

Alcohol and the workplace essay

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People have a long love affair with alcohol. However, with all love affairs, sometimes things take a wrong turn. Many people are dependent on alcohol, which can in turn lead to problems in their life. When a person's alcohol use affects the workplace it becomes a major problem. Besides the health issues to the individual, alcohol use, and abuse, negatively affects workplace safety and productivity, plus it increases medical costs. Oddly enough though, the social aspects of the workplace often can and do contribute to the use and abuse of alcohol.

Further, unhappiness with work and working long hours or odd shifts can contribute to the problems alcohol has in the workplace. These problems can lead to consequences such as job loss and increased health costs, however, there are solutions to aid in preventing alcohol's negative effects in the workplace. Those who allow alcohol to affect their performance in the workplace often suffer consequences due to their alcohol use. But fear not, if you enjoy drinking there are ways to enjoy alcohol responsibly. The intent of this paper is to look at all these areas, relate most of them to personal experiences from a previous place of work and provide solutions.

I offer such solutions as striking a responsible balance in your drinking, effective workplace policies, possible government initiatives and an Air Force program dubbed 0-0-1-3, to minimize alcohol use and abuse in the workplace. With nearly 6 million working Americans bringing their alcohol problems to the workplace (Jacobs & Schain, 2010, p. 1) alcohol use and abuse causes problems and affects productivity. A major problem is in the safety issues it raises. Someone under the influence of alcohol or suffering from a hangover due to too much drinking the night before can quickly

become a liability for not only themselves but for everyone in the workplace. For instance, I used to work in a unit of Military Police, called SFS in the Air Force, at the largest Air Force test installation.

SFS troops are responsible for securing the installation, protecting the people, places, and equipment of the base and enforcing all applicable state and federal laws. Further, they carry loaded weapons in the performance of their duties. If they are under the influence or suffering from a hangover they jeopardize the security of the installation and the nation. Additionally, they endanger the lives of everyone they come in contact with, which can be hundreds of people a day. If they are not at their peak performance daily they could kill an innocent person, allow an assailant or terrorist to get away with a serious crime or lose their life due to their indulgence. With reference to productivity loss, the Institute of Alcohol Studies concluded in a study that alcohol affects workplace productivity by increasing absences, causing otherwise able workers to become unable to work, and premature deaths among those who are of working age (2009). The study showed the “ three factors account for a total alcohol-related output loss to the UK economy of up to 6.

4 billion (British pounds)” (2009), the equivalent of more than \$10 billion. Referring back to my prior unit, when an individual was suspected of being under the influence or incapacitated due to drinking the night before we acted swiftly. We would not allow them to arm with a weapon or, if they were already armed, we immediately took their weapon from them. They were then placed in administrative duties until we could complete an investigation

and administer the proper punishment if deserved. This caused hundreds of lost man-hours per individual, reducing the productivity of our unit. Problems in the workplace and lost productivity are not the only work related issues with regard to the affect of alcohol use in the workplace.

There are also associated medical costs. Long-term high levels of alcohol consumption can affect the cardiovascular system, pancreas, liver, central nervous system and peripheral nervous system. In fact it can affect just about every organ in your body leading to a myriad of health issues and even premature death. The cost of treating alcohol issues is not cheap. The Marin Institute, an alcohol industry watchdog, claims “ the annual healthcare expenditures for alcohol related problems amount to \$22.

5 billion” (2006). Providing health care for employees is an expensive expenditure for employers. In a time when companies are trying to maximize profits and minimize expenditures, an individual with a history of over indulgence and associated medical costs becomes more of a liability than an asset. Factor in that “ children of alcoholics who are admitted to the hospital average 62 percent more hospital days and 29 percent longer stays” (Marin Institute, 2006) and it only makes sense that alcohol use negatively affects a workplace because not only are the costs to insure the worker costly it could be just as costly to insure his or her family.

One of the main problems employers have in dealing with alcohol in the workplace is that it is legal to consume alcohol if you are 21 years of age. It may be illegal to drive a care while drunk but generally it is not illegal to be drunk while at work or after you end your workday. Most employers will not

consider it acceptable behavior but that doesn't make it illegal. After all, alcohol consumption is a social activity for most people. Going to a bar or restaurant for a few drinks with your friends is a great way to relax and a 2003 survey in England “ revealed that three quarters regard the after work drink as the key to building positive relationships” (Zakian, 2003, p.

2). Many people do not truly get to know their co-workers while at work but having drinks with them after work is where they truly begin to bond and build team loyalty. If you do not care to socialize by drinking after work, or at the very least join with the group, then you can feel left out. Sometimes even the boss joins in, either during or after work. Zakian also reported the story of an interviewed survey participant whose first day on the job resulted in her going to lunch with her new boss and him drinking four pints of alcohol (Zakian, 2003, p. 2).

Between the after work socialization and lunchtime alcohol consumption you may feel compelled to become a drinker if you are currently not. Further, if you are a drinker this could lead to alcohol abuse and interfere with your performance in the workplace, thus leading to less productivity. Not socializing in these situations could leave you ostracized by your boss and co-workers causing you to miss out on opportunities. Work itself can cause a person to drink heavily, which in turn can affect the workplace as discussed above. Lauer & Lauer reported “ feelings of alienation or high levels of job dissatisfaction may lead to heavy drinking in an effort to cope” (2011, p. 301). It is ironic that both socializing and alienating yourself from your co-

workers can cause someone to drink heavily. Alcohol is a depressant and many people turn to it to deal with their problems.

They use it as a coping mechanism. If you feel that you are in a dead end job, are bullied, harassed, discriminated against or just despise your current working situation then turning to alcohol may be the way you choose to handle your situation. In reality this is counterproductive because turning to alcohol before, during, or after work can exacerbate all of your problems. Other causes contributing to harmful alcohol use is long work hours, shift work and the risk associated with your job. In my old unit all three of these factors were present and at times they played a factor in alcohol use. Military Police work long, nonstandard hours. My guys worked 12-hour shifts that were in reality about 14-hour shifts. They also had shift work and worked every other weekend.

Additionally, they were always on alert because of the high-risk nature of their job. Many would spend up to 14-hours at work and then go out drinking afterwards, knowing they had to be at work within 8-hours. It was how they decompressed at the end of a stressful day. Air Force policy is that you are not allowed to carry a weapon within 8-hours of consuming alcohol and they all knew it.

Some would show up reeking of alcohol and try to arm with their duty weapon anyways. This is not an anomaly. A study by the Research Institute on Addictions, University of Buffalo, reported “ those working a nonstandard shift were more likely to use alcohol during the workday and report being at work under the influence of alcohol” (USA Today, 2006, p. 9).

This behavior caused major issues and greatly impacted the work place because now the individual had to be relieved of duty and that shift had one less body to utilize. Additionally, the administrative and judicial actions that followed were time consuming and costly to the unit and the Air Force in the way of man-hours lost. The consequences of alcohol abuse in the workplace are numerous. They range from individual to nationwide. Individually, if you allow alcohol to interfere with your performance at work you could lose your job.

An employer wants productivity from its workers. If you cannot perform then they can and will find someone to replace you or look and see if your job is even beneficial to the company. If it is not then they may just fire you and not rehire anyone for your position. This would save the company quite a lot of money based on not only salary paid, but also other benefits such as health insurance. Additionally, depending on your job you could endanger not only your life but also the lives of your fellow co-workers. When you begin endangering the lives of others a company must act and act quickly to avoid even more losses through more reduced productivity and possibly from lawsuits from victims of your recklessness. Nationally, the affects of alcohol drive up health care costs and negatively affect the economy.

With alcohol related health care costs over \$20 billion annually something has to give and that is usually passed on to the common worker in the way of increased health insurance premiums. Economically, alcohol use affects our economy to the tune of more than \$184 billion annually (National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2000). This figure accounts for

health care costs as well as work absenteeism, lost future earnings, crime, premature deaths, etc. So what are the solutions to alcohol affects in the workplace? There are a myriad of options and any one of them could range from the simple to the creative. One solution is that you must strike a balance.

There is nothing wrong with alcohol consumption as long as it is not overdone. Kirkey found that those who do drink tend to earn more than those who do not (2007, p. A7). Kirkey goes on to say that a future study will show that drinking more than 21-38 drinks a week will result in earning less than someone who does not drink.

Finding the right balance is important. Another solution is for companies to have strict policies regarding alcohol use. Kirkey also says “ employees at companies that most discouraged social drinking were 45 percent less likely to be heavy drinkers than those in workplaces with more liberal attitudes to drinking” (2007, p. A7). I find this to be a very plausible solution because I have seen it work. Over the course of my Air Force career I can remember a time when alcohol was widely accepted and expected at unit functions. As a result, there were many alcohol related incidents to include drunk driving and sexual assaults.

In today’s Air Force it is less socially acceptable and even frowned upon at some unit functions. It used to be common to see Air Force people enjoying a pitcher of beer at lunch but if that were to happen today there would be a huge uproar with commanders and first sergeants being called. The Air Force no longer encourages drinking the way it used to and it has had positive

effects on the workplace. Some feel that the government needs to step in and offer a solution, which could actually work. The government could create some sort of initiative that gives clear information and guidelines with regard to alcohol in the workplace and then force employers to provide the training.

This could be done several ways. It could be part of a training program for new employees or it could be through educational workshops. Computer based training would be a great way to present the information and guidelines to everyone. Upon completion of the training everyone would know what is expected of him or her, plus, the consequences of allowing alcohol to interfere with work and the dangerous health affects associated with heavy drinking. The final solution I would like to discuss is also something the Air Force has implemented. The concept, called 0-0-1-3, does not try and steer people away from drinking alcohol, it focuses on responsible drinking; 0 underage drinking incidents, 0 driving while under the influence of alcohol, 1 drink per hour and no more than 3 drinks in a night of drinking. The concept was first implemented at F. E.

Warren Air Force Base, Wyoming in 2004 and had some immediate success. " Within the first two quarters, the base had shown a 27 percent decrease in DUI rates and a 74 percent decrease in underage drinking incidents" (David, 2006). Following a program such as 0-0-1-3 prevents you from abusing alcohol while still preserving your right to consumption. Implementing any of my proposed solutions would result in the reduction of the affects alcohol has in the workplace.

The solutions would maximize worker safety and productivity by removing potentially dangerous situations from the equation. Even a few drinks of alcohol impair your judgment and reasoning so being alcohol free during the workday and not drinking heavily the day prior lowers safety risks and allows you to work at your best. They would also reduce absenteeism, which in turn would lead to more productivity and lost revenue for not only the company but also the economy. Health care costs would be lower because your body's vital organs would not be so stressed from the affects of heavy alcohol use. The solutions also provide for education so each employee knows the danger drinking poses, not only to their body but also to their co-workers.

Clear policies would let employees know the consequences should they overindulge or consume during the workday. And finally, 0-0-1-3 allows you to continue consuming alcoholic beverages but teaches you how to do it in a responsible way. As I previously stated, all the solutions lessen the affects alcohol has in the workplace and increases productivity. Whether it was drinking during the workday or overindulging the night before, many of us have worked with someone who has allowed their alcohol use to interfere with the workplace. If you have, then hopefully you are fortunate enough to not have been hurt by someone else's eckless behavior and decision-making. You most likely however have had to pick up the slack for their poor performance or absence.

Safety and productivity are just two of the problems caused when a person brings their drinking problems to work. If you feel your health insurance premiums are too high, you can attribute some of that cost back to the

drinker because he or she costs the medical system billions of dollars a year. Additionally, social activities often contribute to alcohol related problems in the workplace so you have to be smart when attending social events with your co-workers.

Intentional or not, those who are unhappy with their job, work long hours or odd shifts, are more likely to be the ones who bring their alcohol related problems to work. The consequences of allowing this to happen can result in termination of the violator and higher health care costs for all employees. Solutions such as balance in your drinking, effective workplace policies, possible government initiatives and an Air Force program dubbed 0-0-1-3, will minimize use and abuse in the workplace. Armed with this knowledge, will you be the one to allow alcohol to affect your workplace?

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