

IMPLICATIONS

of alcohol in the workplace

By Rhys Evans, director of ALCO-Safe

Organisations are required by law to comply with the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA), which specifies a zero tolerance approach to intoxication in the workplace.

> Employees who are under the influence of alcohol are a danger to themselves and their co-workers, as alcohol lowers inhibitions, fuels aggression and affects judgement. In hazardous environments such as mining, manufacturing and construction, where employees need to operate machinery that requires sound judgement, alcohol use is a serious area of concern. Importantly, the ongoing behavioural impact of alcohol use in the workplace can have a negative knock-on effect to health and safety, increasing risk for organisations and their employees alike.

Alcohol affects judgment

Employees operating with impaired judgement as a result of alcohol consumption disregard policies put into place for their safety, and make poor decisions regarding their jobs. In the 'Activator, Behaviour, Consequence' (ABC) model of behaviour, alcohol acts as an activator for undesirable behaviours. Employees who are under the influence of alcohol may fail to accurately assess a situation, underestimate the danger involved, and subsequently act in a manner that puts themselves and their fellow workers at risk.

Creating negative feedback loops

The consequences of the action can also negatively impact the behaviour of the colleagues of the offender. If nothing negative occurs, the perpetrator may feel that they can continue with such behaviour. Colleagues may also see this and emulate the undesirable behaviour, which further increases the employees risk not to mention the company's. If someone is injured or even killed, the organisation is liable for damages as well as breaching the OHSA, impacting the morale of workers.

For example, an employee who is

qualified to lift a certain load with a forklift may feel, under the influence, that they are able to exceed the load limit. It is well known that alcohol can create a feeling of 'bravado'. This may cause them to injure themselves or damage equipment. If there is no consequence, it imparts the impression that this type of behaviour is acceptable. A vicious cycle is then created with employees ignoring processes and regulations put into place to ensure their safety. Neither of these situations result in a desirable outcome.

Damaging the bottom line

Undesirable behaviours can also potentially impact the company's bottom line in a negative fashion. Loss of time and an overall loss of productivity in the long run can affect a company's profits and their production abilities, and thus has a corresponding effect on the bottom line. Addressing this challenge will help to ensure that businesses are operating effectively and with maximum productivity, which will therefore ensure profitability is maximised.

A multi-faceted approach is needed

Alcohol consumption in the workplace remains a challenge for a number of reasons. Overcoming this challenge requires a combined approach of the right policies, education and equipment to curb alcohol use and abuse in the working environment.

Alcohol abuse policies are a crucial first step. These must clearly define and outline an organisation's zero tolerance approach to alcohol consumption, as well as all of the procedures involved. Policies must define the parameters for the company and employees to adhere to in order to ensure compliance with OHSA standards. The policy must also outline the full process for testing for alcohol consumption, as well as a complete explanation of disciplinary procedures should employees test positive.

In addition to creating policies, it is also essential to drive awareness – of the policy, the consequences of breaching it, and the effects of alcohol on behaviour. Often, employees are unaware of the harmful consequences of alcohol, on their health, their personal lives and the safety of those around them. Education needs to form a vital foundational pillar of any approach to reducing risk behaviour such as the



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consumption of intoxicating substances in the workplace.

The behavioural changes affected by the use of alcohol are often not understood, and education can help employees to understand the benefits of abstaining or reducing alcohol consumption.

Finally, policies and education should be backed by the use of appropriate technology for testing alcohol consumption. Without the ability to check employees, the policies will be ineffective in changing behaviours. The possibility of random testing or specific tests should employees be suspected of being intoxicated can be a significant deterring factor.

In conclusion

Alcohol in the workplace is a serious challenge across many industries. It can have negative behavioural implications that can create a cycle of negativity that can adversely affect the organisation, and can also have a long term negative impact on productivity, profitability and the bottom line. Changing behaviours requires a combination of policies, education and appropriate technology to ensure that risk can be minimised and adherence to OHSA better assured. <