



WORKPLACE CULTURE

Views

How to have uncomfortable conversations about addiction issues

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A few drinks with colleagues after a long day may feel like a great way to unwind, relax and bond — especially during this week of office parties sandwiched between Christmas and New Year's. Studies show, however, that even one drink a day can have negative consequences.

One in five Americans has been drinking heavily during the coronavirus pandemic, suggests a *US News and World Report* poll. As work pressures and fear around an uncertain future continue to rise, employees are increasingly turning to drugs and alcohol to cope. The dual crises of mental health and substance misuse have become regular headlines since the onset of COVID-19 and is now a “pandemic within a pandemic.”

Employers are seeing the mental health of employees decline as the negative effects of COVID-19 and multiple variants continue to spread. To help create and sustain a healthy workplace, HR departments are increasingly seeking innovative wellness benefits to attract and retain employees. In addition to offering traditional treatment programs, brokers must bring fresh, nontraditional options to the table to remediate today’s pandemic-induced workplace addiction challenges. Otherwise they risk losing business to more forward thinking competitors.

Substance misuse is expensive and risky. U.S. companies lose more than \$100 billion a year because of alcohol and drug-related use by their employees, according to the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information. Examples include injuries, lost productivity, absenteeism, theft and an increase in health insurance claims.

Organizations are asking insurers to provide options for cost-effective treatment for substance misuse, including online assessment tools such as the [Healthy Self Checkup](#) and alternatives to traditional residential inpatient treatment programs. As external consultants, brokers are uniquely positioned to help HR break the stigma around workplace addiction.

Brokers are being tasked by their customers to rise to the occasion and recommend products or services that can help them create safe conversations around the taboo topic of workplace substance misuse. By bringing awareness of the problem to employers, brokers can become change agents, working in partnership with their corporate customers, to offer proven solutions to employees who are struggling, and by extension, positively impact key performance indicators and the bottom-line.

The idea of leaving problems at home doesn’t apply when it comes to mental health and substance misuse, which can no longer be seen as a taboo topic at work. Brokers should look for opportunities to have conversations around the issue of mental health, which if left untreated often leads to substance misuse. By being willing to talk about these sensitive subjects, they can help guide clients to the right solutions to promote a healthy workplace culture.

The [International Center for Addiction and Recovery Education](#) provides training and certification for employers committed to raising awareness about mental health, substance misuse and addiction in the workplace.

Employers must understand the potential harm of not addressing substance misuse and intentionally transform workplace cultures to create a healthy workforce. The good news is there are professional resources to help. Employers don't need to undertake this transformation alone.

Brokers should educate employers about the benefits of partnering with resource and solutions providers such as ICARE to provide non-clinical professional workplace substance abuse guidance and support that is proactive and preventive. To help employers guide conversations, brokers can suggest engaging with a certified facilitator of addiction awareness from ICARE to start a healthy dialogue based on facts, not judgment or stigma.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention believes that addressing workplace substance misuse prevents future problems; prevention and education are proven universal strategies.

Read more: [Employees don't want to work with someone with an addiction](#)

When the issue of workplace substance misuse is addressed by establishing comprehensive programs, it is a winning formula for employers and employees alike, the U.S. Department of Labor suggests.

Prevention includes access to treatment, offering tools and support, creating connection and community, and education and training. Partnering with a resource such as ICARE gives employers the professional workplace substance abuse guidance and support needed to address and reduce this growing problem.

Employers spend an average of \$8,817 annually on each employee with an untreated substance misuse, according to the National Safety Council. As a trusted advisor, talking about this sensitive issue is not only the right thing to do to keep employees healthy, but it also directly contributes to the bottom line.

Today's broker must become educated about the impact of workplace addiction and bring this knowledge to clients. But this is not the end game. They must offer innovative and proven solutions to help employers mitigate the problem and create a healthy workplace that attracts and retains top talent into 2022 and beyond.

Brokers who operate in this way are well positioned above their order-taking counterparts as valuable solution providers employers can trust to solve the most challenging organizational issues that companies face today.