

BFAWU GUIDE TO THE EFFECTS OF DRUGS & ALCOHOL IN THE WORKPLACE

A number of surveys have shown that the amount of companies carrying out random testing for drugs and alcohol is on the increase. Drugs and alcohol misuse is not only a growing problem within society in general; they are also having a profound effect on business and the safety culture.

It is a problem that not only strikes at the participant individual, but also touches the lives of their families, friends and work colleagues. This guide does not seek to apportion blame to individuals or organisations, or to find the miracle cure. It is meant to give some general advice and information on dealing with the problems of alcohol and drug abuse in the workplace.

From a trade union perspective, we should be looking for effective policies at work that are aimed at preventing abuse and how we can best help those who may already have a dependency on the substance.

Removing the problem by punitive action may well be just shifting the problem somewhere else and could actually exacerbate the difficulties that the individual is encountering.

Of course employers should be equally concerned, because as previously stated, the effects on business can be profound, for example:

- Ill health leading to increased levels of absenteeism.
- Failing job performance leading to lower productivity.
- Increased risk of accidents to themselves and others.
- Increased disciplinary problems.
- Greater turnover of staff incurring extra training costs.
- Lack of relationships amongst the workforce.

It must also be recognised that drug and alcohol problems are not just caused by the social circles that the person may move in. Risk of addiction could be increased by the lifestyle that is imposed by our

work and possibly by stress. Irrespective of the causes we have to be able to deal with the consequences.

Recent surveys have shown that the use of illegal drugs is on the increase. Consumption of alcohol amongst women is rising and men are staying at the relatively high levels that have been a factor over the recent past. This evidence points to the fact that there is a major problem in the workplace, no matter how small the workforce, there is likely to be a proportion of individuals with a drug or alcohol problem.

WHY HAVE A POLICY?

It will give a clear pointer to staff about what the company will and will not allow so far as drug and alcohol use is concerned.

It can give the opportunity for raising awareness of the issues and may well prompt individuals with a problem to recognise their difficulties at an early stage.

Procedures can be developed for dealing with a drug or alcohol problems when they arise. Highlighting the rights of the individual, the employer and the workforce.

It gives the opportunity for specialist training for those likely to be involved with the dealing of such problems.

There is a better chance of the individual seeking the help of the employer to deal with their problems if they don't feel that there is going to be automatic disciplinary action taken against them.

When drawing up a policy it is important to recognise that whilst there may be many similarities between drug and alcohol misuse, there is one subtle difference. Alcohol consumption is legal within our society; indeed it is accepted as part of our normal life, whilst with few exceptions drug taking is illegal.

THE POLICY SHOULD:

Have commitment from senior management.

Recognise that drug/alcohol abuse is a problem.

Develop preventative measures by awareness building.

Seek to identify those with problems at the earliest possible stage.

Include assistance for those with problems.

Cover all levels of staff including management.

Identify who has overall responsibility for implementing the policy.
Should identify at what stage the misuse becomes a disciplinary issue.

Both the employer and the safety representative should ensure that the appropriate occupational health advice is available to them when drawing up a drug and alcohol policy.

It may be that referral to the local NHS Occupational Health Unit is the easiest and most cost effective way of gaining the initial information required.

Although quite a few companies carry out testing, there is little if any evidence to suggest that testing reduces possible working difficulties, other than measuring the legal restrictions for driving.

Testing tends to give specific results to specific substances, but it should be remembered that many people take prescribed drugs to maintain their ability to work.

There are other problems that can arise with testing such as:

Industrial Relations problems because the majority of the workforce will be non-users.

Legal problems if the employee is forced under duress to comply for fear of losing their job.

Discrimination if certain groups of workers are targeted on the assumption of who may take drugs.

Security of information, samples and medical records.

The BFAWU conducted a survey of all its branches to ascertain the level of problems encountered and if Drug and /or Alcohol policies are in use.

Although returns were fairly poor, responses seem to show a full spectrum of differences between company policies and methods of dealing with the problem.

They ranged from the very good, where everything practical was done to help people with a problem at the earliest possible stage, the



not so bad were help was only offered if the person came forward and volunteered that they had a problem and the downright awful ones were the only policy was to take punitive measures to remove the person from employment.

If sympathetic hearings are only given once the person has owned up then there is unlikely to be many sympathetic hearings.

The reality is that drug and alcohol abusers do not shout their addictions from the rooftop and although many crave these substances they also crave help.

Taking the “hang ‘em and flog ‘em” approach only removes the individual problem, it does nothing to address the drug and alcohol culture and there is a fair chance that the individual could be replaced by someone with similar or indeed worse problems.

The other strange absence from the company drug and alcohol policy’s that were returned is the lack of any mention of the random testing of management.

Drug and alcohol abuse is not just the domain of the workers on the line; it is just as likely to be found in the boardroom. But if workers see that they are the only ones being tested, then not only will the whole credibility of the tests be called into question but it may also lead to industrial relations problems further down the line.

Further information can be obtained from your regional office or by contacting head office. There is also a free booklet published by the HSE entitled DRUG MISUSE AT WORK a guide for employers. Available by mail from: - HSE books, PO box 1999, Sudbury, Suffolk, CO10 6FS, or by telephone on 01787 881165.