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## The Six Myths: A New Look At Alcohol In the Workplace Part Two

**A**wareness, detection and treatment of drug and alcohol use in the workplace have made significant progress over the last decade. Today, few employers dismiss out of hand the possibility that workers may be using drugs or alcohol on the job, and many have adopted comprehensive drug-free workplace programs to combat workplace substance abuse.

In the second of this two part series, we will examine how corporate policies and programs may be falling short of their intended goals by looking at the remaining results from a comprehensive corporate drinking study funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the National Institute of Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse. Results from this study suggest that the effectiveness of corporate efforts to deal with alcohol problems among employees may be limited by misperceptions about who is causing most of the alcohol-related problems and about how alcohol affects work performance.

For more details on this study, see Part One of this article, or visit the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation online at: [www.rwjf.org/files/publications/books/1999/chapter\\_04.html](http://www.rwjf.org/files/publications/books/1999/chapter_04.html).

### Myth Four

#### Current Policies and Strategies to Deal with Alcohol-Dependent Drinkers Are Effective

The study interviewed more than 150 executives and 7,255 managers at 114 sites to collect data. According to the corporate executives interviewed, companies have made great progress over recent decades in facilitating access to treatment services for alcohol-dependent employees--either by covering such services through their health insurance or providing counseling and referrals through EAPs. In general, corporate executives felt their companies had accomplished a lot by developing policies on alcohol use and providing treatment services to employees. They felt, for the most part, that these services were working effectively.

However, managers and supervisors working in the field felt differently. Among those managers and supervisors responsible for implementing alcohol policies and making referrals to EAPs, only 16 percent thought their efforts were "very effective" in identifying and referring employees with serious alcohol

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problems. A comparably small percentage believed their efforts were "very effective" in preventing heavy drinking by employees who were not yet dependent on alcohol.

The managers identified a range of barriers to successful intervention with alcohol-dependent employees, including organizational barriers such as senior managers who thought that tough stands on alcohol were not important; interpersonal barriers such as confrontations with union officials protecting problem drinkers; and personal barriers such as managers feeling that they needed more training in how to intervene with poor-performing employees. These findings indicate that the effectiveness of corporate drinking policies and programs is often compromised in its implementation.

### **Myth Five**

#### **Companies Have Little Influence on Drinking Behaviors of Employees Away from Work**

In the interviews, corporate executives said they had little influence over employees' drinking practices away from the worksite. In fact, many felt it was not the company's business to intrude into employees' private lives. They believed intervention was only required when work performance suffers or policies are violated. However, the study showed large variations in levels of overall alcohol consumption by supervisors and managers across the 114 worksites, indicating that worksites develop their own microcultures--that is, norms about drinking--that influence individual drinking practices at work as well as away from work.

Co-workers often socialize outside the office, and according to study results, nearly one third of supervisors and managers reported drinking with their coworkers during the previous month. The study indicated that in these worksite microcultures, the amount and frequency of employee drinking was strongly influenced by co-workers' attitudes. These worksite influences are predictable when the behavior in question concerns drinking during working hours or at lunch. It was more surprising, however, to see the influence co-worker attitudes had on an employee's own attitude about drinking away from the worksite.

The fact that such variations in drinking behaviors across worksites are seen (even after adjusting for other influences) belies the belief that companies don't influence employee off-site drinking. It suggests that companies could utilize the power of workplace norms to moderate employee drinking behavior during the workday and heavy drinking away from work. Harnessing the power of small group norms to affect behavior is an underutilized strategy for influencing employee drinking practices.

### **Hiring A New Employee? Check out their DWI record online!**

A DWI on an employee's record can be an indicator of alcohol & drug-related problems, lack of personal responsibility, and poor decision-making skills. Check your employees' records before you hire! The DWI Resource Center offers employers a free online DWI offender database, containing records from the last five years. Check your employees' records today by visiting our new online Business Center at:

<http://www.dwiresourcecenter.org>

### **Myth Six**

#### **Workers Perceive Additional Company Interventions About Alcohol Behaviors as Intrusive**

In the interviews with corporate executives, most were of the opinion that employees would resist more vigorous company attempts to change their drinking behavior. As an example, they cited disputes with unions when they attempted to intervene with alcohol-dependent or alcohol-abusing employees.

However, the worksite study indicates that employees are more open to alcohol interventions than corporate executives imagine, particularly where employees feel endangered by the actions of their coworkers. Employees were asked whether they would be in favor of testing for alcohol use under three different circumstances: pre-employment testing, after an accident, and random testing. Surprisingly, 80 percent supported testing after an accident, two-thirds supported preemployment testing, and half supported random testing for alcohol during the workday. Support for random testing climbed to nearly two-thirds of the employees when only those working in dangerous jobs were considered. Nearly three-quarters of the employees who worked in manufacturing or transportation jobs supported random testing.

There was strong support among all employees for company assistance to employees who have drinking problems, particularly when work performance was affected; almost universal support for company insurance covering treatment services; and large majorities of employees who supported the idea that both supervisors and their co-workers should try to help employees with drinking problems. These findings indicate that employees are not as resistant to expanded alcohol interventions as senior executives perceive.

For more information on starting or enhancing a Drug-Free Workplace Program, contact the DWI Resource Center at (505) 881-1084.