

Substance Abuse in the Workplace - Perceptions and Realities

by Scott M. Primiano, President, Polestar Performance Programs, Inc.

Conventional portrayals of drug and alcohol users usually fall into one of two categories - the addict/alcoholic or the recreational user. Addicts and alcoholics are generally perceived to be unemployed, inner-city, back-alley, ne'er-do-wells; while recreational users are thought of as harmless thrill seekers who limit their consumption to weekend parties and after hour social events. Carrying these images into the workplace, we often find that employers develop an attitude of irrelevance regarding the potential for loss resulting from employee substance abuse. Many believe that pre-employment drug testing and background checks eliminate the former group (who are usually thought of as unemployable anyway), while recreational users are considered non-threatening and undetectable.

Then, something happens. A delivery truck is involved in a fender-bender and the driver is cited for DWI. An employee is caught stealing and blames the theft on a drug problem. A supertanker runs aground off Alaska and spills 11.2 million gallons of crude oil into Prince William Sound; the Captain is impaired. Buses, trucks, trains, and planes crash. Employees lose limbs and lives, turnover rises, morale falls, workers compensation rates skyrocket, and profits decline. Thorough and timely investigation into the causes of these issues and accidents frequently uncovers a workplace substance abuse problem that is both copious and glaring to everybody but the employer. Blinded by erroneous preconceptions, the employer unknowingly contributed to a problem that could jeopardize the entire company.

If you haven't yet addressed workplace substance abuse at your company or you don't consider it to be a problem, consider these statistics:

- 73% of illegal drug users over the age of 18 and 90% of alcoholics work ... *somewhere*.
- 1 out of 6 employees has an active substance abuse problem.
- 74% of drug users are white and live equally in urban, suburban, and metro areas.

- Managers are more than 3 times as likely to drink during work hours as hourly employees are.

What you don't know will hurt you.

In the case of the Exxon Valdez, not knowing hurt a lot. After paying over \$11.1 billion to repair the damage caused by the accident, Exxon was assessed an additional \$5 billion in punitive damages. The court acknowledged that the company did not know that the captain was impaired, however, the court ruled that Exxon *should* have known. Granted, most of us don't have loaded tankers to worry about and few of us could ever absorb such a settlement; the point to remember is that employer ignorance is not a viable defense. In addition to the potential for a catastrophic loss, employers pay an estimated \$7,000 per year for every substance abuser in the workplace. Multiply your headcount by the 1/6 user to non-user ratio mentioned above and then multiply the result by \$7,000. You will quickly realize how expensive the problem can be. Need more? Consider these statistics:

- Substance abusers file 5 times more workers' compensation claims and 40 percent of all industrial injuries and fatalities are caused by substance abuse.
- Absenteeism rates are 10 times higher for substance abusers.
- Substance abusers use their medical benefits 300 percent more often than other employees do.
- Over 65% of the workplace accidents that involve a substance abuser result in injury or death to somebody else.
- Substance abusers are 33 percent less productive than other employees are.

What can be done?

The best defense is total offense. According to Robert Stutman, CEO of Employee Information Services, "nothing short of a state-of-the-art drug free workplace program will significantly impact the problem." Stutman suggests starting with a qualified consultant to review your existing policies, procedures, employee assistance program, and compliance with state and federal laws. Following the review, the consultant should work with you to design a customized program that includes:

- Pre-employment medical screens and background checks.
- Training and education for all employees.
- Intervention training for supervisors.
- Random drug and alcohol tests.
- Post accident drug and alcohol tests.
- On-going training, monitoring, and program enhancement.

Stutman places special emphasis on the need for employers to develop comprehensive education and training programs in addition to the testing, a step too often overlooked in many workplace programs. Referencing a recent American Management Association survey, Stutman points out that the survey "reveals that companies that combine testing and education report test-positive ratios 33% to 55% lower than those companies that rely solely on testing." Stutman

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estimates that the return on investment for such a program is at least 11-to-1 and even greater when you consider the positive effect on employee morale. Further, the employer now has a strong legal foundation against lawsuits and punitive-damage judgments involving substance abuse.

The workplace substance abuse problem is not new and it is not going to ever disappear. The fact that Americans make up only 5% of the world's population yet we consume 60% of its drugs tells me that this epidemic is here to stay. I am not shocked that drug and alcohol use in the workplace is rampant, however, I am aghast at the level of employer naiveté regarding this issue. We all work too hard to be done-in by it and we all deserve to be protected from it. Please take the time to educate your clients appropriately.

