

Breathalysers in the workplace have a significant role to play in addressing South Africa's alcohol abuse problems



Government's ban on alcohol as part of the COVID-19 lockdown highlighted the devastating impact alcohol abuse has on society. While alcohol was banned, there were far fewer instances of domestic abuse, and pressure on hospitals was eased because alcohol-related injuries and accidents were minimised.

However, this issue will not be solved by prohibiting the sale and consumption of alcohol - the problem goes far deeper. The reality is that South Africa has a culture of drinking and it has become normalised to consume excessive amounts on a regular basis. A multi-level approach is critical, and compulsory alcohol testing in the workplace has a pivotal role to play.

There's no silver bullet

Alcohol abuse is a complex problem for which there is no single, magical solution. However, there are steps that businesses can take to play a role in reducing alcohol consumption, especially in the workplace.

The Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Act specifies a zero-tolerance approach toward intoxication in the workplace. Enforcing this with the use of alcohol testing not only ensures compliance, but it can also effectively reduce the alcohol consumption of employees.

If staff know that they will or may be tested when they arrive at work, they will not be able to drink to

excess the night before. In addition, if they are tested upon returning from lunch, they will not be able to consume alcohol during work hours. Regular testing plays a role in reducing excessive alcohol consumption and can help to change culture in a small way.

The proof of the testing

A paper mill in KwaZulu Natal implemented compulsory alcohol testing a number of years ago, and almost immediately experienced a huge reduction in the amount of alcohol their staff consumed. Many of the workers' wives noted that, instead of coming home late and drunk, their husbands would return straight after work. For many industries where employees rely on no work, no pay, running the risk of not being allowed into the workplace due to intoxication is not worth it for many of such employees.

Compulsory testing helped to control excessive drinking behaviours, as the workers knew their jobs could be on the line.

Some other benefits of reducing alcohol consumption were fewer instances of domestic abuse, as well as more disposable income for education and food. For the business, they also saw improvements in productivity, reliability and employee health, as well as fewer accidents, creating an improved working environment for all.

Change the culture to solve the problem

Compulsory alcohol testing is only one element of a multi-faceted problem. Education on the dangers of alcohol consumption needs to be driven from a young age and reinforced in the workplace. The 'cool' factor around drinking needs to be changed and the preconception that socialising has to involve alcohol must shift. In addition, establishments serving alcohol need to play a role in ensuring excessive consumption does not take place.

Ultimately South Africa needs a change in culture and individuals need to be held accountable. We need to become more responsible as a nation and knowing that we could be fired for drinking too much is a really effective incentive to help control

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