

Guide to improving workplace cultures around alcohol

Whether it's used as a bonding tool, a reward, or as a way to try to cope with stress, alcohol often plays a central role in our working lives.

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Around 10 million of us are regularly drinking alcohol in ways that can harm our health and wellbeingⁱ – from headaches, sleepless nights and feeling ‘off’ the next day to poor productivity, absenteeism, and symptoms like anxiety and depression worsening over time.

But rethinking and modernising our workplace drinking cultures can create healthier environments that support employee wellbeing and improve productivity, confidence, safety and morale.

How does alcohol show up at work?

We typically spend large amounts of our adult lives working, so it's not surprising that our drinking and our working lives are all inter-connected in some way.

Across all types of industries and sectors – from offices to factories and shiftwork to frontline services – alcohol often plays a centre stage role but all too often we ignore the signs of how alcohol manifests in the workplace.

Regular alcohol use impacts our physical and mental health, contributing to issues like sleeplessness, anxiety, and depression. In the workplace, this translates into lower productivity, increased absenteeism, and greater safety risks. Additionally, alcohol-centric environments can alienate non-drinkers and create pressures that exacerbate harmful drinking habits. With alcohol-related presenteeism and absenteeism costing the UK economy over £3.96 billion annually,ⁱⁱ addressing this issue is crucial.

Modernising workplace drinking cultures

Workplace cultures that put people, rather than alcohol, at the centre of things can lead to improved productivity, motivation and morale.

Here are five practical ways to foster healthier attitudes towards alcohol in your workplace:

- 1. Conduct a cultural audit** – Start by examining how alcohol features in your workplace. Consider whether the environment is inclusive for non-drinkers. Are social events centred around alcohol? Do jokes or attitudes celebrate getting drunk? A cultural audit can help identify areas for improvement, ensuring your workplace feels welcoming to all.
- 2. Educate your employees** – Alcohol is everywhere. Yet the myths around drinking persist and can cloud our judgement, with many employees unaware of how regular drinking impacts health and wellbeing, and productivity. Awareness sessions on the true impacts of alcohol can be eye-opening. Alcohol Change UK offers a range of awareness training courses, inspiring healthier, more informed drinking choices.
- 3. Train your managers** – Managers are key to identifying and addressing alcohol-related challenges at work. Training will equip managers with the skills to recognise early warning signs, open conversations about alcohol empathetically and proactively, and support employees effectively.

Alcohol Change UK is the leader in alcohol-related workplace training, offering a variety of expert-led courses designed to empower your managers with the skills they need. To learn more or get started, use the contact information provided at the end of this leaflet.

4. **Make alcohol part of your wellbeing agenda**

– Health and mental wellbeing, safety, relationships – alcohol intersects with all of these. Include it in your workplace's broader wellbeing initiatives. Campaigns like Alcohol Awareness Week or the Dry January® challenge offer excellent opportunities to start the conversation. With tools like Alcohol Change UK's free Try Dry® app supporting employees in cutting back.

5. **Be inclusive**

– Not everyone drinks alcohol – whether for religious beliefs, health reasons, or personal preferences. Ensure everyone feels included by offering non-alcoholic options at events and avoid giving alcohol as a prize or reward. Call out any sober shaming and stay accountable. It's important to normalise choice and not scrutinise anyone's decision to drink or not drink.

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Spotting the signs of alcohol harm at work

Alcohol's impact isn't always obvious. But there are signs you can look out for:

- **In-person employees** may arrive late, take longer breaks, or display irritability and erratic behaviour, and have had concerns raised about them by colleagues.
- **Remote workers** might miss meetings or deadlines, disengage from meetings, or seem distracted, and use camera-off mode during video calls.

Leading from the top

Leadership plays a key role in shaping workplace cultures. When managers model healthy behaviours and open communication, it encourages employees to seek help without fear of judgement. Regular check-ins and genuine concern for employee wellbeing can foster trust and provide early intervention opportunities.

How to approach conversations about alcohol

- Choose a private and comfortable setting to ensure confidentiality.
- Use a non-judgmental tone and start by expressing concern for the employee's wellbeing.
- Stick to observable facts, such as specific performance or behaviour issues.
- Listen actively and empathetically, keeping the conversation professional and supportive.
- Agree next steps so everyone is clear on what's expected and follow up as needed with ongoing support.

Developing a comprehensive alcohol policy

A robust alcohol policy is the foundation for a healthier workplace culture. It should include:

- Clear guidelines on alcohol use in the workplace.
- Confidential support mechanisms for employees struggling with alcohol.
- Training for managers to implement the policy effectively and empathetically.

Policies are most effective when supported by continuous communication and encouragement for employees to seek help. Building a culture of trust and transparency ensures the policy is seen as a resource rather than a punishment.

Benefits of change

By addressing workplace cultures around alcohol, organisations can achieve:

- Improved employee health and wellbeing.
- Enhanced productivity and reduced absenteeism.
- Safer work environments.
- Cost savings through greater efficiency and reduced turnover.

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Resources and support

As experts in alcohol-related training, Alcohol Change UK provides evidence-based tools and training to support healthier workplace cultures. Services include tailored manager training, cultural audits, and awareness campaigns. For more information, contact Alcohol Change UK at **020 3907 8480** or **training@alcoholchange.org.uk**.

A proactive approach to modernising workplace attitudes towards alcohol benefits employees and organisations alike. By fostering inclusivity, providing education, and supporting employees in need, managers and HR leaders can create a safer, healthier, and more productive environment for everyone.

References:

- UK Parliament (2023). Alcohol treatment services: House of Commons Committee report, Fifty-Fourth Report of Session 2022–23
- Movendi International (2024). UK: New Figures Reveal Massive Costs of Alcohol Harm

Find out more at **www.alcoholchange.org.uk**

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Registered charity number 1140287. Company limited by guarantee in England and Wales number 7462605.