



Not such a rosé picture

Employers that want to introduce, update or enforce an alcohol policy must tackle an array of sensitive questions, as Hashi Syedain explains

Publication date: 26 February 2009
Source: People Management magazine
Page: 26

[Forward to a colleague](#)

[Email a letter to the editor](#)

[Discuss this article in the CIPD communities](#)

Conversations about absence or poor performance are never pleasant to initiate. Add in an additional awkwardness – say, an employee who may be drinking too much – and many managers will feel way out of their depth. Yet problem drinking is something that employers cannot afford to ignore.

Just over a quarter of the UK population (26 per cent) drinks more than is recommended by the NHS's guidelines and some 17 million working days a year are lost to alcohol-related sickness, according to government figures.

On top of that come the pressures of recession. "High anxiety and drinking a lot feed each other," says Sally Williams, an addiction specialist with Triage Healthcare and a recovering alcoholic herself.

Andrew Kinder, a chartered psychologist at employee assistance programme and occupational health provider Atos, adds: "We've seen a big increase in people calling for help, especially with debt problems. In the last three months of 2008, calls on debt were up by 129 per cent compared with the same time the year before. We know there's a direct relationship between debt and mental health problems and that people with depression or anxiety are more likely to drink more."

Despite the alarming figures – and a change in culture over the past two decades that has made lunchtime drinking less common – many organisations still do not have alcohol policies.

"We are not doing well at all with this," says Ben Willmott, CIPD adviser, employee relations. "This is about line management competence and managing performance. We're not good at having conversations around absence. Health and lifestyle are seen as sensitive issues."

Willmott believes that, as well as putting in place formal alcohol policies, employers could play a more active role by encouraging sensible drinking generally as part of a focus on health and well-being.

Resource pack

"The drinking culture in the UK is unacceptable and it is in employers' interests to help people to make better decisions," he says. Next month the CIPD will be launching an online resource pack for employers, in conjunction with the Department of Health, to encourage staff to understand alcohol units, know their safe drinking limits and be aware of the dangers of drinking too much.

Williams believes that this kind of education is vital. "A lot of big companies have employee assistance programmes but, with alcohol, they are dealing with the end result. We should be talking to the workforce earlier, informing people of the physical and mental effects of alcohol."

Yet alcohol remains a sensitive subject in the workplace. Safety-critical industries such as railways or airlines are explicit about alcohol consumption during or before working hours.

Move outside this group, however, and even if organisations have an alcohol policy, it may be little used.

"Most organisations we work with have a policy. But whether it's effective, monitored and evaluated is an entirely different matter," says Kinder.

Employers that do introduce or revisit an alcohol policy often do so as part of a wider range of initiatives on health and safety or employee well-being. The manufacturing company where Helen Signal (not her real name) works as HR business partner revamped its alcohol policy two years ago. She explains: "There was a small piece in the employee handbook about alcohol but nothing you could enforce. We wanted to strengthen it from a health and safety point of view, because this is a manufacturing site. We were also developing our well-being policy and relaunching the employee assistance programme."

An additional consideration was temptation on the doorstep – in the form of a pub located just outside the factory.

One important decision the company made was to instigate the same rules for all staff, regardless of whether they were based in the factory or office. "We don't allow drinking, even at lunchtime," says Signal. "That was a change for the office-based staff, but we explained that we wanted a single rule for everybody."

Support

The policy was well publicised to all staff, a series of frequently asked questions was drafted in conjunction with the consultative council and all line managers were given training. It includes a provision for testing employees if there is reason to believe they have been drinking – and support via the employee assistance programme and occupational health for anyone who comes forward with an alcohol problem.

So far, Signal has had only one incident of testing, in the early days of the new policy, when colleagues repeatedly smelt alcohol on someone's breath. The individual concerned was called in and given an opportunity to say if they had a drink problem, but they did not declare one. A positive alcohol test led to disciplinary action and they subsequently left.

"The action we take depends on the attitude of the individual," says Signal. More recently, for example, another individual came forward with a drink problem and was referred to the employee assistance programme and occupational health for advice and support.

West Yorkshire Probation Service is at an earlier stage of updating its alcohol policies. Although it does have an alcohol policy, it is both outdated and little known, admits HR director Ian Brandwood.

"We had to root around to find it and it says things like 'staff are expected to turn up in a fit state' and 'drinking at lunchtime is discouraged'," he says.

Stressful environments

Recently, the organisation has done a lot of work on stress and wants to find out whether alcohol is a problem. It has started by testing the CIPD/Department of Health resource pack to help kickstart a conversation about alcohol within the workforce.

"Probation officers have to deliver a service to offenders in difficult, stressful environments," says Brandwood. "There is anecdotal evidence that some are using alcohol as a crutch."

The organisation's healthcare provider says that alcohol consumption among staff is "higher than desirable". Absence rates, at nine to 10 days a year, are also relatively high, although lower than is the case for many of the UK's other probation services.

"The days of Friday/Monday sick days are long since gone," says Brandwood. "But a significant amount of sickness is short term, which raises the question of whether there are other contributing factors as well as the ones that are being reported."

Neil James, head of workplace sales at drug and alcohol testing provider Concateno, advises companies to be explicit about everything in their alcohol policy – such as whether different rules will apply to different roles, whether alcohol is allowed at social functions or for client entertaining, and what level of sign-off is required.

Universal

"One of the things that companies need to think about carefully is senior managers, who may routinely drink at certain meetings or events. What is important is that employees feel that a policy is universal and applies to everyone," he says. "Sometimes, in organisations that do random testing, the senior managers will want us to test them early on, so that staff can see they are taking the policy seriously."

Pam Whyteleaf, a manager at employee assistance programme provider AXA ICAS, adds that she recalls being contacted by an employee for advice after a new manager arrived and banned the hitherto standard practice of bringing in a bottle of wine to celebrate birthdays. The employee pointed out that senior managers had alcohol at their meetings.

"We advised the employee to go back to the organisation and find out if there was an alcohol policy. There wasn't, so we then advised them to raise the issue at the employee forum," says Whyteleaf. "Something like this is not an individual or departmental issue, it has to be organisation-wide."

An alcoholic's story

People who are drinking too much often have very good ways of hiding the fact – from themselves as well as others. Susan, a recovering alcoholic who has not had a drink for five years, used to be a successful saleswoman.

"A lot of people think they don't have a problem because they are not drinking first thing in the morning," she says. "But by 4pm, the thought is in their head and they are becoming increasingly preoccupied with drinking, wondering who will be going out that evening and which pub they'll be going to.

"I used to go to my GP and say: 'By 5pm, I'm feeling really shaky.' He prescribed beta-blockers, saying it was stress. Actually, it was withdrawal symptoms from the alcohol."

Susan used to drink herself into a stupor every evening. In the day, she always carried mouthwash in her briefcase and constantly chewed gum. She was eventually convicted of drink-driving after still being over the limit the day after a heavy session. She lost her licence and her job.

"By that point, I knew I had a drink problem," she says. "But I couldn't have told my employer because I'd have been sacked on the spot. If I'd been in a more supportive environment I could have accessed help earlier on.

"There's such a huge stigma in the workplace attached to alcohol problems – telling someone can be like sticking your head in the guillotine and waiting for the blade to come down."

What are you drinking?

- One UK unit is 10ml pure alcohol.
- A large glass of wine (250ml of 12 per cent) contains three units.
- A small double spirits measure (50ml) contains two units.
- A pint of beer (3.6 per cent, alcohol by volume) contains two units.
- Women shouldn't regularly drink more than 2-3 units a day.
- Men shouldn't regularly drink more than 3-4 units a day.

Further Info

The CIPD and the Department of Health are launching [an online resource pack](#) next month. The pack, part of the government's *Know Your Limits* campaign, is designed for companies of all sizes and includes a "viral" game to test employees' knowledge of alcohol units.