The not-so happy hour

Ignoring the signs of alcohol addiction isn’t an option in the workplace. We explain how to spot the signs and deal with them effectively.

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It’s no surprise alcohol increases the risk of absenteeism, presenteeism, low productivity and inappropriate behaviour. Drinking too much can impair a person’s performance at work through poor decision making and impaired reaction times causing lost productivity, inferior goods or services, errors and accidents.

It is evident that individuals in employment are more likely to drink frequently compared to those who are unemployed – those in managerial and professional positions are likely to drink more often than those in routine and manual occupations, according to the British Medical Association.

Serious consequences
Increasingly, organisations are becoming mindful of drug and alcohol issues and in turn, mental health and well-being in the workplace and the impact of the stressors that are prevalent in society.

Alcohol consumption may have serious short and long-term consequences for both the employer and employee, says Gayle Brewer, Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Liverpool. “For example, employees may experience poor concentration and fatigue due to alcohol consumption; they are also more likely to suffer from a range of physical and mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression.’’

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Take action
The HSE provides a straightforward four-step process for dealing with alcohol problems at work:

● Find out if there is a problem: are they drinking during working hours, drinking during breaks or before coming on shift, or regularly heavy drinking outside working hours? This could be a sign of depression.
● Decide what to do: are they unsafe? Is their work suffering?

Don’t mix it
Drugs and alcohol policies, once confined to safety-critical industries such as energy and transport, are now widespread in the financial, retail and local government sectors. Earlier this year, workers at the historic city institution Lloyd’s of London were banned from drinking during the day after around half of disciplinary cases found to relate to alcohol.

But there’s a fine line between being a responsible employer and telling your workforce to go to bed earlier: DMM Engineering, a company in Wales employing 80 people, has taken a positive approach to promoting workplace health. As well as having clear rules about not allowing alcohol on the factory premises or not allowing employees to use heavy machinery after consuming alcohol, the company also encourages its employees through posters and leaflets to think about the long-term health hazards of alcohol misuse.

WHAT CAN EMPLOYERS DO?

● Employers have a general duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of their employees.
● It is advisable for employers to have an alcohol and drug (substance use) policy.
● Managers and supervisors should be trained to recognise the signs of problems with alcohol and health available to your staff, you are encouraging sensible drinking outside working hours.

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Take action: what needs to be done and who needs to do it?
● Provide information: you may find that by making general information about alcohol and health available to your staff, you are encouraging sensible drinking outside working hours.

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Transparency is key
“Employers should formulate clear policies regarding employee behaviour – such as lunchtime drinking – and ensure the safety of the workforce is a priority,” advises Gayle, who is a member of IIRSM’s Technical Committee. “Providing a culture in which substance use and mental health issues are acknowledged and supported is also important.”

Many managers feel uncomfortable or ill-equipped to confront the problem and defer taking action until it becomes acute or too late, so it’s important that risk managers ensure the health and safety function collaborates with human resources to deal with any problems effectively.