

## ***Substance Abuse Costs Employers Billions***

Substance abuse problems among employees cost businesses billions of dollars each year. According to the 2008 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, in that year, 73% of the nation's adults with alcohol or drug dependence were employed either full- or part-time. This amounts to nearly 13 million Americans working under the influence. Put another way, this data from the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration means that 8% of full-time employed adults and 10.2% of part-time employed adults are substance abusers.

For the majority of substance abusers, their problem lies with alcohol. The same study reveals that slightly more than half of Americans aged 12 or older reported being current drinkers of alcohol (51.6 percent). This translates to an estimated 129 million people, which was similar to the 2007 estimate of 126.8 million people (51.1 percent).

According to information published by Ensuring Solutions to Alcohol Problems, a part of the George Washington University Medical Center, alcohol abuse costs American businesses \$134 billion in productivity losses annually, and the health care costs for these employees are about twice as high as for those without an alcohol abuse problem. Employees who are heavy drinkers use twice as much sick time as other employees, spend four times as many days in the hospital than the national average, and have higher rates of job turnover.



Significantly, light and moderate alcohol users, who are greater in number than heavy drinkers or alcoholics, account for 60% of alcohol-related absenteeism, tardiness, and poor work quality. And, the problems of alcohol abusers go beyond the addicted individual: about 20% of employees say they have been injured by, have covered for, or have had to work harder because of other employees' drinking.

The above data shows that alcohol and other substance abuse takes a toll on workplace productivity, and contributes to higher medical costs both for treatment of the addiction and for substance-related medical issues. Employee substance abuse problems also

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# Risk Monitor



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result in an increased occurrence of workplace accidents and higher disability and workers' compensation costs. It is clearly in an employer's best interests to seek ways to minimize the impact of employees' substance abuse on the workplace.

Experts in the field stress the importance of workplace practices that educate employees about the health hazards of substance addiction and encourage employees to seek early treatment of any problems. While stressing the importance of a drug-free workplace, policies that rely primarily on discipline can result in addicted employees hiding their problems out of fear of losing their jobs, and in co-workers enabling such behavior in a spirit of friendship. In that kind of environment, an addicted employee may resist seeking any available help—such as obtaining treatment under the medical plan or taking a leave to enroll in a treatment program—until a crisis occurs.

On the other hand, employees will be more likely to come forward and get the help they need if they believe that by doing so they will receive help, not punishment. The same is true of co-workers, who can be an invaluable resource in encouraging addicted employees to seek help and to stay on track once treatment has begun.



Since most medical insurance plans include at least some substance abuse benefits, workplace communications about a business's policies on alcohol/drug use should include this information. Employees are more likely to seek help if they feel it is within their reach, and they may not realize that this benefit is available to them. Employee assistance programs (EAPs) also can offer screenings, counseling, and treatment referrals for employees with substance problems; depending on the EAP, it also may have worksite awareness and supervisor training programs.

Communications to employees about any available benefits should stress that both medical plan and EAP services are confidential. This, along with a supportive (rather than punitive) environment, increases the likelihood that employees will seek the help that they need.

With many dollars in lost productivity at stake, the reasons for businesses to promote substance abuse awareness are compelling. And, because work is such an important part of most people's lives, the workplace can be an effective place for substance abuse intervention to begin.



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