

Substance abuse

How to deal with alcohol and drug abuse in the workplace

Abuse of alcohol and drugs in the workplace is a reality that employers cannot afford to overlook. According to a 2008 study by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, more than 70 percent of the admitted drug and alcohol abusers in the country are employed, and a majority of those are full-time employees.

The costs to an employer can come in different forms. A study by the National Institute on Drug Abuse found that drug-using employees are 2.5 times more likely to have absences of eight days or more, three times more likely to be late for work and five times more likely to file a workers' compensation claim.

"Alcohol and drug abuse on the job can cost employers money in many ways. Some of the ways are easily visible, such as higher health care premiums. Other ways are more covert, such as absenteeism, accidents and theft," says Jan Nedin, MBA, MEd, RCC, a senior account manager at LifeSolutions, UPMC Insurance Services Division.

Smart Business spoke with Nedin about how to address alcohol and drug abuse at your organization.


What's the first step to proactively approaching this problem?

Employers must develop a substance abuse policy. It should include:

- A requirement that all employees report to work and remain free of alcohol, mood-altering drugs and other intoxicants.
- Acknowledgement that the company recognizes alcoholism and drug abuse as illnesses that are major potential problems regarding health, safety, security and productivity.
- A statement indicating that behavior and performance problems related to alcohol

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and drug abuse should be identified early and dealt with constructively via professional evaluation and treatment.

- A clear statement that chemically influenced behavior and/or performance will not be tolerated and could result in discharge.

How can an employee assistance program (EAP) help?

An EAP is a confidential consultation, assessment and referral service available to employees and supervisors to deal with recognition and treatment of substance abuse problems, as well as other personal problems that may be affecting an employee's performance. It is an extremely valuable tool in dealing effectively with these problems.

What roles do supervisors play?

Supervisors need to know the company policies and procedures, monitor employees' performance and behavior, and document performance problems. It is not a supervisor's job to diagnose drug or alcohol problems — that should be left to the professionals. An EAP consultant can train supervisors on when to refer drug abuse and alcohol matters to the EAP for assessment.

What else is important to remember?

Design appropriate health plan coverage.

Efforts to help the employee will be much more challenging unless health plan coverage is in place that allows employees to get treatment as needed.

Consider pre-employment and random drug screening. This is not the answer, but rather a tool that must be utilized wisely and cautiously. Pre-employment screening can weed out undesirable applicants so you have less of this problem to deal with after hiring.

If unionized, involve the union. When unions are present, they must be involved for the program to be effective.

Secure good legal counsel. Be sure to have policies and procedures reviewed and approved by a good labor relations attorney prior to implementation.

Don't make it a witch hunt. Turning a program into a concentrated search for substance abusers may be counterproductive. Place your emphasis on recognizing and helping those who exhibit problems.

Do not concentrate solely on drugs. Alcohol, which is also a drug, can be just as serious a problem, if not more so, and all should be equally addressed. ●

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