







Safety Bulletin 104

Dealing with addictions in the workplace

Addiction is something which is felt most strongly within the family, but can have a massive impact on the workplace. It can bring down morale, undermine teamwork and damage performance. The addicted employee can present a number of challenges to the manager and colleagues, many of whom will try to avoid the issue. But considering the rising numbers of alcohol and drug addicts, this does not seem to be a problem that will go away any time soon.





According to a report released in October 2007 (by the Stroke Association and Siemens) 34% of the UK workforce say they combat stress by drinking more. Another survey carried out by Norwich Union Risk Services earlier this year, concluded that alcohol was the “*number one threat to employee wellbeing*” in this country. One in three employees admitted that they had been to work with a hangover and more than 15% admitted to have been being drunk at their desks before. 85% of those people stated that being in either one of those situations (hung-over or drunk at work) had had an affect on their concentration, performance and mood. Also that they had been more tired than usual and done the minimum amount of work possible. The industries that were identified as being most at risk were;

-  The media
-  Construction
-  Professional and business services
-  Information Technology







More striking is the figures from the International Labour Organisation and the World Health Organisation, stating that 60 – 70% of people with alcohol or drug related problems are actually in full time employment. Suggesting that a vast majority of alcoholics and drug addicts are not the type hanging about in dirty bedsits as we tend to imagine, but they are in the office, on the site, or behind the wheel.

Signs of addiction

Work performance

-  Difficulty in concentrating
-  Work requires increased effort
-  Inability to make decisions
-  Problems with remembering instructions – making mistakes

Absenteeism

-  Employee has a habit of arriving late
-  High absence rate (particularly on Mondays and Fridays)
-  More frequent early departures from work
-  Unauthorised leave
-  Strange/suspicious reasons for sickness
-  High incidence of cold, flu and stomach problems



Behaviour and appearance

- + Sudden changes in behaviour
- + Irritability, mood swings
- + Depression
- + General confusion
- + Secretive behaviour
- + Displays of anger/arguments with colleagues
- + Financial problems – borrowing money from colleagues
- + Resistance to respecting company hierarchy

Dealing with the problem

Employers often have difficulty tackling the problem of addiction. One of the main issues being that it can be very difficult to spot. Another issue being that employers do not often like to get involved with their employees personal lives.

There is a great deal of misunderstanding surrounding addiction. A lot of that comes from the fact that a lot of the behaviours associated with it are linked to fun (being drunk etc). Colleagues can all have a laugh and joke at drunken escapades, but it takes a sensitive manager to see through the jokes and stories to the underlying reality.

It is important for managers to realise that addiction is almost always a symptom of something else. Something has usually happened to the person in question to leave them being unable to face reality. This means that before managers consider disciplinary procedures, they should always think about the addict first and foremost as someone in need of understanding and help.

Recognition

There are many ways that an employer might begin to establish whether or not an employee has addiction problems. Many of these are outline on the bullet point lists above. The most noticeable in terms of work performance are difficulties in concentration, making decisions and remembering simple instructions. They could also start arriving late quite regularly, leaving early or phoning in sick. The reasons given for sick leave can start becoming suspicious and unlikely, or alternatively the employee may be getting genuinely sick much more often (e.g. with colds/flu or stomach problems).

On a more personal level, employers should look out for things such as irritability and mood swings, which are characteristic of addict behaviour. Depression, confusion and evasiveness are also sign to look out for. Addicts can also vary from rebellious behaviour to people pleasing behaviour quite quickly.

Once a problem has been identified

Once a manager has identified that an employee may have an addiction problem, it is vital to take action. Letting the problem fester will only make things worse. This is because it will reinforce the addict's belief that nobody has noticed what is going on.



Managers should ensure they are aware of their company's drug and alcohol policy before speaking to an employee.

The occupational health view suggests that employers can intervene when an addiction is having an obvious negative impact on performance. But human resources experts state that it is often best to speak to the person in question about their erratic behaviour and performance worries first, rather than referring to the suspected addiction straight away.

It is also very important not to criticise or judge the person, but offer a sympathetic ear instead. That was trust can be gained first before approaching the difficult subject of the addiction.

Any discussion needs to be followed up with a concrete plan of action. If an employee states that they are willing to seek help then the manager can direct them to HR/ occupational health services for more information. A follow up meeting should be arranged to monitor progress.

It is important that the manager is not dragged into a therapist role. There are professionals who can help the addict. However, if an employee refuses help and continues with the behaviour, the manager then needs to consider disciplinary action. But despite the fears that these encounters can trigger, most addicts are grateful for them, because they just want to be able to talk to someone.

While it is true that addiction is an escalating problem in the modern workplace, sensitivity and support can go a long way in tackling it.

If you require any further information, clarification or assistance with the above, then please do not hesitate to contact us;

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