

**We live in an age suffused with substances and lifestyles that encourage addictive behaviours. Kate Nowlan explains how to implement a supportive, non-punitive drug and alcohol policy.**

# ADDICTS in the OFFICE

There are a number of ways in which we can define addiction: the addictive personality, the drug-dependent employee. For the purposes of this article, I shall be referring to addiction in a broad sense, and examining the importance or otherwise of implementing policies which can protect and support employer and employee when skilfully introduced into company procedures.

Addictive behaviour is multifaceted. It can sometimes be glaringly obvious (the member of staff who returns from lunch every day with alcohol on the breath; the employee who openly boasts of cannabis use) but often symptoms are hidden (eg secret internet gambling) and can be difficult to diagnose.

Research by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) tells us that 60–70 per cent of people with alcohol- or drug-related problems are in full-time employment.

Also, 15–30 per cent of all fatalities at work are related to alcohol or drugs. Employees with alcohol and other drug problems have 200–300 per cent more absenteeism than other employees. The economic costs of alcohol in the UK are estimated to be billions of pounds each year. There is less available research on what “other” addictions cost – but it is surely obvious that internet gambling will have a profound effect on employee wellbeing – and even addiction to shopping or sex or dieting can seriously impact on performance in the workplace.

**Addiction in the workplace**  
In some industries the attention to misuse of alcohol and drugs will

be of prime importance. Safety-critical industries, for example, will always have some form of policy in place. Staff who drive regularly, who work with machinery or at heights, or staff in the construction, aviation and rail industries will be aware that random testing is a given. The emergency services (fire, ambulance and police) will be familiar with the necessity for a zero-tolerance approach to the use of alcohol or drugs while on duty. However, for many companies the picture is more complex. What, for example, of the music and entertainment industry where use of cocaine, cannabis and alcohol may be seen as a “normal” part of everyday life? What of the news and broadcasting industries where journalists head to the bar as a matter of course after tough assignments? A recent headline in the *Independent* read: “Stress in the City: alcoholism soars in banking”. The article goes on to say: “A binge-drinking culture in the City among highly paid lawyers, bankers and other workers has seen death rates there from alcohol-related causes climb to triple the national average.” One of the problems in this case from an employer’s standpoint is that much drinking in the City environment can take place after work (no longer so many of those three-hour boozy lunch hours) where employers have little jurisdiction but where clearly work performance is affected.

#### Possible effects

The effects of substance abuse are varied, sometimes difficult to diagnose and may be hidden by other behavioural characteristics. However, there are some widely recognised signs that can help alert an employer to possible problems in this area.

#### Work performance

- The employee may find it difficult to concentrate.
- Their work is requiring an increased effort.
- There is a worsening of the employee’s decision-making ability.
- The employee is experiencing problems with remembering instructions or making mistakes.

#### Absenteeism

- The employee habitually arrives at work late or has high rates of absenteeism (especially on Mondays and Fridays).
- They often depart early from work.
- There are instances of unauthorised leave.
- There is excessive sickness absence.
- There are strange or suspicious reasons for sickness.
- The employee suffers from an unusually high level of colds, flu and stomach problems.

#### Behaviour and appearance

- The employee displays sudden changes in behaviour, irritability and mood swings.
- They are depressed.
- They experience general confusion.
- They argue with colleagues.
- They borrow money from co-workers.
- The employee has difficulty respecting hierarchy within company.

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#### High accident rate

UK statistics show one in four accidents involve an “intoxicated” person. When a person is an addict, they may suffer from an a higher number of accidents than other workers, both at work and outside of work (eg while driving or at home). They may also display carelessness in handling hazardous materials or dangerous equipment.

#### Drug and alcohol policies

Research carried out by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) identifies four key reasons for employers to implement an alcohol and drug misuse policy. The need to: safeguard the wellbeing of the workforce; ensure the safety of the public; safeguard the organisation from unfair claims; and maintain the

external image and reputation of the organisation.

The aim of a good policy is not to police the organisation, nor should it be used to intimidate employees. A good policy will be a thoughtful document that has had input from all the key stakeholders in the company – and issues of human rights and civil liberties will need to be taken into consideration. However, the employer

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has a duty of care to ensure that the personal health, safety and welfare of all employees is paramount and that staff are protected from the actions of those who may be suffering from addiction problems.

For example, the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) recommends that employers ask four questions before defining the rules relating to alcohol in the workplace.

- 1 Should the employer permit employees to drink alcohol during working hours, during lunch and other breaks, on special occasions or when entertaining clients?
- 2 Do the rules on alcohol apply equally to employees working in both safety-critical and non safety-critical jobs and management positions?
- 3 How does the employer manage an employee with an alcohol misuse problem when it is affecting their work?
- 4 How does the employer manage an employee attending work in an intoxicated state or ignoring rules on alcohol use at work?

Once the policy has been agreed, then careful implementation should take place. Employees must be made aware of the procedures – and education throughout the company is crucial. There should be comprehensive induction programmes so that no staff member is in any doubt about organisational policy. Alcohol Concern recommends that all staff, especially managers, should be encouraged to examine their own attitudes to alcohol problems as this can affect their response to situations. Training for managers and employees should be provided at regular intervals to promote awareness and provide the skills for implementing the policy provisions. It is particularly important to set out the company rules when random testing is part of the policy – but in all cases it is important to emphasise the support that can be offered to staff with difficulties in this area.

### Support structures

Given that alcohol abuse and drug-taking in the workplace is seen to have escalated alarmingly during the last five years and is now estimated to cost £6.4 billion per year in lost productivity (from absenteeism, unemployment and premature death), how can employers help buck the trend? Implementation of robust policies is a start – but only a start. An atmosphere of trust in the company is the essence. What employee

will want to report his or her struggle with addiction to a manager who might be seen to react punitively? HR and Occupational Health departments, senior managers and middle managers have a particular role to play in fostering a supportive culture that is seen to offer help rather than disciplinary action. The best HR departments and managers are those who know their people, understand the pressures and stresses they are facing at work (and maybe home) will be more sympathetic to a desire to hide behind drink and drugs and quicker to offer treatment and support. It is early days yet to predict the effect of widespread internet gambling – but it is likely that as this becomes more commonplace there will be many suffering from debt and relationship problems as a result of their addiction. Managers will need support themselves in tackling many of these issues – as even the most carefully drafted policies do not train staff to talk sensitively of entrenched behaviour patterns.

### Employee Assistance Programmes

In addition to education and information programmes for employees, there are further steps that should be taken by employers. Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) such as CiC, which has recently launched an addictions service, provide 24/7 support, specialist advice and counselling help. The best EAPs will work closely with their companies to support managers and help them look for changed behaviour patterns. Support services should include training courses for managers in the recognition of addictive behaviours and a 24-hour telephone helpline that ensures that staff and managers alike receive appropriate advice and assessment.

There is little doubt that we live in an age where addictive behaviour is widespread and has a serious impact on effectiveness in the workplace. Awareness of these issues is key to a happy and productive workplace.

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## Useful references and sources of information

- Clouds House – specialist provider of rehabilitation services. East Knoyle Salisbury, Wilts SP3 6BE; tel: 01747 830733; www.clouds.org.uk
- Department of Health – for information on alcohol and drug abuse; www.dh.gov.uk
- Alcoholics Anonymous; www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation – drug testing in the workplace; www.jrf.org.uk
- Faculty of Occupational Medicine – guidance on alcohol and drug misuse in the workplace; www.facocmed.ac.uk
- National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse; www.nta.nhs.uk
- Health & Safety Executive: “Drug misuse at work – a guide for employers” (2004); www.hse.gov.uk