



Topic overview

Productivity: Effects of Alcohol on

Encyclopedia of Drugs, Alcohol & Addictive Behavior

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Productivity: Effects of Alcohol on

Alcohol is the most commonly used and abused substance in the United States. As with workforce drug use, besides affecting productivity, the depressant effects of alcohol impact workplace safety because its use may reduce an individual's reaction time, and impair judgment and memory. Its use also affects workplace morale because of attendance and coworker relationship problems. Its use also adds to the health costs of employers. The impact from alcohol occurs not only as a consequence of intoxication, but also because of carry-over effects in the short term such as a hangover, and chronic health effects such as alcoholism or liver disease.

In 2000 the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse revealed that for the reported work-force of over 108 million people aged 18 to 48, about 8 percent reported they had been drinking heavily (five or more drinks on five or more occasions) during the past month and 7.4 percent of these workers were dependent on or abusing alcohol. Heavy drinking is more than three times as prevalent among male workers than it is among female workers, and it is most prevalent in semi-skilled or male-dominated occupations such as construction, mining, precision production and craft, and operators and fabricators. Younger workers (aged 18 to 25) are over two times more likely to be heavy drinkers than older workers (aged 35 to 49) (The George Washington University Medical Center, 2002).

Problem drinkers (individuals who are not necessarily alcoholics but are heavy or binge drinkers prone to causing harm or conflict while under the influence) and alcoholics are more likely than other workers to have major difficulties in the workplace; however, the cost to employers is not limited to problem drinkers and alcoholics, it is also affected by non-drinking employees (The George Washington University Medical Center, 2002). According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, there are two types of problem drinkers: chronic and situational. Chronic drinkers have been heavy drinkers (2 or more drinks per day on average per year) for many years (FTN Centers For Disease Control And Prevention). Binge drinkers are defined as drinking that corresponds to "5 or more drinks on a single occasion for men or 4 or more drinks on a single

occasion for women, generally within about 2 hours" (FTN National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism). Situational abusers may develop a drinking problem later in life, often because of negative life events (failing health, death of a loved one, loneliness) wherein alcohol may initially bring "relief" but may later turn into a problem.

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The impact of alcohol use off the job extends to the workplace and affects the user's functionality. Employees who drink heavily off the job are more likely to experience hangovers causing them to be absent, to show up late or leave early; to feel sick at work; to sleep on the job; to perform poorly; or to initiate conflict with their coworkers.

An estimated 500 million workdays are lost annually due to alcoholism (National Association of Treatment Providers, 1991).

Problems related to alcohol and drug abuse cost American businesses over \$134 billion annually in lost productivity, and work performance drops significantly (The George Washington University Medical Center, 2002).

Up to 40 percent of industrial fatalities can be linked to alcohol abuse and alcoholism and the individuals who consume alcohol are more likely to cause injuries to themselves or others while on the job (Baker, 1987; Bureau of National Affairs, 1986).

People with alcoholism and problem drinkers are more likely than other workers to have had three or more employers during the last year, to have missed work more than two days in the past month because of illness or injury, and to have skipped work more than two days in the past month, according to the findings of a National Survey on Drug Use and Health taken in 2000. People with alcoholism use twice as much sick leave as other employees (The George Washington University Medical Center, 2002).

Employees who regularly use alcohol are five times more likely to file workers' compensation claims (The George Washington University Medical Center, 2002); nearly half of all workers' compensation claims are related to substance abuse (National Council on Compensation Insurance, 2008).

Employees who use alcohol and other drugs cost their employers about three times as much in medical claims as do employees who do not use drugs or alcohol (Bureau of National Affairs, 1980).

Sixty percent of alcohol-related job performance problems are caused by people who are *not* alcoholics or problem drinkers; they are employees who occasionally drink too much at lunch or the night before. Twenty percent of workers reported that they have been injured, had to cover for a coworker, or had to work harder because of other employees' alcohol consumption (The George Washington University Medical Center, 2002).

As with drugs, many employers implemented workplace alcohol-testing programs using breath alcohol protocols. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) and the Department of Transportation (DOT) require alcohol testing as a part of their substance abuse prevention efforts. Because of the rapid elimination of alcohol from the human body, the deterrent nature of alcohol testing is significantly less in these programs than those for drug testing, because evidence of recent drug use remains in the system for a day or more depending on the drug, and frequency and intensity of use. Positive rates for alcohol testing by the NRC and DOT remain low, as is true for most other employers. A more reliable method of alcohol testing is for-cause testing because there is a greater likelihood of recent alcohol use.