

Addressing Substance Abuse in the Remote Workplace

By Dom Nicastro - Feb 05, 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased concerns about employee well-being, mental health and substance abuse.

The National Safety Council (NSC) reported [spikes in fatal opioid overdoses](#) last year and ongoing concern about mental illness or substance use disorders in connection with COVID-19. The council called on employers to prioritize employee stress and emotional and mental health, both now and as employees return to traditional work environments.

"Extended social isolation can lead to the development of substance use disorders," NSC officials said. "Those with previous substance use disorders are even more vulnerable due to decreased accessibility to treatment, recovery supports and harm reduction services, all a result of the pandemic."

It all adds up to new territory for organizational leaders. Yes, HR leaders are trained to address substance abuse in the workplace, and employee assistance programs (EAPs) often include resources to help employees cope. The federal government even provides resources. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) [workplace toolkit](#) for employers provides tools and techniques to gain a better understanding of how substance abuse may be impacting the workplace or employees. It includes survey questionnaires, administrative data, statistical analyses as well as tips on observations, in-depth interviews and focus groups to identify behavior.

But no government organization or HR association put out a Workplace Substance Abuse Pandemic Playbook. COVID-19 caught the entire workplace off-guard, from a technology point of view but also a human and emotional standpoint.

The Toll the Pandemic Has Taken

Since March 2020, 49% of employees reported less energy for non-work activities, 42% said they've had less interest in socializing with friends, 42% had more trouble sleeping at night and 33% reported more alcohol or substance use than usual, according to a [report from employee experience platform provider Limeade](#).

The New York University School of Public Health reported in January 2021 that 29% of 5,850 survey respondents have [increased their alcohol use during the pandemic](#). Further, people with depression were 64% more likely to increase their alcohol intake, and those with anxiety were 41% more likely to do so. Employees with substance use disorders [miss two more weeks of work annually than their peers](#), averaging nearly five weeks (24.6 days) a year, according to the NSC.

“The pandemic has been hard on all of us, and this can be especially true for those in recovery and struggling with substance abuse,” said Deb Muller, CEO at Florham Park, NJ-based [HR Acuity](#), which provides a platform for employee relations management. “Additional stressors from COVID-19, the economy and the political environment can bring on mental health issues and can lead to, or resurface, addiction. HR and employee relations teams want to step in and help, but less face-to-face contact makes it more difficult to offer support and identify exactly who needs assistance.”

Related Article: [How Remote Working Changed Company Culture and What to Do About it](#)

Be Careful With the COVID-19 Happy Hour

Here's one issue to address right off the bat: Alcohol in the workplace is often as common as meetings. The pandemic may have shut down office holiday parties and cut off the beer tap at the cool companies, but COVID-19 has boosted [virtual happy hour](#), with employees sharing a virtual glass of wine or two on pandemic Friday nights.

Sure, companies don't mandate alcoholic beverages but imagine you're an employee who struggles with addiction in a workplace that encourages alcohol.

Is there a way for companies to balance the need for employees to let off steam and bond while respecting those employees struggling with alcohol addiction?

For starters, don't fall for stories that other businesses that allow alcohol in the fridge at work are more attractive than employers that don't, said Beth Siegert, founder of [Siegert & Associates](#), which specializes in addiction recovery services. “Multiple litigation has happened when an intoxicated employee gets into an auto accident or acts badly after being allowed or encouraged by the corporate culture to drink at work,” she said.

Don't let the work culture appear to support drinking as a reward for hard work, Siegert added. “It supports the denial and minimization of those with substance problems,” she said.

Remember: Laws Exist Here

HR leaders must act with compassion and sensitivity when addressing substance abuse in the workplace. But there are a few challenges; namely, employees don't readily come forward with their struggles. And further, there are legal barriers to approaching employees about it.

“Employee substance abuse is one of the trickiest issues an employer can face from a human resources and a legal perspective, and the move to remote work during the pandemic has only complicated things more for employers,” said Christopher Feudo, partner at Boston-based law firm [Foley Hoag](#).

The United States Commission on Civil Rights lays out nicely what the [American Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#) says about substance abuse and discrimination in the workplace. And here's a good source on [substance abuse provisions in the Family Medical Leave Act](#).

The American Disabilities Act and state anti-discrimination laws treat substance abuse as a disability, meaning employers are obligated to offer employees reasonable accommodations, according to Feudo. But, he added, those same laws place substantial limits on the types of inquiries an employer can make about employee medical issues.

Related Article: [3 Tips to Create a More Resilient and Productive Workforce](#)

Focus on Employee Behavior and Performance

With this in mind, the guiding principle, Feudo suggested, is to focus on employee behavior rather than the cause of the behavior. Document and hold employees accountable when they violate company rules or fail to meet performance expectations.

“If the employee is engaging in problematic behavior in the workplace or if an employee’s performance has deteriorated, employers should focus on addressing the issue rather than trying to ascertain whether the employee has a substantive abuse issue that is resulting that behavior,” Feudo said. “While substance abuse is a covered disability under anti-discrimination laws, those laws do not prohibit employers from addressing misconduct or performance issues that result from employee substance abuse.”

Where employers get in trouble, he said, is when they take action based on an assumption that an employee has a substance abuse issue and treat that employee less favorably than others as a result.

Employees May Open Up

Aside from liability concerns, focusing on employee behavior and performance instead of trying to diagnose the cause can often be the best approach to get assistance to employees with substance abuse issues, according to Feudo. Often, when confronted with feedback about their workplace behavior, employees will recognize that their drug or alcohol use has become a problem.

“The employee coming to that realization places employers in a better position to offer necessary accommodations to address the issues — often leave to receive substance abuse treatment — as well as resources to get help, such as through an employer-sponsored employee assistance program,” Feudo said.

EAPs are voluntary, work-based programs that offer free and confidential assessments, short-term counseling, referrals and follow-up services to employees who have both personal and workplace problems, according to Tauhidah Shakir, chief diversity officer at [Paylocity](#), an HR and payroll software provider based in Schaumburg, Ill.

Employers should be communicating with their benefits providers about the types of additional support they can provide to employees, Shakir added. EAPs can help address a wide range of problems, from substance abuse to stress or grief. Additionally, mobile applications can supplement these benefits, such as [meQuilibrium](#), a resilience platform that provides stress management solutions and exercises that employees can turn to whenever they need.

Related Article: [Does Your Company's HR Lack Heart?](#)

Keeping Employees Connected in a Pandemic

So how do you spot problematic workplace behavior in a virtual setting? Are there obvious signs of potential substance abuse when employees are remote? Bob slurring his speech often on Zoom calls could be about poor bandwidth rather than drinking on the job, after all.

In the work-from-home environment, managers should have frequent contact with employees throughout the day via telephone or video conferencing, Feudo said. Email is efficient for tasks but it does not allow the employer to see or hear their employees.

“Scheduling regular calls or Zoom meetings — either on a team or individual basis — makes a lot of sense from an employee relations perspective,” he said. “I also recommend that managers periodically check in with their reports to see how they are holding up during the pandemic and see if there is anything the supervisor or the company could be doing to support the employee. These steps can help spot and address issues because things have devolved into an untenable situation that negatively impacts the employee’s health and the employer’s business.”

Putting the Human Back in Human Resources

Compliance concerns have dominated many approaches to the workforce. HR professionals have long sought the advice of legal counsel and consultants to ensure strict adherence to rules, according to Cheryl Brown Merriwether, vice president and executive director of the [International Center for Addiction & Recovery Education \(ICARE\)](#) and president of [Greater Orlando Society for Human Resource Management \(GOSHRM\)](#).

Unfortunately, for many reasons, the line between personal and professional, home and work has grown ever harder to identify. And, beginning in March 2020, as a direct result of COVID-19, “the demarcation has been completely obliterated,” Brown Merriwether said.