Substance Abuse in the Workplace

Substance use and abuse among workers

Substance abuse by employees results in:
- Higher health care expenses for injuries and illnesses;
- Higher rates of absenteeism;
- Reductions in job productivity and performance;
- More workers’ compensation and disability claims; and
- Safety and other risks for employers.

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

Employees with substance abuse issues often:
- Fail to fulfill major role obligations at work, school or home.
- Use substances in situations where it is physically hazardous (e.g. driving an automobile or operating a machine when impaired by substance use).
- Have recurrent substance-related legal or financial problems.
- Continue to use substances despite persistent social or interpersonal problems that are a result of the substance use.


Substance use and abuse is a concern for employers. Most drug users, binge and heavy drinkers, and people with substance use disorders are employed.

- Of the 19.9 million current illicit drug users aged 18 or older in 2011, 13.1 million (65.7 percent) were employed either full or part time.
- The rate of current alcohol use was 64.3 percent for full-time employed adults aged 18 or older in 2011.
- Most binge and heavy alcohol users were employed in 2011. Among 56.5 million adult binge drinkers, 42.1 million (74.4 percent) were employed either full or part time. Among 15.5 million heavy drinkers, 11.6 million (74.9 percent) were employed.
- About half of the adults aged 18 or older with substance dependence or abuse were employed full time in 2011. Of the 18.9 million adults classified with dependence or abuse, 9.8 million (51.8 percent) were employed full time.

- 2011 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH)

Substance use and abuse is not necessarily limited to after work hours, leading to the risk of impairment on the job.
- An estimated 3.1 percent of employed adults actually used illicit drugs before reporting to work or during work hours at least once in the past year, with about 2.9 percent working while under the influence of an illicit drug.
- An estimated 1.8 percent of employed adults consumed alcohol before coming to work, and 7.1 percent drank alcohol during the workday.

- Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Studies on Alcohol
Impact of substance use on the workplace

Worker Substance Abuse Brings High Costs to Employers
Although costs for substance abuse treatment may appear low as reflected in an employer’s health plan, drug and alcohol problems cost the United States an estimated $276 billion per year. The majority of these expenses result from lost work productivity (which will not be reflected in a health plan) and health care costs related to substance abuse.

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

Workers reporting substance use and abuse have higher rates of turnover and absenteeism, are more likely to have worked for more than three employers in the past year, are more likely to have skipped work more than two days in the past month, and were also more likely to have missed more than two days of work due to illness or injury.

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

The impact of employee substance use and abuse is a problem that extends beyond the substance-using employee. There is evidence of co-worker job performance and attitudes being negatively affected. Workers have reported being put in danger, having been injured, having had to work harder, to re-do work, or to cover for a co-worker as a result of a fellow employee’s drinking.

- Employee Assistance Quarterly, JSI Research & Training Institute

Small businesses most vulnerable
Smaller firms may be particularly disadvantaged by worker substance use and abuse. For example, while about half of all U.S. workers work for small and medium sized businesses (those with fewer than 500 employees), about nine in ten employed current illicit drug users and almost nine in ten employed heavy drinkers work for small and medium sized firms. Likewise, about nine in ten full-time workers with alcohol or illicit drug dependence or abuse work for small and medium size firms. However, smaller firms are generally less likely to test for substance use.

- U.S. Census Bureau, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

Good news for employers
A 2011 poll conducted by the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) and the Drug and Alcohol Testing Industry Association (DATIA) regarding drug testing demonstrated the efficacy of implementing these workplace programs. Among companies that conducted drug testing:

- 9% reported high absenteeism rates before implementing a drug testing program compared to 4% after program implementation;
- 14% reported high workers’ compensation incidence rates prior to program implementation compared to 6% after implementation;
- 9% reported experiencing an increase of productivity after program implementation;
- 16% reported seeing a decrease in employee turnover rates after implementation.