

Alcohol and the workplace



Introduction

Alcohol can have a damaging effect on workplace productivity, safety, health and morale. With any amount of alcohol in their system, staff can be less efficient and less safe. In particular, where employees are doing jobs that need a high level of alertness to stay safe, impairment from ‘the morning after’ effect can be potentially catastrophic.

This briefing explores the issue of alcohol and the workplace, examining the range of interventions available to employers, and highlighting in particular the need for all businesses in Wales to have an effective alcohol policy that will help facilitate a safe, healthy and productive work environment.

Alcohol and work

“At work, don’t drink. When drinking, don’t work.”

Paul Baart, Centre for Work Health¹

Alcohol misuse is associated with a variety of negative workplace outcomes, including higher levels of absenteeism, reduced turnover and increased frequency of accidents and

(sometimes violent) arguments.² Quantitative research from the US indicates that alcohol misuse significantly affects the productivity of around 15% of the workforce there, including over 9% of workers who work with a hangover.³ This latter figure has been reported in the UK to be much higher, whereby a survey undertaken for Norwich Union Healthcare found that almost a third (32%) of employees had attended work with a hangover, with 10% stating this happened at least once a month.⁴ Moreover, one in four workers said that their drinking meant that they did the minimum amount of work and went home as soon as possible. This finding is consistent with other research concerning ‘presenteeism’ (attending work when unwell), which shows a clear association with poor performance at work, as well as higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of psychological well-being.⁵

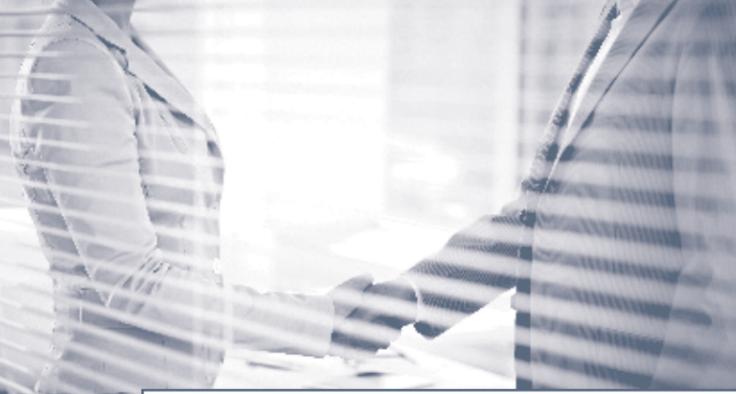
The workplace offers an appropriate setting for identifying and treating alcohol problems, because of the presence of natural social networks; the fact that most employed adults spend a significant proportion of their time at work (around 42.7 hours per week in the UK⁶), thereby increasing the possibility of exposure to preventative messages and interventions;⁷ and, their benefits may be disseminated to others including friends



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and family.⁸ It is not, however, conducive to interventions aimed at preventing alcohol misuse, given that employers are unlikely to be in a position to prevent their employees from drinking outside working hours.⁹ Instead, the focus of interventions is on harm reduction, usually where they are linked with job performance issues, or where an employee directly seeks help or is identified by a fellow employee as requiring assistance.

Types of intervention

Researchers have identified and assessed a variety of workplace alcohol interventions, including those that focussed on health promotion, brief interventions, web-based interventions and the work environment. Each of these is considered in turn below:

1. Health promotion

Through health promotion campaigns, employers can encourage workers to improve their physical and psychological well-being by undertaking increased physical exercise, adopting healthier diets, and reducing risky behaviours such as smoking and alcohol consumption. Research has shown that, even with only moderate intervention, beneficial lifestyle changes can be observed amongst the workforce, improving rates of sickness and absenteeism in the process.¹⁰

In a study of insurance company workers, an intervention that incorporated substance abuse prevention into a stress management programme and nutrition/weight-management programme achieved positive results in both worker attitudes and behaviour, including reduced alcohol consumption. This suggests

that employees' perceptions towards, and actual behaviour concerning, alcohol misuse may alter if they are exposed to health promotion sessions, irrespective of whether explicit alcohol misuse prevention materials are presented.¹¹

The overall effectiveness of general health promotion interventions, however, may be small, and is likely dependant on the characteristics of the study population. One recent review suggests that such interventions are most effective with predominantly white collar-workers and younger individuals, and that campaigns that have frequent contact moments (for example, once a week) may be more effective than those with less frequent contact moments (for example, once a month), although more research is needed.¹²

2. Identification and brief advice (IBA) interventions

IBA interventions aim to moderate an individual's alcohol consumption to sensible levels, and comprise a screening tool to establish levels of drinking and a five minute advice session with a trained interventionist, such as a general practitioner or social worker, who provides non-judgemental feedback and motivational advice to reduce risky drinking where appropriate. IBA delivered in primary care settings has been shown to result in a 15-30% reduction in alcohol consumption sustained for at least 12 months.¹³

More recently, its implementation and effectiveness in workplace settings has been examined. An evaluation by Middlesex University of the North London Alcohol Hub



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IBA workplace project,¹⁴ which was designed to deliver training to selected staff in a range of private and voluntary sector organisations on how to deliver IBA, concluded that such training successfully equips recipients with improved knowledge of alcohol issues and practical, useable skills. The study's authors recommend that organisational buy-in is needed to support managers in the delivery of IBA, and that alcohol workplace policies (see below) may be the key to facilitating the delivery of IBA in the wider context of a health and wellbeing agenda.

3. Web-based interventions

According to a recent review, workplace interventions delivered via the internet have shown some success, with advantages including cost-effectiveness, and the ability for employees to access the intervention any time they wish, and in private to avoid openly disclosing an alcohol problem.¹⁵ An earlier review of a web-based personalised feedback programme delivered to 124 workers aged between 18-24, found that participants reported significantly lower levels of drinking than the control group one month later, with those classified as high-risk drinkers reporting the greatest decreases.¹⁶

Web-based interventions may not be suitable for all members of a workplace, however, in particular those who are computer illiterate or have low reading levels, and those with complex alcohol problems.¹⁷

4. Workplace environment

Some interventions target the workplace culture and environment, under the premise that workplaces may have certain characteristics that facilitate the development and maintenance

of undesirable drinking behaviours.¹⁸ A recent survey of more than 2,000 US salaried workers found nearly two thirds (63%) reported that they could easily bring alcohol into work, use alcohol while working, use alcohol during lunch and other breaks, or obtain alcohol at work. Moreover, during the preceding 12 months, 23% reported exposure to a co-worker who used or was impaired by alcohol during the workday, and around 7% reported exposure to a co-worker who approved of alcohol use or impairment during the workday.¹⁹

Research by Ames and colleagues²⁰ compared two work settings with distinctly different managerial cultures. The first setting, a traditional hierarchical US management design, was associated with more permissive norms regarding drinking before and during work shifts and breaks, and higher workplace drinking rates. By contrast, the second setting, based on a Japanese model which included greater enforcement of alcohol policies, predicted more conservative drinking norms and lower alcohol availability, thus facilitating better social control of alcohol problems, unlike the traditional setting which appeared to undermine such control.

Workplace culture has been shown to have the potential to positively influence drinking behaviour both at work and beyond the workplace. A study by Barrientos-Gutierrez et al. found that, in environments where drinking is discouraged, workers were 45% less likely to be heavy drinkers, 54% less likely to be frequent drinkers, and 69% less likely to drink at work than their counterparts in workplaces with the most relaxed attitudes to drinking.²¹



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Workplace alcohol policies

“Workplace alcohol policies can provide a framework for managing all alcohol related issues and should be seen as being central to the principles of a responsible, supportive and caring organisation.”

Welsh Government²²

Alcohol interventions are generally considered to be most beneficial when placed in the context of a workplace alcohol policy that includes drinking at the workplace, workplace discipline, recognition and help for those with alcohol-related problems, and alcohol education.²³

Such a policy provides a positive message that the organisation is committed to providing a safe, healthy and productive working environment for all employees, contractors, customers and visitors involved in its operation; that it wishes to promote a culture in which the problems associated with alcohol misuse are understood; and, that it wants to encourage and support employees who may have an alcohol misuse and/or an alcohol dependency problem by assisting them in seeking help and supporting them in overcoming alcohol related problems.

The nature, culture, size and structure of an organisation will determine the exact nature of the policy.²⁴ It is recommended that organisations involve and consult with managers, supervisors, employees and employee representatives/representatives of any recognised Trade Union both during the development and implementation of a new

alcohol policy, to ensure that it will work and is sustainable. Alongside involvement in the development of the policy, all employees should be offered education/awareness about responsible drinking and how alcohol use and misuse can impact on the workplace.

Giving managers the tools they need

Robust and regular training, in identifying and managing alcohol issues, is recommended for line managers and Human Resources staff as a matter of good practice. The Chartered Institute for Personnel Development survey of 505 Human Resources professionals in the UK, who work with organisations employing over a million people, has found that only one third (33%) of employers have formally trained their managers on alcohol and drug policy and management issues.²⁵

According to Jacobs and Schain,²⁶ supervisors and line managers should be reminded that their job is not to diagnose problems, but to monitor factors that may indicate underlying alcohol issues, such as absenteeism, performance problems, work relationships and behaviour at work.



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Programme For Change

The *Programme For Change* is a cost-effective workplace solution developed by Alcohol Concern to help employers to reduce alcohol related absenteeism and accidents, and improve productivity. It will also help to tackle alcohol-associated issues including drink driving, staff turnover, staff wellbeing and mental health. The programme supports organisations with the technology and tools to challenge unhealthy drinking cultures and promote workforce engagement.

Our approach is based on combining a range of evidence-based techniques and the latest technology to ensure that the programme engages and can be accessed by all staff.

We can also help your business with the following activities and tools:

- Development and dissemination of an alcohol policy
- Training for managers in IBA and on how to respond to alcohol related sickness absence, performance or accidents
- Health events and awareness raising days
- Employee screening
- Single use breath tests
- Intranet based information and advice
- Support for other health focused workplace initiatives

For information on the range of support we can offer, please contact Lauren Booker, Workplace Programme Manager at lbooker@alcoholconcern.org.uk or call 020 7566 9800.

Conclusion

The workplace is becoming widely recognised as an appropriate environment for identifying and treating alcohol misuse, and disseminating alcohol education. Researchers have identified a variety of useful workplace alcohol interventions that may be easily adopted by organisations to assist employees who may experience alcohol problems. Formal alcohol policies provide a framework for organisations to manage alcohol-related issues, and work best alongside regular training for line managers and Human Resources staff in how to monitor factors that may indicate underlying alcohol issues.



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Alcohol Concern

Alcohol Concern is the national charity on alcohol misuse campaigning for effective alcohol policy and improved services for people whose lives are affected by alcohol-related problems. We are working at a national level to influence alcohol policy and champion best practice locally. We support professionals and organisations by providing expertise, information and guidance. We are a challenging voice to the drinks industry and promote public awareness of alcohol issues.

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