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How to Help an Employee with an Addiction



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The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence estimates over 20% of the population over 12 years old in the USA uses alcohol or other drugs for nonmedical reasons and are dependent upon these substances. Addiction does not discriminate among economic class, education level, race, gender, religion, or geography. The fact is that addiction occurs everywhere, and can happen to anyone – willing or not: and willpower has nothing to do with it.

What this means to an employer is that 1 out of every 5 employees may have a substance abuse or addiction problem. Whether the business is in a high-rise office building with employees wearing suits and ties, or the business is cleaning out gutters and sewers with employees wearing construction clothing: chances are that up to 20% of the employees have a substance abuse or addiction.

What does this mean to an employer?

Having an addicted employee work for you can have serious consequences. Firstly, there is the obvious liability should an employee be under the influence and injure or kill someone. But liability does not stop there, if the employee is producing work that is sub-standard and the delivery of that work to you customer damages their business in some way, you could be liable for the damages. There is also the concept of vicarious liability, in which the employer may be held liable for the acts of the employee when they are under the influence, even if they are not working at the time. For instance, if the employer is aware of the employee's alcoholism, and the employee announces that they are leaving work and driving over to the local bar before heading home, it is a fair assumption to note that the employee will likely be an impaired driver when leaving the bar. Should that employee have an accident

on the way home, the employer can be held liable to a certain extent, so long as it can be proved that the employer knew of the employees plans.

While liability is a major concern because the consequences can be so great, it is not the primary reason that an employer should be concerned about an employee's addiction. The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy conducted a survey in 2001 which showed that productivity decreases about 20% in an employee with substance abuse issues. That same study showed that employees with substance abuse issues also cost the employer more in healthcare costs and legal fees.

In addition to the costs associated with productivity loss, insurance rates, legal fees, and potential liability, there is a hidden cost in organizational culture. When an employer chooses to allow an employee with substance abuse and/or addiction problems to continue operating within the workplace as if nothing was wrong, the message which is broadcast to the other employees is clear: do what you want because there will be no repercussions. This type of culture can be very damaging to the business on many levels. It will be difficult to retain high performers because they will perceive others within the organization as slackers that are not held accountable. And, it will be difficult to motivate employees to improve their skills or productivity because there is a lack of perception that it will mean anything for them. Finally, the most valuable aspect of any employee's retention is the extent to which they feel job security and safety. Allowing an employee with addiction to continue to interact with other employees will reduce their feelings of security.

What does an employer do?

The first thing to consider is that there are many laws that protect individuals with disabilities, and that addiction is classified as a disability. So a savvy employer will consult with a human resources attorney to develop appropriate policies that will comply with state and federal laws, and then follow those policies when disciplining and/or firing an employee.

Once a substance abuse problem is established, it can

be problematic to terminate an employee without first pursuing a remedy to the situation. Therefore, it is very important to review the company's health insurance coverage for adequate substance abuse and treatment benefits. More information on the difference between the two can be found at www.serenescenemagazine.com in an article entitled "Choosing a Treatment Center."

Don't ignore the signs of substance abuse and addiction. The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Addiction has identified the following characteristics as warnings signs of substance abuse and/or addiction:

Job Performance

- Inconsistent work quality
- Poor concentration and lack of focus
- Lowered productivity or erratic work patterns
- Increased absenteeism or on the job "presenteeism"
- Unexplained disappearances from the jobsite
- Carelessness, mistakes or errors in judgment
- Needless risk taking
- Disregard for safety for self and others- on the job and off the job accidents
- Extended lunch periods and early departures

Workplace Behavior

- Frequent financial problems
- Avoidance of friends and colleagues
- Blaming others for own problems and shortcomings
- Complaints about problems at home
- Deterioration in personal appearance or personal hygiene
- Complaints, excuses and time off for vaguely defined illnesses or family problems

At the first signs of a problem, it is time to intervene on the employee. Early intervention can mean the difference between life and death for the addict. Be candid with the employee and let them know that they may lose their job if they do not seek help immediately. Offer them options for assistance, or hire an EAP (employee assistance professional) who can take care of all

those details for you.

In general, what are the effects of various types of substances?

Alcohol (beer, wine, spirits)

impaired judgement, slowed reflexes, impaired motor function, sleepiness or drowsiness, coma, overdose may be fatal

Cannabis (marijuana, hashish)

distorted sense of time, impaired memory, impaired coordination

Depressants (sleeping medicines, sedatives, some tranquilizers)

inattention, slowed reflexes, depression, impaired balance, drowsiness, coma, overdose may be fatal

Hallucinogens (LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide), PCP (phencyclidine), mescaline)

inattention, sensory illusions, hallucinations, disorientation, psychosis

Inhalants (hydrocarbons, solvents, gasoline)

intoxication similar to alcohol, dizziness, headache

Opiates (morphine, heroin, codeine, some prescription pain medications)

loss of interest, "nodding", overdose may be fatal. If used by injection, the sharing of needles may spread Hepatitis B, or C and HIV/AIDS.

Stimulants (cocaine, amphetamines)

elevated mood, over activity, tension/anxiety, rapid heartbeat, constriction of blood vessels

(Source: Blume, S.B., Alcohol and Drug Abuse in the Encyclopaedia of Occupational Health and Safety 4th edition, International Labour Office, 1998)

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