Effective workplace alcohol strategies

Alcohol and other drugs cost Australian workplaces an estimated $6 billion per year in lost productivity[1].

Alcohol and other drugs can affect workplace productivity in a number of ways including; increased absenteeism, lateness, staff turnover, accidents, increased workers compensation premiums and reduced performance[2]. In addition, alcohol adversely impacts workplace culture and morale and the health and welfare of the workforce[3].

Where to begin

All organisations need to consider primary prevention as a way to reduce the harms associated with alcohol in the workplace. Primary prevention looks at preventing an issue from occurring in the workplace as opposed to secondary prevention which identifies and treats alcohol-impaired individuals[4].

There are a range of different types of primary prevention measures that organisation can adopt to reduce the impact of alcohol[5], but which one is the right type of intervention for your situation?

Workplace policies

Having an alcohol and other drug policy is the first step to managing alcohol in the workplace. An alcohol and other drug policy is an effective way to communicate to your employees the organisation's expectations and employee responsibilities regarding alcohol.

To effectively reduce alcohol related harm in a workplace, a policy needs to be:

- clear and unambiguous in its language[6]
- circulated to all employees[7]
- implemented throughout the entire workplace, not just one unit or location[7]
- specifically designed to meet the operating conditions of that workplace – based on a needs analysis and risk assessment, as well as consultation with employees[7]

Are you covering all angles?

Education and training programs

Education programs have been proven to be effective in ensuring workers are aware of the organisation's alcohol policy and expected behaviour[7]. There are a number of important characteristics to education programs that need to be considered:

- whole of organisation approach
- frequency of education
- delivery of education
- if testing is conducted, why it is conducted

Alcohol testing

There is little evidence that demonstrates the effectiveness of workplace alcohol testing to reduce alcohol related harm[7]. Despite the evidence, the perception is that workers see this form of intervention as a deterrent. If you are considering implementing testing in your workplace, you should think about the reason for testing. It is also best practice to organise a working group to engage employees from across the organisation and communicate your intentions widely.

Employee assistance programs (EAPs)

Employee assistance programs are an effective early intervention service to assist employees with personal or work-related issues. Whilst not a requirement, Workcover NSW recommends EAP's are a feature of all workplaces.

Pros and cons of different interventions

Intervention type	Effectiveness	Justification
Policy	✓ ✓ ✓	• Provides direction to all workers on what is expected of them when it comes to alcohol use and behaviour. • Provides management with guidelines when dealing with alcohol-related issues in the workplace and ensures a consistent approach is applied across the organisation.
Education	✓ ✓ ✓	• Essential for effective policy dissemination, understanding and acceptance. • Provides clear and unambiguous expectations for all employees.
Training	✓ ✓	• Enhances capacity to identify and manage alcohol-related harm in the workplace. • Improves perceptions of and tolerance of co-workers who use alcohol. • Increases positive attitudes toward the policy. • Effective in changing attitudes towards use, reducing alcohol use that impacts the workplace, and improving teamwork[8].
Information sessions	✓ ✓	• Particularly effective when implemented within large organisations with strong cultural beliefs. • Provides opportunities to openly talk about alcohol and the strategies implemented to dispel the myths. • Increases management and union relationships[8].
Alcohol Testing	✓	• Workers may change their behaviour to avoid detection. • Little evidence that testing is a deterrent or reduces alcohol and other drug related harm[5] • Workers may change their behaviour to avoid detection. • Workers may fail to report near misses or accidents in fear of negative consequences[8].
EAP	✓	• Provide services to help and support employees, managers, and organisations to deal with life problems and challenges and remain healthy, engaged, and productive.

For further information about workplace alcohol programs see adf.org.au/policy-advocacy

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Further information

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