

In some companies, supervisors may routinely work with the manager of personnel or safety to address workplace problems. There are numerous ways in which companies choose to deal with substance abuse problems. Regardless of the approach, supervisors must document their observations and efforts to ensure that appropriate action has been taken.

Who can perform the training?

Supervisor training does not necessarily require you to hire an outside consultant. The federal government's National Clearinghouse on Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI, (800) 729-6686) is an excellent source of free or low-cost materials that can serve as the nucleus of a supervisor training program. Available materials include training manuals, booklets, pamphlets, videos, and posters, some of which have been developed specifically for supervisor training.

A supervisor or other management-level employee can review the materials and put together a training program with the assistance of the Workplace Helpline ((800) 843-4971), a service sponsored by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.

Local business organizations, police departments, or community resources may also be used to supplement or provide training. Employee assistance professionals typically offer supervisor training services.

Conclusion

There is no way to determine whether supervisors could have prevented the tragic New York subway accident. Well-trained supervisors are not an absolute defense against the problems associated with substance abuse. However, companies that utilize comprehensive programs (that include supervisor training) generally report fewer positive results in drug tests as compared to companies that just do drug testing.

The level of support your supervisors give to the company's substance abuse program, combined with the fairness of your program and the firmness of your commitment, will generally influence its potential for success.

Example #2

Taking a stand against substance abuse with a written policy statement

"I was tired of playing God," says Harold Green, co-owner of Chamberlain Contractors, Inc., a paving company in Laurel, Maryland, with 75 employees. Green recalls struggling with how to handle employees who had drug-related problems, often choosing to fire them.

High rates of worker tardiness and absenteeism, typical by-products of workplace substance abuse, also were hurting Chamberlain financially. However, the magnitude of the company's problem did not hit home until increased accidents, in particular vehicular accidents, caused the company's workers' compensation premiums and general liability insurance costs to increase 100 percent between 1983 and 1986. In response, Green did what thousands of business owners have been doing throughout the country — he implemented a written substance abuse prevention policy that today has developed into a comprehensive program which includes an employee assistance program (EAP) and drug testing.

The critical step

Once a company makes the commitment to take a stand against alcohol and other drug abuse in the workplace, development of a policy that clearly states the company's position is the next, critically important step.

Despite what you may hear or read, there is no such thing as a "model" policy that will fit all companies' needs. With an issue as potentially controversial as a workplace substance abuse program, boilerplate policies are an invitation for disaster — and legal troubles. Just as all companies are different, all policies will be different, at least somewhat. Much depends on your company's experience with substance abuse, as well as your business' location, resources, circumstances, and overall needs.

To determine exactly what your policy should contain, consider taking the following steps. First, conduct an assessment to determine your company's needs. This may be accomplished as informally as simply talking with several employees about perceived needs. For example, you may have already identified that a problem exists, but how widespread is the problem? Is drug dealing taking place? Has safety become a concern? What about employee theft? Is the problem isolated to a specific work unit or location?

How has substance abuse impacted the cost of doing business, such as health care insurance costs and workers' compensation premiums?

Next, consider creating a policy task force consisting of several employees from throughout the company. If your company is large enough, include supervisors and line workers from various departments in addition to upper management. If you have only five employees, you may decide to include all of them. You'll find that just about everyone has something significant to contribute as you establish a policy that will undoubtedly affect everyone on your payroll — and beyond. Besides, as employees take part in the development of the policy, they gain a sense of ownership for it, which increases the chances of winning their support.

Once you have consulted everyone, you are ready to begin actually writing the policy. Though you may want to seek the guidance of an attorney with workplace substance abuse program expertise, your policy need not contain elaborate legal wording. In fact, just the opposite is better. Simply worded, straight-forward, and concise language will increase the likelihood that all your employees and job applicants will understand the policy and be willing to abide by it.

Remember, however, that the policy is where your commitment to a substance abuse program will be stated for all to see. Be direct. Use active language to convey the company's policy. Obligations and responsibilities should be stated without ambiguity to avoid the possibility of confusion or misunderstandings.

Common components of a policy

Although no two policies are exactly alike, all should contain certain common components: Why you are implementing a policy, what the policy prohibits, and what the consequences are for any policy violations.

Why you are implementing a policy

There are many good reasons for creating your policy. Chief among them is safety — the safety of your workers, your customers and clients, and the general public. This is particularly true if the work being performed is of a safety-sensitive nature.

Other common reasons could be to improve productivity; to control the costs of doing business, such as health care insurance, workers' compensation, and accident insurance premiums; to increase the overall health and well-being of employees and their families and help them with their problems; and to minimize employee theft and other wasteful behaviors. It is not uncommon for many companies to state that they are required by one or more federal or state government regulations to implement a policy. Additionally, other program components may also be required, such as drug or alcohol testing. These should be described later in the policy statement.

What the policy prohibits

What types of drug or alcohol use are considered violations of your company's policy will, in part, be determined by the input from your task force. While it may be obvious that all illegal drug use on company time will be prohibited, what will the policy say concerning off-duty use, criminal drug convictions, and being at work under the influence of illegal drugs even though the use took place elsewhere?

Also, how will the policy address alcohol use? Alcohol is legal and, in many circles, commonly used and accepted. It is not uncommon for a company to serve alcohol at company functions or to reimburse employees' travel or sales expenses that include alcohol consumption. However, alcohol is the most commonly abused substance in America. Keep in mind that when measuring the impact of substance abuse on your company, ignoring the role of alcohol is almost like ignoring the problem altogether.

It is fully within the rights of a company to require its employees to report to work fit for duty. It also is completely appropriate to prohibit any employee from purchasing, manufacturing, transferring, using, or possessing illicit drugs while on company business. This includes work

performed off company premises. You may also prohibit employees from being at work under the influence of illegal drugs and from abusing legal substances, such as prescription drugs or alcohol.

The more detail contained in the policy the better. With the members of the task force, think of every possible scenario that should be discussed in the policy.

What the consequences are for violations of the policy

Simply put, any violations of the company policy will result in disciplinary action up to, and including, termination. Depending on the other elements of your program, this may be all that you need to say. The purpose of this section of the policy is to make it clear that employees will be held accountable for their substance abuse-related behavior.

You may also wish to describe the progressive disciplinary measures that your policy will include. For example, will first-time offenders be allowed a second chance? Will a second chance be conditioned on participation in some type of treatment or counseling program? If so, how are referrals to employee assistance services made and what are the consequences if employees refuse to get help?

Other elements

Your policy should describe all of the program's elements and what is expected of your employees. The common components of a program that should be discussed in the policy typically include supervisors' responsibilities, employee drug education/awareness opportunities, employee assistance, and drug and/or alcohol testing.

Of primary concern are employee assistance and drug and/or alcohol testing. For employees who need help and are willing to accept it, some form of assistance should be made available. Though a complete, in-house EAP is not always an option for a company, the services that an EAP would provide are widely available. Companies have the option of joining an EAP consortium with other businesses, contracting individually with an outside provider, subscribing to a toll-free hotline service that employees and their dependents can utilize, or providing information on local programs that employees can pursue on their own. Regardless of the type of assistance being provided, the availability of such assistance should be stated in your policy.

Regarding testing, the policy should describe how and under what circumstances employees may be tested for drugs and alcohol. If the company will test employees after accidents, when being transferred or promoted, when there is reason to suspect drug use, or on a random basis, a full explanation should be part of the policy. The consequences of a positive drug or alcohol test should also be explained.

Conclusion

Your written policy statement is your opportunity to express clearly your position on employee substance abuse. For some workers, the knowledge that the company is active on the issue and that they will be held accountable for their behavior is enough to deter future substance abuse. For others, knowing that their company is aware of the problem and is trying to respond to it will strengthen their commitment to being loyal and productive workers. Still others who may be struggling with a loved one's substance abuse problems will appreciate the opportunity to obtain support and assistance through their company.

Eight years after implementing his substance abuse program, Harold Green refers to it as a "profit center" for Chamberlain. Green says the company has seen significant reductions in workers' compensation costs because there are now fewer accidents and fewer claims being filed. In 1988, for example, 65 Chamberlain employees filed \$96,000 in workers' compensation claims; in 1991, 60 employees filed claims that totaled \$22,000. From 1992 through the first part of 1994, Chamberlain had gone more than 900 days without a workplace-related accident.

Regarding his comprehensive substance abuse program, Green says that he spends a total of approximately \$7,500 each year, an annual per employee cost of about \$36. He estimates savings from the program to be in excess of \$120,000 annually in decreased workers' compensation and insurance premiums alone. "To me, \$120,000 is a significant amount of money to save each year," Green says. "Employers should focus on the long-term savings they'll see by implementing a drug-free workplace program and not on the short-term costs of setting it up."

Example #3

Uncovering the hidden signs of workplace substance abuse

Tom Warner couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he knew something in his company was not right. In fact, he recognized that something was very "weird" about the way his employees were performing.

Warner, president of the Warner Corporation, a plumbing, heating, and air conditioning services company in the Washington, D.C. area, described the situation as a series of "stupid" mistakes by experienced plumbers and assistants who couldn't handle simple responsibilities. However, when Warner discovered how prevalent workplace substance abuse is, he began to suspect that drug abuse was at the heart of his employees' problems.

"When I learned that statistics show 20 percent of our population uses drugs — and that in the Washington, D.C. area, at least 20 percent of the work force uses drugs every day — things started to make sense," Warner says.

In response, Warner's company implemented a comprehensive substance abuse program for its employees. This program included the development of a thorough policy statement that strictly prohibits workers from abusing alcohol and prescription drugs and from using illegal drugs. Today, the program also includes drug testing and counseling for troubled workers who self-refer through the company's employee assistance program.

Taking its toll

The substance abuse problems experienced by the Warner Corporation are not unique to this company, its industry, or even its geographic location. The unfortunate truth is that substance abuse — the abuse of alcohol and legal drugs and the use of illegal drugs — is more common today than it has been for the last several years.

According to the federal government, 71 percent of all illegal drug users are employed — an increase of 5 percent since 1992. As a result, substance abuse is taking a tremendous toll on employers' ability to stay in business. This trend is particularly apparent among smaller companies that, for a variety of reasons, have been slow to address the problem.

How exactly do substance abusing employees cost their employers? Consider the following: employees who abuse drugs are less likely to show up to work on time or put in a productive day's work. Conversely, they are more likely to be absent from work without a legitimate reason, use their health care benefits, and file workers' compensation claims.

According to the National Council on Compensation Insurance, as many as 50 percent of all workers' compensation claims are related to the abuse of alcohol or drugs in the workplace. Drug users, as a group, use medical benefits at a rate 8 times higher than non-users. Substance abusing employees also are absent from work more often than their non-substance abusing coworkers, often resulting in increased workloads for coworkers and decreased employee morale.

Though the total cost of substance abuse in the workplace is difficult to assess, Marsh & McLennan Companies estimates the national figure to be \$75 billion per year or about \$640 per employee, whether user or non-user.

The signs

Unfortunately, once employers begin to see the dollars leaking out of their bottom line, it is often late in the development of a serious substance abuse problem. Can this be avoided? Can employers look for signs of possible substance abuse? Are there hidden signs that might warn employers that a problem is developing?

The answer to all three of these questions is yes. In most cases, many of the long-term problems associated with workplace substance abuse can be avoided if employers are constantly on the lookout for the hidden signs of substance abuse and take appropriate action. However, it is also important to recognize that an employee's declining job performance may be caused by factors unrelated to substance abuse.

Supervisors should be trained to measure each worker's job performance and to refer employees with performance problems to the appropriate qualified professional to determine the nature of the problem.

Performance

There are many ways to measure workers' performance. These indicators can also help employers spot potential substance abuse problems early on. Is a certain employee's quality of work inconsistent? Is the employee's work pace slow, slower than usual, or sporadic? Does the employee have trouble concentrating on his work? Are there signs of fatigue?

Other telling performance signs include increased mistakes, errors in judgment, and a sudden inability to fulfill complex assignments or meet deadlines. Increased absenteeism or tardiness, both of which have a direct impact on the performance of the troubled employee and the coworkers who have to carry the extra workload, also could indicate that a substance abuse problem exists.

Other performance-related signs of substance abuse may include:

- Excessive sick leave;
- Frequent early departures;
- Patterns of absenteeism (Mondays, Fridays, before or after holidays, and following paydays);
- Extended coffee breaks; and
- Excessive time on the phone.

Behavior and appearance

Workers who display sudden changes in behavior on the job may be trying to hide a substance abuse problem. For example, irritability, moodiness, arguing with coworkers, or insubordination toward supervisors are not uncommon among substance abusers.

For substance abusing employees, personal appearance may lose its usual importance. Troubled workers will often show up to work looking sloppy, unkempt, unshaven, or dressed inappropriately (i.e., long sleeved shirts in the summer, sunglasses indoors, etc.).

Also, employers may begin receiving complaints from customers, clients, and coworkers regarding the attitudes and work quality of substance abusing employees.

Other behavior-related signs of substance abuse may include:

- Sleepiness,
- Slurred speech,

Workplace Substance Abuse

- Unsteady movements and shaky hands,
- Cold, sweaty palms,
- Dilated pupils,
- Red eyes,
- Unusual weight loss or gain,
- Smell of alcohol on breath,
- Deteriorating family relationships,
- Borrowing money from coworkers,
- Stealing from the company and coworkers,
- Sudden change in choice of friends,
- Poor personal hygiene,
- Violent behavior,
- Impatience,
- Depression,
- Suspicious attitude toward others,
- Emotional behavior, and
- Excessive talkativeness.

Safety hazards

Substance abusing employees are not safe employees. Depending on the type of work employees do, substance abuse problems can begin manifesting themselves in employee safety records. Substance abusing employees will be involved in more accidents than other workers, even though they are often not the ones who are injured. They also tend to display carelessness in the operation and maintenance of potentially hazardous materials or dangerous equipment.

Other safety-related signs of substance abuse may include:

- Risky behavior,
- Increased involvement in off-the-job accidents, and
- Damaging equipment or property.

Conclusion

The most important thing employers can do to help control the cost of substance abuse is to establish and enforce a policy that prohibits employees from using illegal drugs and abusing legal drugs or alcohol. Employers should train supervisors to monitor workers' job performance and to report any irregularities. However, supervisors should not be expected to diagnose possible medical conditions, such as substance abuse. Employers should also offer employees ongoing substance abuse education opportunities so that everyone in the workplace can be on the look-out for the hidden signs of substance abuse.

As for Tom Warner, it wasn't long before his company began reaping the benefits of its substance abuse program. In fact, Warner credits the program with saving the company at least \$385,000 in one year due to fewer accidents, which in turn resulted in lower workers' compensation costs and vehicle insurance premiums.

Warner says, "Companies need to establish drug testing and drug abuse policies, make them known, and enforce them vigorously and without exception."

Related Keller*Online* links

Learning Center – Best Practice: [Substance Abuse](#)

Safety Training (OSHA & EPA): [Violence in the Workplace](#)

Safety and Hazmat Training:

[Alcohol & drugs – driver](#)

[Alcohol & drugs- supervisor \(alcohol\)](#)

[Alcohol & drugs - supervisor \(drugs\)](#)