

# Alcohol and the workplace?

## The importance of early intervention and workplace policies in reducing the health and business impact of alcohol misuse

*This document sets out the case for employers to recognise alcohol as an important workplace health issue by outlining:*

- *The key costs and health issues associated with alcohol misuse*
- *What employers can do to reduce these impacts*
- *What an effective alcohol workplace approach might include*

### Background

Alcohol misuse has a major impact in the workplace and has been estimated to cost the UK economy up to £6.4 billion per year – double the cost to the NHS. Around one in four<sup>1</sup> employees are drinking at a level that is likely to contribute to such costs, which are mainly attributed to alcohol-related absenteeism, lost productivity and lost working days due to alcohol-related ill health.

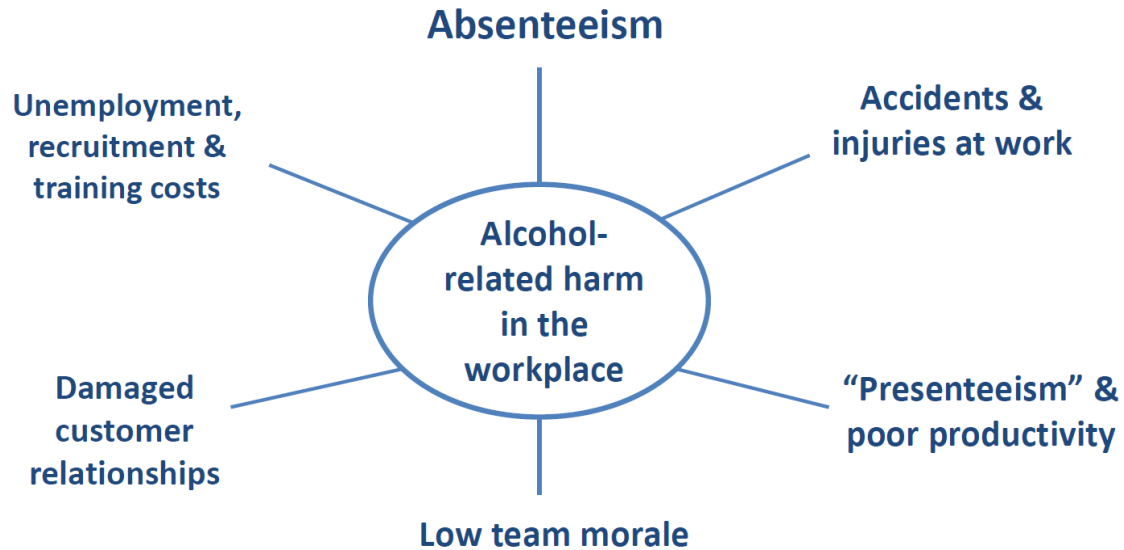


Figure 1: The impacts of alcohol misuse on the workplace totalling £6.4 billion per year<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Based on national prevalence rates (GHS) showing that 24% of adults drink at increasing or higher risk levels. Workplace studies indicate similar prevalence rates.

<sup>2</sup> *Alcohol Misuse: how much does it cost?* Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit 2003

## Why should organisations act?

Most organisations are yet to fully recognise the significant benefits that can be made by improving employee's health and wellbeing – benefits both to the individuals themselves and the direct and indirect business benefits. Dame Carol Black's 2008 review *'Working for a healthier tomorrow'* found that although there was strong support for workplace initiatives to improve health and wellbeing at work, a significant shift in attitudes, behaviours and practices was required. This is particularly true for alcohol where the huge health and productivity burden has received little attention.

Put simply, a comprehensive approach to helping employees to recognise and reduce alcohol misuse is likely to positively impact health and well-being and thereby on business effectiveness by:

- Reducing levels of absenteeism
- Increasing productivity
- Preventing the early loss of skilled employees due to chronic ill health

In addition, further business impacts can be reduced such as alcohol-related accidents or injuries, damaged customer relationships or team morale. Addressing these issues can therefore result in significant cost savings to employers, individuals and the wider economy.

Every year in England it is estimated that:

- 17.3 million working days are lost due to alcohol
- Absenteeism due to alcohol costs employers £1.8 billion
- Using a modelled calculation<sup>3</sup>, alcohol-related harm costs an average organisation with 200 employees around £37,634 per annum

It is important to remember these costs are not all incurred by dependent drinkers. Many employees may consider their drinking 'normal' without realising their drinking may be impacting on their health or work.

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<sup>3</sup> Calculation from an 'Alcohol cost to employers tool' developed by [Improving Health & Wellbeing UK](#)

## **The potential for the workplace to affect levels of alcohol misuse**

Employers must also recognise that the work environment itself can contribute to levels of employees' alcohol misuse. Common workplace factors that may contribute to levels of alcohol misuse may include:

- Stress caused by high workloads or periods of change
- Pressures of dealing with a difficult client group or distressing situations
- Workplace environments or social activities which may be permissive or even encouraging of alcohol misuse

## **What can organisations do?**

Organisations can reduce and prevent the costly impact of alcohol misuse by adopting a holistic approach to improving employee health and wellbeing, including specific action to prevent and reduce costs of alcohol misuse. An effective approach should include:

- Measures to ensure employees have a good level of alcohol awareness including: knowledge of typical alcohol unit content in a variety of common drinks; an understanding of recommended guidelines; the risks of drinking above these and; where to get further help and information
- Staff in appropriate roles that are suitably trained and equipped to deliver evidence based 'Identification and Brief Advice' (IBA). Occupational Health roles are particularly well placed to deliver IBA but staff in employee assistance roles, Union Representatives or other roles may also be well placed
- A clear recognition and understanding among managers of the importance of preventing alcohol misuse through promoting a healthy workplace. Although not all managers will be ideally placed to directly deliver IBA, most can readily provide crucial alcohol-related information, resources and support to their staff
- A health and wellbeing strategy that recognises environmental and other determinants likely to affect employee's alcohol use, and engenders a range of activities and structures to promote physical and mental health
- A suitable workplace alcohol policy that clearly sets guidelines for managers and staff on a range of alcohol-related areas including managing dependence as well as supporting approaches to improve health and wellbeing

- Senior organisational commitment to the alcohol workplace policy and health and wellbeing objectives

## **‘Prevention is better than cure’ – the importance of early intervention**

When considering the overall impact of alcohol misuse, of key importance is remembering that many alcohol ‘problems’ are not caused by those with alcohol dependence. Whilst around 4% of adults have some level of alcohol dependence, around 1 in 3 men and 1 in 6 women (18% of adults) are drinking at a level that may be putting their health at risk. This far larger number of non-dependent but ‘at-risk’ drinkers contributes significantly to total alcohol-related accidents, injury, poor productivity and associated costs.

***Effective workplace approaches will engage, inform and support the larger group of ‘at-risk’ drinkers, as well as a smaller number who may be alcohol dependent.***

It is simpler and more cost-effective to reduce alcohol harm among this larger group of non-dependent drinkers. ‘Identification’ of at-risk drinkers, followed by simple ‘Brief Advice’ (IBA) is a simple yet highly effective health behaviour intervention, supported by an extensive evidence base and promoted by the NHS, Department of Health, NICE and World Health Organization.

## **A place for ‘Identification and Brief Advice’ (IBA) at work?**

IBA is the most cost-effective behaviour change intervention – a questionnaire accurately identifies levels of health risk from an individual’s drinking behaviour and delivering just a few minutes of structured brief advice can result in significant reductions. The aim of IBA is simply to inform people about their level of risk from their alcohol use and to provide them with information to increase their understanding of units, guidelines and simple strategies to cut down.

Most people want to be in good health and to make healthy choices, but often they are unaware of the effect that their alcohol use may be having. The fact is that when people are given clear information in a simple structured way, many of them will reduce their drinking back to levels where the health risk is minimal. In fact the term “brief advice” is something of a misnomer - rather than advice, IBA is really information-giving, coupled with motivational questions which encourage the recipient to make healthier choices for themselves.

Contrary to many people’s natural fears, delivering IBA does not tend to trigger defensiveness in those drinking at risky levels, especially when delivered with the

appropriate skills. Non-dependent but 'at-risk' drinkers will commonly be receptive to appropriate information. IBA is not about identifying or labelling a 'problem' – many drinkers are simply not aware of units or the guidelines and associated risks from drinking above these. Training to deliver IBA typically takes less than a day and the interventions itself takes as little as 5-10 minutes to deliver. IBA is being increasingly delivered across a range of health and social care settings, but its role in the workplace has not yet been well established.

A recent research project has explored the feasibility of delivering IBA within various workplace settings. It found that, although delivery of full IBA does not appear an appropriate part of some roles, some post holders are suitably receptive to delivering it. Previous research also backs the workplace as an ideal setting for the delivery of such interventions. In particular, health care or support roles such as Occupational Health, employee support or union representatives will be well placed to deliver IBA. Other roles, particularly managerial or supervisory roles may be more readily able to deliver less formal approaches, such as providing information or self-help resources.

## **The legal position and employer's responsibilities**

### **Legal requirements**

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, employers have a duty 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. Similarly, employees are required to take reasonable care of themselves and others who could be affected by their actions at work.

The Road Traffic Act 1988 makes it illegal for any person to drive or attempt to drive a motor vehicle while unfit to drive through the use of a substance. This includes prescribed and over-the-counter medication, as well as illegal drugs and alcohol.

### **Managing staff whose alcohol use may be affecting their health or work**

Knowingly allowing an employee to continue working if affected by alcohol or drugs, when their behaviour places the safety of colleagues or clients at risk could make the employer liable to prosecution. Managers also have the responsibility to ensure the appropriate performance, capability and conduct of their staff. If alcohol misuse is impacting on these, a manager will be expected to intervene accordingly.

Managers in organisations with good alcohol workplace policies will be more likely and more confident to appropriately respond to or address such issues. It is important to note that many employers have successfully worked to support employees to overcome alcohol problems.

## Alcohol and drug testing

Testing or screening samples (usually breath, saliva, urine or blood) is a way of detecting alcohol or drug use by employees or potential employees. This has always been a sensitive issue, raising human rights and industrial relations questions. It is suggested that testing does not improve productivity and safety in the workplace (TUC, 2001).

Further implications should also be carefully assessed by an employer considering introducing testing. Particularly, testing could only be required from an employee where it was incorporated within their contract. Once in place, testing itself will be unable to directly establish whether drug or alcohol use specifically impaired an employee's work. The costs of an accurate testing programme are also likely to be considerable.

Drug and alcohol testing may be a suitable or important approach for safety-critical workplaces. For other organisations however, testing should not be viewed as the solution to drug and alcohol problems in the workplace; in fact the risks and implications may be counter-productive. If testing is used, it should be part of a broader workplace policy which includes actions to support employees who may have problems. A programme of education and training to help employees and employers prevent drug or alcohol issues developing should also be implemented, endorsed by all sectors of the workforce and senior management.

## Alcohol workplace policies

A survey undertaken by Alcohol Concern showed that almost two-thirds of employers (60%) were experiencing problems as a result of staff drinking. A separate Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development survey found that a large number of employers (43%) did not have any form of alcohol policy and most (84%) did not run health awareness programmes for their staff.

The objectives of a workplace alcohol policy should seek to ensure that:

- All staff are clear about what the organisation does and does not find acceptable in relation to alcohol use (e.g. is it acceptable to drink at lunchtime or come to work with a hangover?).
- The organisation has structures in place to deal with employees' alcohol problems when they arise, with a clear expectation of offering support before disciplinary action is necessary

- Staff confidence in seeking help for alcohol problems is increased
- Opportunities arise for raising awareness of alcohol issues among staff, including opportunities for effective interventions such as IBA
- The range of workplace factors which may be increasing alcohol misuse are addressed, whether by recognising the impact of stressful periods or considering drinking attitudes and cultures

## Conclusion

Many employers will be unaware of the effects that employees' alcohol use may be having on their organisation and the health of its most important assets. In fact in some cases employers will be implicit in creating a culture where alcohol misuse is tacitly encouraged. Whilst within the context of current or past 'drinking cultures' this may appear perfectly normal, any objective analysis will clearly reveal it is clearly not healthy.

Having an effective workplace alcohol policy and ensuring that staff are alcohol-aware isn't draconian, nor is it "nannying". Responsible employers support their staff in looking after their health and wellbeing, not just for the individual's benefit, but because at the end of the day it also makes good business sense.

### With special thanks to:

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London Regional Public Health Group

Middlesex University Drug and Alcohol Research Centre

Improving Health and Wellbeing UK ([www.improvinghealthandwellbeing.org](http://www.improvinghealthandwellbeing.org))

## Information and resources

### Alcohol specific

- *Don't mix it: A guide for employers on alcohol at work* - Health and Safety Executive (HSE) 2009 <http://www.hse.gov.uk/>
- *Improving Health and Well being UK* - alcohol calculator and pages: [www.improvinghealthandwellbeing.org/serviceareas/workplace-change/](http://www.improvinghealthandwellbeing.org/serviceareas/workplace-change/)
- *Alcohol and the workplace* - Institute of Alcohol Studies factsheet. Available from [www.ias.org.uk](http://www.ias.org.uk)
- *Alcohol and the workplace* - Alcohol Concern Factsheet, September 2009. Available from [www.alcoholconcern.org.uk](http://www.alcoholconcern.org.uk)
- Identification and Brief Advice (IBA) resources and learning – visit [www.alcohollearningcentre.org](http://www.alcohollearningcentre.org) and locate IBA under topics
- Drinkline 0800 917 82 82 – 24 hour advice and information line for those concerned about their or someone else's drinking

### Workplace health and well being

- Health for Work adviceline: 0800 0 77 88 44 [www.health4work.nhs.uk](http://www.health4work.nhs.uk)
- Workplace Well-Being Tool, developed by the Department for Work and Pensions Health Work Well Being initiative Visit [www.dwp.gov.uk/health-work-and-well-being/](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/health-work-and-well-being/)
- *Wellbeing at work: how to manage workplace wellness to boost your staff and business performance* - A Director's Guide published by the Institute of Directors (IoD) 2006 [www.iod.com](http://www.iod.com)

### Further reading

- *North London Alcohol Hub Identification and Brief Advice (IBA) workplace pilot research: A feasibility study into delivering IBA within workplace settings.* B. Thom, M. Bayley, F. Annand, R. Herring, K. Stone, 2011
- *'Working for a healthier tomorrow'* Dame Carol Black's 2008 workplace health review
- *'Alcohol use disorders: preventing harmful drinking'* NICE PH24

## Alcohol workplace policy checklist

An effective alcohol policy should:

- ✓ be a clear statement, which sets out an organisation's policy on what is acceptable/unacceptable in terms of alcohol use in relation to the workplace and its procedure for dealing with alcohol use that affects employees in the workplace or employer's business
- ✓ emphasise that an alcohol problem should be seen as a health issue, unless an individual's work is affected
- ✓ apply to everyone in the organisation, including temporary staff and subcontracted staff (for whom details of the policy will need to be included in their contracts)
- ✓ clarify confidentiality to encourage staff to discuss their alcohol use as part of health interventions such as 'Identification and Brief Advice'
- ✓ delineate responsibility and give guidance to managers about when disciplinary or capability procedures should be started
- ✓ be agreed by employers and relevant trade unions or staff representatives
- ✓ be supported by a programme of training that raises awareness about alcohol as a health and wellbeing issue and its potential impact in the workplace
- ✓ Ensure that staff who are well placed to deliver IBA do so and are provided with appropriate training and resources
- ✓ be supported by training for managers and personnel on responding effectively to alcohol problems and referral processes for those with more serious problems
- ✓ establish referral procedures for in-house or local counselling and treatment services for those who may be alcohol dependent
- ✓ recognise that relapsing back into alcohol misuse after treatment can be common, therefore recovery may be a long or even continual process
- ✓ be linked with other policies and procedures (e.g. dealing with violent or aggressive individuals, health and safety, and confidentiality)