Alcohol and drug abuse: A major problem in the workplace

Part 1: Understanding substance abuse

We have briefly discussed the issue of substance abuse in previous issues when we outlined setting up the company’s Policies and Procedures Manual (The Book). In this column, we will discuss this subject more in depth, as drug and alcohol abuse is a real problem in some firms.

Perhaps the best place to start is with reiterating some points raised in the editor’s comments which appeared in the World Fence News December 2004 issue.

The main point, according to OSHA, was that the majority of drug users are employed, and that when they arrive at the workplace, they don’t leave their problems at the door.

Of the 16.7 million illicit drug users in the U.S. who were age 18 or older in 2003, 12.4 million or 78.3 percent were employed either full or part-time. This figure would be much higher if we included alcohol or prescription drug abuse.

Furthermore, research indicates that between 10 and 20 percent of the nation’s workers who die on the job test positive for alcohol or other drugs. In fact, industries with the highest rates of drug use are the same as those at a high risk for occupational injuries, including construction, mining, manufacturing and wholesale.

When I began revisiting and extending my research of the issue, and observed the current statistics which were released by OSHA, several things jumped off the page.

First, it doesn’t appear that we have made as much progress as we would like to in the “war on drugs.”

Second, as regards to the workplace, it doesn’t appear to me that there were enough companies that have a proactive position in the form of drug testing (mandatory or even random) along with a policy of zero tolerance for drug and alcohol use.

Finally, while I realize that alcohol and drugs are a very real presence in the workplace, perhaps even yours, I cannot help but wonder why more work isn’t being done to weed it out of our businesses, when we consider the potential danger it represents both to life and limb, as well as to our insurance and workers’ comp rates.

Just this morning, our local news channel gave extended air time to the incidence of drunk driving deaths and injuries, both in the area and the nation.

The statistic of some 50 percent of the 30,000 to 40,000 national annual deaths in vehicular accidents were attributed to drunk driving. And it was mentioned that if such death statistics were the result of war, there would be a huge outcry for making the changes required to change and drastically reduce these numbers.

It is also necessary to bring into the thought pattern that this percent is mentioned only in regard to alcohol related deaths, and that a consideration of the impact of other substance abuses should be brought into the picture.

These figures only include death; to bring injuries into the picture demonstrates a widespread catastrophe affecting our lives both personally and in the workplace!

Over recent years, one important development has been the growing realization in many countries that drug and alcohol abuse is an important workplace issue. The issue of drug and alcohol abuse at the workplace has traditionally been met by a dismissive attitude, and the reflex of trying to sweep the problem under the carpet, based more on moral precepts than on a concern for the health and safety issues involved.

On the pragmatic side, it is now coming to be much more widely understood, though not necessarily universally, that substance abuse is harmful to both enterprises and workers alike, and is subsequently prejudicial to national and international competitiveness.

Remember, we are focusing on abuse in the workplace, which alludes to drugs used during the workday, but there is also the fact that some employees who abuse substances arrive at the workplace already impaired, or return to the workplace after a break such as lunchtime having ingested some form of drug which impairs their functioning for the duration of the workday.

At this point, I would like to name other aspects of this problem that should help focus our thoughts on the impact that the aforementioned issue could have on our businesses.

Drug and alcohol abuse not only affects work performance in general, but also results in higher rates of absenteeism, accidents, illness and mortality, with all their related costs.

It is therefore an important health and safety issue in those aspects of the problem as well. Over recent years, studies have shown that, first, absenteeism is two or three times higher for drug and alcohol users than for other employees.

Second, employees with chemical dependence problems may claim three times as many sickness benefits and file five times as many workers’ compensation claims.

Third, in many workplaces, 20 to 25 percent of accidents at work in-
the consumption of a certain amount of alcohol, as demonstrated by tests reported in a 1990 New England Journal of Medicine article regarding pilots.

Of course, this study was not an endorsement of drinking in the workplace. (As an aside, do you want to be in a plane piloted by someone who has been drinking, even if just a little?)

As a result of these findings, there is a great deal of support for the establishment of broad based prevention and problem management preparations rather than only focusing on heavy drinkers and actual alcoholics and illicit drug users.

As we have been saying throughout this discussion, because many problem drinkers and drug takers are employed, we must look at the workforce as typically being a reflection of the community in which the workers live.

The workplace is thus a very significant channel for prevention and remedial action, with the potential to reach an extremely high proportion of workers with alcohol and drug issues, as well as members of their families. The workplace can be a vital component of community programs created and utilized to change attitudes toward the consumption of alcohol and drugs and to assist with dealing with the resultant problems.

The purpose of this discussion, besides again bringing up the issue of drug and alcohol abuse in the workplace, is to hopefully reconnect with you about the seriousness of the problem and the potential danger that is represented to the contractor, to the employees as a health issue, and to the business in those areas mentioned.

By doing this, it is important to us to believe that we have refocused your mindset on the issue as a problem, that it will set the stage for the upcoming Part 2 of this column.

We will continue the discussion about substance abuse and give some guidance as to what steps can be taken to positively address the problems posed by this issue to the employee and your business, and to your willingness to take steps that will help you to continue to realize that Profit Is Not A Dirty Word!™

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