

Breaking the bottle - the truth about alcohol's impact on workplace well-being



Alcohol consumption in the workplace isn't just about immediate risks like intoxication. It contributes to a broader range of psychosocial challenges affecting employee well-being. Psychological factors like impulsiveness and low self-esteem, often stemming from unresolved emotional trauma, can lead to inappropriate drinking behaviour, while for others, alcohol becomes a misguided form of self-medication for emotional struggles. This reliance on alcohol can exacerbate existing psychosocial risks in the workplace, and impaired cognitive function, emotional instability, and strained interpersonal relationships are just a few of the consequences. The good news is that employers can proactively address these issues.

The hidden costs of alcohol at work

For employees, reliance on alcohol is a double-edged sword that can worsen psychosocial risks in the workplace. Impaired cognitive function manifests as reduced concentration, poor judgement, and slower reaction times, which often result in mistakes and safety hazards. Alcohol can cloud communication and cause conflict with colleagues or clients. Over time, alcohol abuse can contribute to absenteeism, mental health issues, addiction, and even increased healthcare costs for the company. The negative impact isn't limited to the drinker, as it can also affect colleagues and the overall work environment.

Proactive measures in the workplace

Employers can play a vital role in addressing these issues. By implementing proactive measures like counselling and awareness programmes, companies can foster an environment where employees feel

comfortable discussing alcohol-related concerns. Early intervention is vital. Counselling can help employees recognise and address potential dependencies before problems escalate. Breathalyser tests, while not a perfect solution, can act as a deterrent while helping management proactively identify individuals who are at risk in order to get them help, while also acting as a valuable tool to promote accountability. Breathalyser tests should be part of a comprehensive approach that includes education and support stemming from a solid, clearly communicated company policy on drugs and alcohol in the workplace.

The role of counselling in substance abuse

Counselling is a critical tool in mitigating alcohol-related risks. Early detection allows professionals to identify the stage of alcohol misuse (using, misusing, abusing, dependent, or addicted) and create a personalised plan for recovery. Counselling can help uncover the root causes of alcohol misuse, such as unresolved trauma or mental health conditions, while contributing to the establishment of a support system for individuals and helping to connect employees with appropriate resources and treatment options.

Fostering a culture of well-being by breaking the stigma

The most important message to remember is that addiction is a treatable condition, not a character flaw. By fostering awareness and understanding, we can move away from stigmatising those struggling with alcohol misuse and encourage them to seek help. There is now a global focus on supporting individuals in recovery rather than on punishment. Seeking help needs to be reframed as a sign of strength and a commitment to a healthier and happier life, rather than a weakness.

Prioritising mental health in the workplace goes beyond just addressing alcohol misuse. It creates a supportive environment where employees feel comfortable seeking help. This, in turn, leads to improved overall well-being, as employees who feel supported are more likely to be happy, healthy, and productive. Addressing underlying issues can lead to fewer missed workdays due to stress or illness, reducing absenteeism, while focusing on well-being fosters a positive workplace culture that attracts and retains top talent.