

So long, happy hour? How workplace culture can better support employees fighting addiction

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As the volume has been turned up on conversations about diversity, equity and inclusion efforts, the primary topics have involved race, gender, age and disability. But those discussions are now being broadened to include addiction and teetotalism, adding another important consideration for leaders shaping DEI strategies.

It's an issue that's hidden in plain sight. More than 70% of an estimated 22.4 million illicit drug users and nearly 80% of 41.2 million binge drinkers are part of the U.S. workforce, according to the latest federal government research on this topic. But given the stigma around addiction, many are afraid to seek help for fear of being fired.

There are also employees who seek to abstain from alcohol and drugs because of religious beliefs, health reasons, pregnancy and cultural taboos. Plus, more than 23 million Americans are in recovery, according to **Cheryl Brown Merriwether, VP and executive director of the International Center for Addiction & Recovery Education.**

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"If [an employee isn't] personally impacted by substance use or drug use, they have family members who are, and they're struggling in silence in the workplace," she says.

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And while other populations of employees — such as LGBTQ or BIPOC workers — can find support at work and even create additional community through Employee Resource Groups, those dealing with substance abuse or addiction may feel increased levels of isolation. By breaking the stigma of addiction or teetotalism, Merriwether says, employers can re-level the DEI landscape through education to encourage safe conversations in the workplace around an uncomfortable topic.

One tangible avenue for positive change involves rethinking booze-soaked company outings and parties — especially as a post-pandemic return to offices may be seen as cause for celebration among friendly coworkers.

“We think alcohol helps connect people,” says Heather Lowe, a certified recovery coach and founder of Ditched the Drink, which promotes sobriety. “The truth is, alcohol contributes to sexual harassment, lower productivity, higher absenteeism and a reduced bottom line.”

Read more: [Combating addiction will improve workplace safety](#)

But employers will have to do more than just reconsider happy hour to truly support these employees. As Lowe sees it, people in recovery “show incredible resilience that any workplace would be lucky to hire,” though there are built-in obstacles to retaining such talent.

For example, addiction is a medical-related matter, the privacy concerns of which could hamper any outreach to employees who are struggling, explains Sommer Sherrod, vice president of healthcare strategy and people strategy consulting for the Insurance Office of America. And a year and a half of remote work arrangements has made it easier for employees to erase certain work-life boundaries and more easily engage in addictive behavior during the work day.

“The virtual world essentially allows peoples’ problems to be hidden even further,” Sherrod says. Infusing mindfulness education into corporate culture can help set the tone on addiction issues and enable some people to recognize they have a problem, she notes, as well as make the workplace more inclusive, welcoming, and prepared to offer support through DEI efforts aimed at managing these issues.

“Creating desire to beat addiction is the goal,” Sherrod says.

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