Alcohol Awareness in the Workplace

Burnout, a feeling of exhaustion resulting from chronic work stress, has been associated with increased rates of alcohol dependence. Poor workplace safety, a high number of hours worked, and unhealthy working conditions may also contribute to greater stress and more alcohol-related problems.

The consumption of alcohol at work is related to social norms and the ease of drinking during work hours or breaks. Injunctive norms (the degree to which other people at work approve of working under the influence of alcohol) and descriptive norms (the degree to which an individual’s coworkers drink before or during work) have been shown to predict alcohol consumption and impairment at work.

Harmful drinking has been shown to pose significant social and economic costs to the workplace, primarily as a result of lost productivity. The effects of absenteeism, poor job performance, accidents and injuries, and alcohol-related disability and death have been estimated to cost employers around the world hundreds of billions of dollars a year. It has been estimated that lost productivity is the primary social cost of harmful drinking, costing the European Union €59 billion in 2003 and costing the U.S. $134 billion in 1998.

While some of the productivity losses can be attributed to drinking on the job, most of the costs stem from drinking outside the workplace, such as drinking at lunchtime or heavy drinking after work. Furthermore, it is not just regular problem drinkers, who account for around 10% of the workforce, whose heavy drinking leads to reduced productivity; individuals who typically drink moderately but may occasionally drink excessively are also responsible for much of the alcohol-related productivity losses, including losses resulting from absenteeism.

Heavy drinking episodes can result in hangovers that lead to employees calling in sick or missing part of a work day. It has been shown that risky alcohol consumption levels are associated with an increase in the number of sick days taken. Studies in Sweden and Norway have found that a 1-liter increase in total alcohol consumption is linked to a 13% increase in sickness absence among men, but the effect is not statistically significant among women. The direct effects of absenteeism are felt not only by employers but by employees who may have to take on additional work to compensate for absent colleagues.

Employees who report to work following a heavy drinking episode may be less productive than usual, an effect sometimes categorized as “presenteeism.” The costs of subpar performance resulting from alcohol consumption are difficult to measure but are believed by some to be more significant than the costs of absenteeism. The effects of coming to work with a hangover may include falling asleep at work, lower output, poor work quality, conflicts with supervisors and coworkers, and injuries. Performance of certain tasks following an episode of heavy drinking may be diminished well after alcohol has been eliminated from the body.

Source: NCADD

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