



Drug use in workplace presents variety of problems

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From the hospital operating room to a construction site, drug use in the workplace is a real problem. Drug use costs the American economy millions of dollars each year.

The problems take many forms: reduced productivity, increase in accidents and insurance costs, increase in health problems, increase in sick time and absenteeism, decrease in quality of work, decrease in morale, higher turnover in the workforce, increase in litigation and a variety of stress-induced problems brought to work by the drug dependent employee.

In simple terms, anything that can go wrong probably will go wrong when a drug-dependent employee is on duty. The problem is compounded by a culture that tolerates and sometimes encourages drug use.

In addition to illegal drugs, a large segment of the workforce is dependent on nicotine, prescription medication and alcohol.

Our children grow up in a world where a variety of drugs is available, and many young people experiment. Substance abuse is highest among those age 15 to 25. This age group enters the workforce with predictable consequences. The fast-food industry employs many young people and has the highest incidence of drug use of any sector of the U.S. economy.

Employers are faced with a steady stream of young applicants for whom working and using drugs has become normal. Fortunately, most people stop or reduce chemical use by age 25, but many still continue occasional use. An estimated 10 percent will continue to

have significant problems.

This has been the case for two generations. Employers in business and industry, healthcare, education and our armed services have been trying to come to grips with the problems stemming from alcohol/drug abuse. An increasing number of employers require pre-employment urine drug screens. A drug-dependent employee affects an employer's bottom line.

Drug use occurs in all groups and occupations. Many people do not stick with just one chemical, and problems can develop at any stage of someone's work life.

Because of this, it is important that employers have more than just pre-employment screenings. They should also do drug testing in response to worksite accidents and evidence of impaired behavior.

The process for confronting a possible drug-related worksite incident or impaired behavior is a delicate one. Supervisors should be trained in appropriate ways of addressing the problem. This would also include ensuring arrangements are in place for the employee to seek help, including mandatory referral to a treatment program.

It is important to remember to not be an enabler (e.g., ignoring the problem, covering up for someone, taking care of the drug abuser's responsibilities, etc.). This only prolongs any attempt at recovery.

Many drug-dependent employees are talented and have a history of productive work. It's worth the time

and effort to help them start recovery and once again be productive and of value to themselves, their families and their employer.

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