ALCOHOL PROBLEMS IN THE WORKPLACE

Alcohol misuse is a major issue affecting employers and employees in the UK. Problems created in the workplace as a result of alcohol include:

- **Absenteeism**, costing an estimated £2 billion a year to industry is strongly related to occasional excessive or inappropriate drinking.
- Performance and productivity are affected by employees underperforming due to the influence of drink or being hungover. It may take longer than one day to recover from a heavy binge.
- Accidents with alcohol as a contributory factor are estimated to comprise 20-25% of all workplace accidents. With drinking impairing concentration, judgement and co-ordination, accidents can affect the drinker and those around them. Employers have legal responsibilities regarding the safety of employees and, where relevant, the general public.
- The loss of staff and costs of recruitment escalate when employers need to replace experienced and trained staff. It is usually more effective to retain existing staff, if possible, by supporting them in dealing with their problems than to incur the cost of recruiting and training new staff.

**Underlying reasons**

Alcohol problems sometimes stem from an attempt to cope with underlying problems such as stress, relationship difficulties or depression. The result can often be that these problems are then exacerbated by drinking and the alcohol use itself becomes a problem.

In the case of an employee experiencing an alcohol problem, this could also be linked to workplace stress or an organisational culture that encourages or tolerates heavy drinking. Employees often use drinking as a way of socialising or bonding whilst some employers traditionally use or include drinking in the process of doing business, e.g. via working lunches.

**Drinking & high risk occupations**

Alcohol Concern has reported that statistically, certain occupations show a higher incidence of alcohol-related deaths than others. Obvious reasons for higher levels of drinking may include the ready availability of alcohol, high levels of occupational stress or as in some working cultures, social pressure to drink.

Those occupational sectors reporting the highest consumption of more than 14 (for women) or 21 (for men) units of alcohol per week (occupation with the highest level first) were:

- **Women**: security, arts & sport, professional (other), professional (science), managerial, clerical, transport.
- **Men**: construction, arts & sport, professional (other), assembly workers, metal & electrical, managerial.

Men from any level or income group may develop alcohol problems, though those earning under £100 or over £500 weekly appear slightly more vulnerable. Among women, those working full-time in professional or managerial posts are most likely to develop problems.
The legal situation

• The **Health and Safety at Work Act 1974** places a duty on employers to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their employees. They must ensure that employees do not injure themselves or endanger the public or colleagues. This has particular relevance to alcohol and the use of machinery or vehicles.

• The **Road Traffic Act 1988** provides that any person driving, or attempting to drive, a motor vehicle whilst unfit to drive through alcohol use can be prosecuted under this act. This includes driving as part of work related duties.

• The **Transport and Works Act 1992** states that it is a criminal offence for certain employees to be unfit through alcohol use whilst working on transport systems such as railways. The operators of the system would be liable if they had been negligent in their duty to prevent the offence occurring.

• Under the **Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1992** employers have a duty to assess the risks to the health and safety of their employees. Knowingly allowing an employee to continue working when affected by alcohol and where their behaviour places the employee or other colleagues at risk could make an employer liable to prosecution. Employees should also take reasonable care of themselves and others who could be affected by their actions at work.

Workplace alcohol policies

Alcohol policies are fundamental in helping to tackle alcohol-related problems at work. Alcohol problems in the workplace should be viewed as a health issue, and an alcohol policy should be located in, or linked to one or more of an organisation’s procedures on managing health and safety as well as personnel and/or general management issues.

An alcohol policy will be more successful if supported by a programme of training that raises alcohol awareness and supports managers in its application. **Employers often have a parallel or combined policy to address drug misuse.**

Key principles of an alcohol policy for the workplace

An effective workplace alcohol policy should:

• clarify that an employer has a legitimate interest in an employee’s life outside work when it affects their own or others’ performance, health or safety;

• regard an alcohol problem as a health problem rather than being an immediate cause for discipline or dismissal;

• be a clear statement of intent agreed by employers and trade union representatives;

• be clearly understood by and apply equally to everyone in an organisation;

• clearly delineate responsibility and give guidance to managers on procedures to follow, signalling when disciplinary action, if appropriate, should be instigated;

• establish procedures for referring an employee with alcohol problems to in-house support or outside specialist services;

• clarify rules of confidentiality in order to encourage staff or colleagues to come forward;

• ensure managers receive appropriate training to implement the policy;

• be publicised at regular intervals to staff; and

• be reviewed regularly, probably every 12 months.

Helping employees with alcohol problems

There can be signs suggestive of alcohol related problems, although care should be taken as these could be due to underlying health problems such as stress or depression. Signs of possible alcohol problems in an employee may include:
• **Work performance**, including missed appointments or deadlines, increased error rate, poor concentration, unreliability or an inability to remember instructions.

• **Attendance**, including lateness in the mornings or after lunch, unauthorised leave, patterns of absence (e.g. after weekends), recurring causes of absence.

• **Conduct**, such as withdrawal, depression, anxiety, poor co-operation, mood changes, uncharacteristic behaviour, accidents, alcohol on the breath, customer complaints.

It is important to keep in mind that an employee's alcohol use can often affect other staff, either by increasing their workload or their stress levels as a result of trying to cover up for a colleague who is drinking inappropriately or to excess.

Alcohol problems should be regarded primarily as health issues rather than an immediate cause for discipline and negotiators should encourage employers to reflect this in any workplace policy. This will encourage staff with problems to come forward and decrease the likelihood of collusion by colleagues not wishing to 'get someone into trouble'.

**Getting specialist help**

Some larger employers or blue chip companies will have an occupational health department or employee assistance programme that may include an in-house counselling service with expertise in alcohol problems. Alternatively, individuals might be encouraged to approach their GP or seek to be referred to a community alcohol service, or attend Alcoholics Anonymous, an abstinence-based self-help group. In-patient detoxification and residential treatment facilities may also be available although normally these would be through referral following a full assessment.

**Testing**

Testing employees or potential employees for alcohol remains controversial, raising both industrial relations and civil liberties issues.

Whilst it is reasonable to expect employees to be unimpaired by alcohol whilst at work, it could be argued that requiring an employee to undergo a test ‘without cause’ (randomly or without specific evidence that they are impaired) is unfair and intrusive. In this context, the Data Protection Act and the Human Rights Act, particularly Article 8 concerning an individual's right to privacy, have implications for employers.

Under UK law, employers' have a responsibility to demonstrate ‘due diligence’ (take reasonable care) to prevent an offence if an employee's ability to work safely is impaired. This need to actively prevent alcohol or drug-related accidents has led companies in the transport sector to introduce testing to prevent employees' substance use in the workplace. Industries with staff in 'safety critical' roles, using machinery for instance, do test employees for alcohol.

**Methods of testing**

Alcohol testing indicates whether an individual is under the influence at that time. Drug testing differs, sometimes showing traces of drugs used in the past but not confirming impairment at the time of testing. Alcohol use can be tested in several ways:

- **Breath testing** - A 'breathalyser' measures the level of alcohol in the breath. This is both convenient and inexpensive.

- **Blood testing** - The most accurate measure of alcohol in the body is by means of a blood test although this is more invasive than a breath test. It is often inappropriate in a workplace setting due to lack of staff suitably trained to take samples.

Screening or testing to detect alcohol problems can be used in a variety of ways:

- **Recruitment** - screening usually refers to testing or assessing the health of
potential employees during the recruitment process.

- **Routine testing** - is done at specified times, gives a clear message that it is not acceptable to be affected by alcohol when working, and might be used in situations where employees are in ‘safety critical’ posts, such as operating public transport or machinery. Use in situations that are not safety critical will often cause resentment among employees and have human rights implications.

- **Random testing** - or unannounced testing is used as a deterrent to identify previously undetected alcohol misuse. As with routine testing, use in situations that are not safety critical will cause feelings of resentment amongst employees and have human rights implications.

- **‘With cause’ and post-incident testing** - might be used if a manager has reason to believe that an employee has been drinking, by their behaviour or smelling of alcohol, for instance. After an incident at work, such as an accident, it can be a part of the post-incident investigation.

**Drink and work - a dangerous cocktail**

The recent report entitled *A potent cocktail* was the TUC’s response to a wide-ranging trawl being undertaken by the Cabinet Office and the Department of Health for ideas on how to tackle the issue of alcohol in the workplace.

To illustrate the extent of the problem, the TUC submission refers to a recent Alcohol Concern survey which showed that almost two-thirds of employers (60%) were experiencing problems as a result of staff boozing.

As not enough is understood about the effects of drink on the workplace, the TUC is calling on the government to fund more research into what is becoming a growing problem. It also points to an increase in factors such as stress, bullying, long hours, working away from home and an office culture which can all lead to individual workers consuming more alcohol than is good for them.

*A potent cocktail* suggests a number of ways that the government, employers and unions might tackle the drink/work issue:

- The government should fund research looking at the extent of the misuse of alcohol by individuals at work, its effect on the workplace and its cost to the nation. The government could also provide financial incentives for those employers offering counselling and other types of employee assistance programmes to encourage more workers to come forward and admit or acknowledge their alcohol problems.

- Employers who don't have alcohol policies should draw them up in consultation with unions in the workplace. Policies should cover such topics as tackling the causes of excessive drinking, confidentiality, counselling, screening, testing and occupational health services.

**Further Information**

Much of this brief was provided by Alcohol Concern, the national voluntary agency dealing with alcohol misuse. Alcohol Concern can be contacted at their head office: Waterbridge House, 32-36 Loman Street, London, SE1 0EE, Telephone: 020 7928 7377 or their web site at [www.alcoholconcern.org.uk](http://www.alcoholconcern.org.uk).

Useful information can also be obtained from the TUC, Congress House, Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3LS - 020 7636 4030. The TUC produces a range of Health and Safety publications, which can be ordered from its publications department. It also has a one stop health and safety shop for trade unionists which is a useful starting point with a wealth of information and links on H & S at work via [www.tuc.org.uk/h_and_s/index.cfm](http://www.tuc.org.uk/h_and_s/index.cfm).