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By **Scott Clark**

With healthcare costs rising across the country and the pandemic taking a toll on public health, employee health and well-being have never been more important than they are today.

One troubling trend is the spike in addiction rates as people turned to drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism. Inevitably, these addictions carry forward into the workplace.

Addiction carries a social stigma that discourages many people with drug and alcohol problems from seeking treatment. That's doubly so when it affects their job. Here are some of the ways companies are tackling the challenge in the enterprise and helping employees overcome their challenges.

There's No Vaccine for the Addiction Pandemic

As the world continues to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic, another pandemic is still raging with no end in sight. In November 2021, the [National Center for Health Statistics announced](#) that in the 12-month period that ended in April 2021, over 100,000 Americans died of overdoses, up almost 30% from 2019. Experts attribute the increase to lost access to treatment due to the pandemic, an increase in mental health problems, and greater availability of the opioid fentanyl.

Add in the anxiety that many employees are feeling as they return to the office, and it's a prescription for drug and alcohol abuse. According to a [McKinsey report](#), 33% of employees said that their return to the office has had a negative impact on their mental health, and that they are feeling anxious and depressed.

It's not just a personal issue of employee health and well-being. Even before the pandemic, substance abuse cost US businesses [close to \\$81 billion](#) in lost productivity annually.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Programs Can Play a Positive Role

Cheryl Brown Merriwether, vice president and executive director of [ICARE](#), the International Center for Addiction and Recovery Education, said there are ways that companies can proactively assist and encourage employees with addictions to get help.

"Companies seeking innovative solutions to meet the needs of a hurting post-pandemic workforce, should consider expanding DEI initiatives to identify, include and engage the sober-curious, or recovery-minded individuals who are already a part of their workforce, but covered and hiding in plain sight," Merriwether said.

"These individuals are a valuable resource to help other individuals who have been hiding in plain sight to uncover and find their way to a more authentic path."

Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives can give a voice to the voiceless and to all who are included in this underrepresented identity group, she added.

In 2021, ICARE and Global Health Metrics introduced the [Healthy Self Checkup tool](#) to identify the potential for alcohol or drug abuse among employees before it has an effect on work performance. This tool takes employees five minutes to complete, and is also able to identify issues with depression, stress and sleep.

Related Article: [Addressing Substance Abuse in the Remote Workplace](#)

Where Are the Addicts in the Workplace?

It may come as a surprise to some that the vast majority of those who are addicted are holding down jobs. The [National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence](#) says that over 70% of people who are abusing illicit drugs in the US are employed, and that the majority of them are categorically binge drinkers. The most commonly abused illegal drugs in the workplace are marijuana and cocaine.

The [National Safety Council](#) reported that about 16% of employees have a substance abuse disorder. They also reported the \$81 billion lost per year in the workplace results from three categories: absenteeism, healthcare costs and lost productivity. Another effect is theft. An estimated 80% of drug users fuel their drug use by stealing from their employer.

Drug abuse in the workplace can be a threat to public safety, impact job performance, and cause accidents that are a liability for employers. It can also

negatively affect decision-making abilities, as well as create physical impairment. And it's not just the abuser who is at risk. Drug use in the workplace impacts those around the user, negatively affecting production, engagement and personal satisfaction.

Related Article: [Dealing With the Mental Health Pandemic at Work](#)

How Companies Can Address Addiction in the Workplace

Companies benefit from addressing addiction in the workplace and helping the addict get help without stigmatizing or ostracizing them. Many companies are incorporating drug and alcohol awareness into their employee assistance programs (EAPs) so that employees are able to address problems before they cause issues in the workplace.

The problem is addiction is a topic that nobody wants to openly discuss and issues can often only be resolved when they are brought out into the open.