

IT'S OUR BUSINESS

Addressing addiction and mental health in the workplace

Information for Leaders

Steps to consider when developing a policy

The World Health Organization (WHO) has a process for businesses to address mental health in the workplace that can be adapted for developing any type of workplace policy.¹ WHO states that a policy can help define a vision for improving aspects (e.g., mental health) of the workforce, while also establishing a model for action. Without policy direction, and with a lack of co-ordination, the impact of any workplace strategy will be reduced.

Putting a policy into place requires the following four steps.^{1,2}

Step 1: Analyze the issue.

Make the case for developing a policy in the workplace. Use a business case to demonstrate the potential savings, including increased productivity and decreased costs. A co-ordinating body, such as a working group or steering committee, should be established to help guide the assessment of the workforce, facilitate consultation with stakeholders and co-ordinate the development of the policy.

Step 2: Develop the policy.

A health policy usually includes a vision statement, a statement of values and principles on which the policy is based, and a set of objectives. Comprehensive consultations with employees need to take place prior to the development of a policy. You can engage the working group or steering committee (set up in Step 1) to develop the policy. Continue consultations with key stakeholders.

Step 3: Develop strategies to implement the policy.

There are three tasks within this step: review strategy options, find resources to implement strategies and develop an implementation plan. The strategies selected will depend on the company's resources as well as the needs of the company and its employees. The implementation plan should outline the objectives, specific strategies, activities and targets. Implementation plans also need to identify the people responsible, timeframes, expected outcomes and potential barriers.

Step 4: Implement and evaluate the policy.

The main actions in this step include generating support and collaboration, co-ordinating implementation, training, demonstration projects and evaluating the outcomes.

Here are some things to consider when implementing and evaluating the policy:

- Review the policy with employees regularly. Ensure that they understand the standards, as well as their responsibilities. Make copies of the policy available to them.
- Intervene when you suspect or observe that employees are not fit for work. When you receive reports about an employee drinking or taking drugs, take them seriously. Investigate the situation and take the required actions. For those in unionized environments, involving a union representative may be required.

- Make use of counselling or employee relations resources if you're unsure what action to take. Each company has its own guidelines about who to call for assistance, but these will likely include a manager, a human resources team, an occupational health nurse or an employee assistance program (EAP) or employee and family assistance program (EFAP).
- Ensure that managers, human resources staff and executives understand the company policy. Encourage them to seek clarification wherever points are unclear. Make sure their knowledge is current and that they are kept up to date on any revisions to the policy.

References

1. World Health Organization. (2005). *Mental health policies and programmes in the workplace (mental health policy and service guidance package)*. Geneva: Author
2. Alberta Health Services. (2010). *Workplace Health Improvement Project (WHIP): Review of standards and best practices for workplace health programming*. Calgary, AB: Author.

For more information

Alberta Health Services (AHS), Addiction and Mental Health offers information, prevention and treatment services through a province wide network of offices, facilities and funded services. Services include a toll-free helpline, prevention and education, detoxification, outpatient counselling, opioid dependency programs and residential treatment.

AHS, Addiction and Mental Health has counsellors with specific training in workplace issues. This allows us to better meet the needs of employees and supervisors, and to respond readily to referrals from the business community. Other specific services for the Alberta workplace include

- addictions-related information and prevention resources for the workplace
- addictions education, employer consultation and supervisory training
- the Addiction and Mental Health Business & Industry Clinic, which offers residential treatment for employees who have problems related to alcohol or other drugs

For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, please call the 24-hour Addiction Helpline at 1-866-332-2322 or the 24-hour Mental Health Helpline at 1-877-303-2642. For more workplace-specific resources, please visit: <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/2672.asp>



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Alcohol and drug testing

What about alcohol and drug testing?

Each company has to determine for itself whether or not to institute alcohol and other drug testing. A company may need to rely on expert assistance to make this important decision. Here are some points for companies and leaders to consider about testing.

1. Alcohol and drug testing is controversial and involves legal, ethical and technical issues. Although it can be useful in some situations, it is not a complete answer to alcohol and other drug misuse in the workplace.
2. A positive drug test result indicates only that a substance is present in the employee's urine sample. It cannot determine the level of impairment at the time the sample was taken. For example, a positive test for cannabis indicates that an employee has recently used marijuana or hashish. It cannot tell whether he or she was fit for work at the time the urine sample was provided, or whether the drug was used while the person was on the job.
3. Testing cannot differentiate between occasional and addictive use. For example, in the case of an employee who is charged with impaired driving, the breathalyzer test cannot tell if the employee has an alcohol problem or is simply someone who made a bad decision in a single instance (e.g., after the company's Christmas party). Only an alcohol and drug assessment by a trained professional can determine this.
4. Sometimes testing is used with employees who have returned to work after being sent to treatment for an alcohol or other drug problem. For addicted employees, total abstinence (absolutely no use) from the substance is recommended. Once the employee returns to work, occasional testing can tell the employer whether the employee is maintaining sobriety.
 - If they have relapsed (returned to their old drinking or drug-using behaviour), further steps can be taken. Some employees who are recovering from alcohol or other drug addiction say that they find testing after treatment helpful in maintaining their recovery.
5. Some employers are required to have a testing program in place in order to bid on or perform work (e.g., some companies in the transportation industry that are involved in cross-border transportation to the United States).
6. Little research has been conducted to determine whether alcohol and other drug testing is effective in reducing substance use or whether it is more effective than supervision in detecting impairment.

Alcohol and drug testing should not stand alone as a company's only effort to determine an employee's fitness for work. It should be part of a comprehensive alcohol and drug policy that includes clear guidelines about drug testing, education and training for all employees.

- Employees need to understand why testing has been introduced.
- Employees need to be clear about alcohol and other drug testing guidelines, procedures and the consequences of a positive test result.
- Employees need to feel secure that those with an alcohol or other drug problem will be treated fairly and given support throughout their treatment and recovery process.
- Supervisors/managers must be trained on policy, procedures and the consequences of a positive test.
- Supervisors/managers need to be provided with the skills to manage workplace substance use problems.

Alcohol and drug testing considerations

- Although alcohol and drug testing may be part of an overall approach, it is not the complete answer to reducing alcohol and drug misuse in the workplace.
- Positive drug tests cannot determine the level of impairment at the time the sample was taken, or whether the employee used the drug on the job.
- Testing cannot differentiate between occasional and addictive use.
- Testing may be useful in some situations, such as after an accident or incident.
- Testing after an employee returns from treatment may be one way to provide support to the recovering employee and ensure that they are maintaining sobriety or abstinence.
- Some employers are required to have testing programs in place in order to bid on or perform work.
- If alcohol and drug testing is used, it should be part of a comprehensive alcohol and drug policy.

The employer's role in alcohol and drug testing

1. Ensure that you are knowledgeable about your company's alcohol and drug testing program. Ask for clarification if anything is unclear.
2. Make sure that employees understand the testing program. You do not have to be a drug testing expert. You can invite a speaker in to talk with your team about testing and how it works. The laboratory that provides your drug testing services may be able to help you find a knowledgeable speaker.
3. Make sure that employees understand the situations in which they may be asked to submit to a test for alcohol and other drugs. Your invited speaker can talk to the employees about how their consent will be obtained, how the sample will be provided, the safeguards in place to prevent tampering with samples, how positive test results will be confirmed by a second test and to whom results will be reported.
4. Request that employees submit to a drug test when required to do so under your policy. Front-line managers and co-workers are often the first

to notice signs that a worker is not fit for work. Your company policy will explain what actions you should take. It is rare that a manager or leader would be asked to refer employees for drug tests without first consulting at least one other person. Be clear on your role and take action when required.

5. Use resources to assist you when you do not know what to do. Each company has its own guidelines about who to call for assistance. For most companies, the people called to assist will include a manager, the human resources team, an occupational health nurse and, often, a union representative.

Detecting alcohol and drugs in testing samples

Each person is different. Each drug is different. Some classes of drugs stay in the body for a few days, and some can be detected even after a few weeks. It depends on a number of factors, including how long it takes your body to metabolize (clean out) the drug. Alcohol, for example, is usually metabolized more quickly than a drug like marijuana, which can be detected several weeks after the last use. The best way to prevent testing positive is not to use at all.

Supplementary handout

AHS It's Our Business: Alcohol/Drug Policy Development and Employee Testing:

<http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/AddictionsSubstanceAbuse/if-wrk-its-our-business-policy-dev-employee-drug-testing.pdf>

For more information

For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, please call the 24-hour Addiction Helpline at 1-866-332-2322. For mental health related information, and to find a mental health clinic near you, please call the 24-hour Mental Health Helpline at 1-877-303-2642.

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Making policy work

It is not enough to have a sound company policy on alcohol and other drug use. Leadership has to show commitment to a safe workplace, ensure that employees understand the reasons for having the policy, and actively engage employees in applying the policy.

Information

Leadership must take responsibility for employee familiarity with the company's alcohol and other drug use policy. Make sure that all employees have a copy of the policy and that they know where to obtain other copies. Post a copy in each staff area for easy reference.

Review your company's alcohol and drug policy with your employees on a regular basis. You can do this at times when you are already getting together (e.g., safety meetings or staff meetings).

If your company uses alcohol and drug testing, your employees will feel comfortable with this process if they know what to expect. Invite a speaker from the laboratory that does your alcohol and drug testing to speak to your employees. Focus on telling employees what happens when they go for a test, how test results are handled and analyzed, what a positive result means and how positive test results are communicated to the company. Leave lots of time for questions.

Education

No alcohol and drug policy will work without employee participation. Employees will be more likely to co-operate if they understand that the policy is in place for their benefit and if they know what their role is in helping to keep their workplace safe.

To help employees understand the need for a policy, invite a physician or pharmacist to talk with your team about the effects of some common drugs on work performance. Encourage employees to ask questions.

Teach employees to discuss their specific job duties with their physician. Emphasize that it is especially important to have this discussion when they are on medication, to find out if they can safely perform their work duties while using the medication, or if it would be best to modify duties. Ask the employee to get a note from their physician indicating what they can do and how long the modified duty will be required.

Teach employees to talk with their pharmacist before using over-the-counter medications to ensure that these drugs will not affect safe work performance.

Help your employees to understand that fitness for work is everyone's responsibility. Offer education to all employees so that they know how to intervene if they think a co-worker is not fit to perform their duties safely. Ensure that you take action when you receive reports from team members that an employee is not fit for work.

A safe workplace

Ensure that the work environment is designed for employee safety in accordance with your alcohol and drug policy. Ask a pharmacist to review any medications that are kept on site in first-aid kits or nursing stations. Ask the pharmacist to ensure that none of the headache remedies, decongestants or other cold medications made available to employees have the potential to affect safe work performance.

For more information

Alberta Health Services, Addiction and Mental Health offices offer a range of prevention and treatment services to assist businesses in managing workplace addiction and mental health concerns. For more information, and to find an addiction and mental health services office near you, please call the 24-hour Addiction Helpline at [1-866-332-2322](tel:1-866-332-2322) or the 24-hour Mental Health Helpline at [1-877-303-2642](tel:1-877-303-2642). For more workplace-specific resources, please visit: <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/2672.asp>

