

Don't mix it

A guide for employers on alcohol at work

Introduction

This booklet has been developed to help the owners and managers of small and medium-sized businesses deal with alcohol-related problems at work. It reaffirms the Government's commitment in *The Health of the Nation*¹ to encourage employers to introduce workplace alcohol policies and evaluate their impact.

Ninety per cent of personnel directors from top UK organisations surveyed in 1994² stated that alcohol consumption was a problem for their organisation. Most regarded alcohol as a fairly minor problem, involving a small number of employees. However, 17% of personnel directors described alcohol consumption as a 'major problem' for their organisation. What concerned directors most, in order of priority, was:

- loss of productivity and poor performance;
- lateness and absenteeism;
- safety concerns;
- effect on team morale and employee relations;
- bad behaviour or poor discipline;
- adverse effects on company image and customer relations.

These concerns are equally important for small and medium-sized businesses. They fall into two main areas:

- **Alcohol-related absenteeism and sickness absence.** Alcohol is estimated to cause 3-5% of all absences from work; about 8 to 14 million lost working days in the UK each year.³ How much is alcohol-related absence costing your business?
- **The effects of drinking on productivity and safety.** Alcohol consumption may result in reduced work performance, damaged customer relations, and resentment among employees who have to 'carry' colleagues whose work declines because of their drinking. There are no precise figures on the number of workplace accidents where alcohol is a factor, but alcohol is known to affect judgement and physical co-ordination. Drinking even small amounts of alcohol before or while carrying out work that is 'safety sensitive' will increase the risk of an accident.

Contrary to popular belief, the majority of people who have a drinking problem are in work. The good news is that people with drink problems can and do cut down, and that there are places throughout the country where people with drinking problems can go for expert help.

The prospect of tackling when and how much employees drink can be daunting, especially for businesses without a personnel specialist. But acting to prevent problems before they occur can save time in the end and is often more effective than dealing with a problem that has become too serious to ignore.

Any business, however small, can take practical steps to minimise the risks associated with inappropriate drinking. This booklet includes examples of action taken by businesses to prevent alcohol-related problems. Sources of advice and information lists organisations that can provide further information and help.

Drinking alcohol: Effects on the individual

Before thinking about what you can do to prevent alcohol-related problems for your business, it is worth looking briefly at how drinking alcohol affects people and your legal responsibilities as an employer.

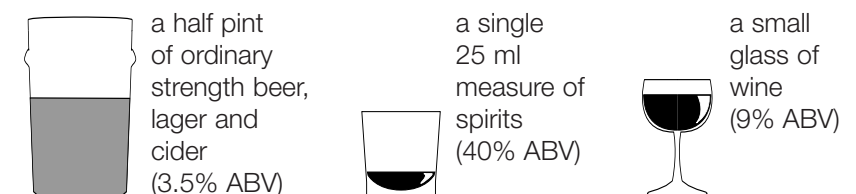
Alcohol is a positive part of life for many people and most of the time drinking alcohol doesn't cause any problems. But drinking too much or at the wrong time can be harmful. The Government's guidance on sensible drinking, published in December 1995,⁴ lists the following as examples of specific situations when the best advice is not to drink at all:

- before or during driving;
- before using machinery, electrical equipment or ladders;
- before working or in the workplace when appropriate functioning would be adversely affected by alcohol.

Box 1 describes what happens to someone when they drink alcohol. It is easy to see from this how drinking alcohol at lunchtime or before coming on shift can affect an employee's work performance. The effects of heavy drinking the previous night can last well into the next day.

Box 1 What happens when you drink alcohol

- Alcohol is absorbed into your bloodstream within a few minutes of being drunk and carried to all parts of your body including the brain.
- The concentration of alcohol in the body, known as the 'blood alcohol concentration', depends on many factors, but principally, how much you have drunk, how long you have been drinking, whether you have eaten, and your size and weight. It is difficult to know exactly how much alcohol is in your bloodstream or what effect it may have.
- It takes a healthy liver about 1 hour to break down and remove 1 unit of alcohol. A unit is equivalent to 8 gm or 10 ml (1 cl) of pure alcohol. The following all contain one unit of alcohol:



- If someone drinks 2 pints of ordinary strength beer at lunchtime or half a bottle of wine (ie 4 units), they will still have alcohol in their bloodstream 3 hours later. Similarly, if someone drinks heavily in the evening they may still be over the legal drink drive limit the following morning.
- Black coffee, cold showers and fresh air won't sober someone up. Only time can remove alcohol from the bloodstream.

Box 2 Daily benchmarks

The following benchmarks are a guide to how much adult men and women can drink in a day without putting their health at risk. They apply whether you drink every day, once or twice a week, or occasionally. The benchmarks are not targets to drink up to. There are times and circumstances when it makes sense not to drink at all.

Men

- If you drink between 3 and 4 units a day or less, there are no significant risks to your health BUT...
- If you consistently drink 4 or more units a day, there is an increasing risk to your health.

Women

- If you drink between 2 and 3 units a day or less, there are no significant risks to your health BUT...
- If you consistently drink 3 or more units a day, there is an increasing risk to your health.

Note: the benchmarks don't apply to young people who have not reached physical maturity.

Even at blood alcohol concentrations lower than the legal drink/drive limit, alcohol reduces physical co-ordination and reaction speeds. It also affects thinking, judgement and mood. People may feel more relaxed and less inhibited after a couple of drinks but getting drunk can lead to arguments, mood swings, and even violence. Large amounts of alcohol in one session can put a strain not just on the liver but other parts of the body as well, including muscle function and stamina. After getting drunk, you should avoid drinking alcohol for 48 hours to give your body tissue time to recover. However, this is a short-term measure and people whose pattern of drinking places them at significant risk should seek professional advice.

Drinking alcohol raises the drinker's blood pressure. This can increase the risk of coronary heart disease and some kinds of stroke. Regularly drinking more than the daily benchmarks (see Box 2) also increases the risk of liver damage, cirrhosis of the liver, and cancers of the mouth and throat. People who drink very heavily may develop psychological and emotional problems, including depression.

Studies show that people who regularly drink small amounts of alcohol tend to live longer than people who do not drink. The main reason is that alcohol gives protection against the development of coronary heart disease.⁴ However, this protective effect is only significant when people reach a stage of life when they are at risk of coronary heart disease. For men, this is over the age of 40. For women, it is after the menopause. The benefits come from drinking small amounts of alcohol fairly regularly - ie between 1 and 2 units a day. No overall additional benefit comes from drinking more than 2 units a day, or from drinking a particular type of drink (eg red wine).

The legal position

You have a general duty under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of your employees. If you knowingly allow an employee under the influence of excess alcohol to continue working and this places the employee or others at risk, you could be prosecuted. Similarly, your employees are also required to take reasonable care of themselves and others who could be affected by what they do. In the transport industry, there is additional legislation in place to control the misuse of alcohol and drugs. The Transport and Works Act 1992 makes it a criminal offence for certain workers to be unfit through drink and/or drugs while working on railways, tramways and other guided transport systems. The operators of the transport system would also be guilty of an offence unless they had shown all due diligence in trying to prevent such an offence being committed.

What can I do?

A straightforward four-step process for dealing with alcohol problems at work is set out below. All companies - large and small - can benefit from an agreed policy on alcohol. A model policy is described under Step 3.

Step 1 Find out if there is a problem

Problems may come from employees:

- drinking during working hours;
- drinking during breaks or before coming on shift;
- regular heavy drinking outside working hours;
- getting drunk outside working hours.

You may find it useful to find out from your employees what they know about the effects of alcohol on health and safety, what they feel currently about drinking alcohol during working hours and their understanding of any restrictions or rules on alcohol use in your business.

You may also want to explore the information you have on:

- sickness absence;
- productivity;
- accident records;
- disciplinary problems. This may help you to find out if alcohol is harming your business.

There are many reasons why someone develops a drinking problem. Working conditions - for example stress, excessive work pressure, unsocial hours or monotony - may be a factor in someone starting to drink more. Opportunity can also be a factor; for example in jobs where there is ready access to alcohol or where drinking and entertaining is a normal part of doing business. Lack of supervision combined with opportunities to drink during working hours may mean that a drinking problem goes unnoticed.

People with drinking problems are not, however, the sole cause of alcohol-related problems at work. A business will suffer if any employee drinks during working hours in such a way that the work suffers, phones in sick after a heavy drinking session the night before, or comes to work with a hangover.

Step 2 Decide what to do

A good start is to ask yourself the following four questions:

- Question 1 Am I happy for my employees to drink alcohol...
... during working hours?
Yes/No/Depends on...?
... during lunch and other breaks?
Yes/No/Depends on...?
... on special occasions?
Yes/No/Depends on...?
... when entertaining clients?
Yes/No/Depends on...?
- Question 2 Do I expect the same from staff working in safety-sensitive jobs when it comes to not drinking alcohol as I do from staff working in non-safety-sensitive jobs or management positions?
- Question 3 How would I deal with an employee who is finding it difficult to control his or her drinking and whose work is suffering as a result?
- Question 4 How would I deal with an employee who turns up for work drunk or flouts known restrictions on drinking alcohol?

Box 3 Dealing with an employee with a possible alcohol problem

- Employees with a drink problem have the same rights to confidentiality and support as they would if they had any other medical or psychological condition.
- Disciplinary action should be a last resort. A court may find a dismissal unfair if an employer has made no attempt to help an employee whose work problems are related to drinking alcohol.
- The cost of recruiting and training a replacement may be greater than the cost of allowing someone time off to obtain expert help.
- Many people with an alcohol problem are able in time to regain full control over their drinking and return to their previous work performance.
- It may be very difficult for people to admit to themselves or others that their drinking is out of control. They need to know that you will treat their drinking problem as a health problem rather than an immediate cause for dismissal or disciplinary action.
- If employees' drinking is a matter of concern, they should be encouraged to seek help from their GP or a specialist alcohol agency.

Consulting others

In deciding what to do, you will almost certainly need to consult others. In larger organisations, good practice would be to set up a working party led by a senior manager to look at the issue of alcohol as it affects the business, also involving the occupational health practitioner where available. This may not be feasible in smaller businesses, but you will find it useful to talk to:

- other managers;
- supervisors;

- staff representatives/trade union representatives;
- employees.

Gaining the support of your workforce for any change in company rules will be much easier if staff feel that they have been consulted beforehand. You may be surprised by the reactions of your staff. The culture surrounding drinking during working hours has changed dramatically over the past decade. The 1994 Health Education Authority survey² found that 63% of workers and 69% of manual workers supported a total ban on drinking during working hours. The same survey found that 66% of workers thought that senior employees should be subject to exactly the same controls on alcohol as the rest of the workforce while 25% believed senior employees should set an example and be subject to tighter controls!

If you want to find out what other businesses in your area have done, you could try getting in touch with your local business forum or health promotion unit. You might also find it helpful to talk to your local alcohol advisory service about the best way to deal with any employees who are finding it difficult to control their drinking. Establishing a link now could make things easier if you have a problem to deal with in the future.

Step 3 Taking action

In taking action, you need to ensure that you have the support of other managers and gain the support of your employees. The personal involvement of the boss will also make a huge difference when it comes to introducing any changes. The most important questions are:

- **What** needs to be done?
- **Who** needs to do it?

You also need to think about communication and training. How will current staff and any recruited in the future know the company's rules about drinking? Does anyone need more information or training?

Supervisors and other managers need to be clear about company rules and what to do if they suspect employees' drinking is affecting their work. They also need to be aware of the implications of not tackling possible alcohol misuse, especially where safety is an issue. Your local alcohol advisory service may be able to help train managers to recognise if someone has an alcohol problem and the best way to handle the situation. The service may charge for training.

Many larger organisations have a policy that describes their position on employees' drinking. A written alcohol policy has many advantages, for example leaving less room for misunderstanding than an informal 'understanding'. A model alcohol policy is described in Box 4. It does not have to be a long or complicated document.

Providing 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. Your local health promotion unit can supply leaflets and posters.

Box 4 A model alcohol policy

A model workplace alcohol policy would cover the following areas.

Aims

Why have a policy?

Who does the policy apply to?

(Note: best practice would be for the policy to apply equally to all grades of staff and types of work.)

Responsibility

Who is responsible for implementing the policy?

(Note: all managers and supervisors will be responsible in some way but it will be more effective if a senior employee is named as having overall responsibility.)

The rules

How does the company expect employees to behave to ensure that their alcohol consumption does not have a detrimental effect on their work?

Special circumstances

Do the rules apply in all situations or are there exceptions?

Confidentiality

A statement assuring employees that any alcohol problem will be treated in strict confidence.

Help

A description of the support available to employees who have problems because of their drinking.

Information

A commitment to providing employees with general information about the effects of drinking alcohol on health and safety.

Disciplinary action

The circumstances in which disciplinary action will be taken.

Screening: What is involved

More companies - particularly those in safety-sensitive industries - are using screening and testing as a way of controlling alcohol problems. It can be used in various ways, for example:

- as part of a selection process for job applicants;
- testing all or part of the workforce routinely, occasionally or on a random basis;
- in specific circumstances, such as after an accident or incident, where there is evidence of drinking that contravenes the company's regulations, or as part of an aftercare rehabilitation programme;
- to monitor a particular problem, eg employees reporting for work with alcohol in their bloodstream from the previous evening's drinking.

Alcohol screening is a sensitive issue. Securing the agreement of the workforce to the principle of screening is essential, partly because of the practical and legal issues involved. Screening is only likely to be acceptable if it can be seen to be part of a company's occupational health policy and is clearly designed to prevent risks

to others. Cost is another consideration because of the need to ensure the accuracy and validity of test results.

Screening by itself will never be the complete answer to problems caused by alcohol misuse and its results must always be supplemented by a professional assessment of the employee. Prevention is just as important and the guidance set out earlier in this booklet is relevant to all businesses, whether you decide to include screening or not.

The implications of introducing alcohol screening

Agreement to the principle of screening must be incorporated in each member of staff's contract of employment. For new staff, this is fairly straightforward but existing staff are under no legal obligation to agree to changes in their terms and conditions of service. If an employer tried to force a test on an unwilling employee, the employee could resign and claim 'constructive dismissal'.

In addition to changes to the contract of employment, you should obtain the written consent of the individual for each test. This consent applies only to tests relating specifically to alcohol and to no other substances, condition or disease. Where more extensive testing is required (ie for drug abuse), you should obtain further consent from the employee. Employers should ensure that employees are fully aware of this requirement. Medical confidentiality should be assured - you should only tell managers whether an employee is considered fit or unfit for work.

Testing requires the introduction of a 'chain of custody' procedure to ensure that samples are actually provided by the person being screened, samples cannot be tampered with, accurate laboratory analysis and interpretation is guaranteed, and appropriate action is taken when a test result is positive. Any laboratory accredited by the National Measurement Accreditation Service (Tel: 020 8943 7140) will have satisfied assessors that it provides a service that meets all criteria.

Step 4 Checking what you have done

As with any other kind of initiative, you should regularly check if it is working and whether any changes need to be made.

Summary checklist

- 1 Find out if you have a problem.
- 2 Make a list of who you need to consult.
- 3 Decide how your company expects employees to limit their drinking.
- 4 Consider how you can make sure that if an employee has a possible alcohol problem, this is noticed and help is offered.
- 5 Decide at what point and in what circumstances you will treat an employee's drinking as a matter for discipline rather than a health problem.
- 6 Think about how you will let your workforce know about company policy on alcohol - consider introducing a formal written alcohol policy.
- 7 Find out if any of your managers or other staff need more information or training.
- 8 Consider providing staff with general information about alcohol and health.

Sources of advice and information

The stages described in this booklet can be managed by any small or medium-sized business. However, if you would like additional information or help, you may wish to contact one of the organisations listed below.

National workplace organisations

ADVISORY CONCILIATION AND ARBITRATION SERVICE (ACAS)

Brandon House,
180 Borough High Street
London SE1 1LW
Helpline: 08457 47 47 47
Website: www.acas.org.uk

ACAS can provide advice to employers and employees on the employment and industrial relations implications of policies on alcohol at work.

CONFEDERATION OF BRITISH INDUSTRY (CBI)

Centre Point
103 New Oxford Street
London WC1A 1DU
Tel: 020 7379 7400
Website: www.cbi.org.uk

The CBI is the employer's representative on bodies such as ACAS and the Health and Safety Commission (HSC). It has various committees and working groups dealing with issues including health and safety and produces a range of publications.

THE HEALTH AND SAFETY EXECUTIVE (HSE)

Tel: 0845 345 0055 (Infoline)
Fax: 0845 408 9566
Textphone: 0845 408 9577

HSE's Infoline is available to provide general advice about health and safety issues related to work.

THE INSTITUTE OF OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH (IOSH)

The Grange
Highfield Drive
Wigston
Leicester LE18 1NN
Tel: 0116 257 3100
Website: www.iosh.co.uk

IOSH is the leading professional body in occupational safety and health. It organises seminars, conferences and training on health and safety issues, and provides access to a technical database and an information service.

TRADES UNION CONGRESS (TUC)

Congress House
23-28 Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3LS
Tel: 020 7636 4030
Website: www.tuc.org.uk

The TUC has produced a number of health-related publications.

Specialist organisations

ALCOHOL CONCERN
64 Lemon Street
London E1 8EU
Tel: 020 7264 0510
Website: www.alcoholconcern.org.uk

Alcohol Concern can put you in touch with local alcohol advisory services, in particular those that are members of the Federation of Workplace Alcohol Advisory Services (FEDWAAS).

INSTITUTE OF ALCOHOL STUDIES
Alliance House
12 Caxton Street
London SW1H 0QS
Tel: 020 7222 4001
Website: www.ias.org.uk

Provides educational and training materials.

ROYAL SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF ACCIDENTS (ROSPA)
Edgbaston Park
353 Bristol Road
Birmingham B5 7ST
Tel: 0121 248 2000
Website: www.rospa.co.uk

ROSPA has an occupational safety membership scheme which offers access to a number of services and products.

Agencies in the rest of the UK

Northern Ireland

THE HEALTH PROMOTION AGENCY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND
18 Ormeau Avenue
Belfast BT2 8HS
Tel: 028 9031 1611
Website: www.healthpromotionagency.org.uk

NORTHLANDS
Shepherds Way Complex
Dungiven Road
Derry
Tel: 028 7131 3232
Website: www.northlands.org.uk

As a member of FEDWAAS, Northlands offers training and help with health care in the workplace.

Scotland

HEALTH EDUCATION BOARD FOR SCOTLAND
Woodburn House
Canaan Lane
Edinburgh EH10 4SG
Tel: 0131 536 5500
Website: www.healthscotland.com

ALCOHOL FOCUS SCOTLAND
2nd Floor
166 Buchanan Street
Glasgow G1 2LW
Tel: 0141 572 6700
Website: www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk

Wales

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY FOR WALES HEALTH PROMOTION DIVISION
Cathays Park
Cardiff CF10 3NQ
Tel: 029 20 825111
Website: www.hpw.wales.gov.uk

References

- 1 Department of Health *The Health of the Nation* 1992 HMSO
- 2 Health Education Authority *Attitudes towards alcohol in the workplace* 1995 HEA
- 3 Holtermann, S and Burchell, A *Government Economic Service Working Party No 37* 1981 DHSS
- 4 Department of Health *Sensible Drinking. The Report of an Interdepartmental Working Party* 1996 Department of Health

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For information about health and safety ring HSE's Infoline Tel: 0845 345 0055 Fax: 0845 408 9566 Textphone: 0845 408 9577 e-mail: hseinfo@natbrit.com or write to HSE Information Services, Caerphilly Business Park, Caerphilly CF83 3GG.

This document contains notes on good practice which are not compulsory but which you may find helpful in considering what you need to do.

This document is available web only at: www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg240.pdf.

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Case Studies

DMM Engineering Ltd

DMM Engineering Ltd, 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.

SSI

Subscription Services Ltd, a subsidiary of the Post Office, is a market leader in the provision of telemarketing and integrated customer management services. SSI provides its services to a range of markets from government agencies to mail order companies and charities. It is perhaps best known as the organisation that administers the TV licence on behalf of the BBC. Around half of its 1600 staff are based at SSI's Bristol Headquarters and the remainder are spread over 43 areas across the UK.

In January 1993, the company proposed a policy on alcohol to the trade unions. The trade union side requested that lunchtime retirement functions be exempted from the restrictions on alcohol on the premises and the company agreed. On 1 March 1993, a letter went out to all employees explaining the new policy which was introduced on 1 April. SSI's policy covers restrictions on alcohol consumption during working hours, defines what is allowed when entertaining on special occasions, encourages staff with a drink problem to seek help at an early stage and provides general information to employees on the risks to health from excessive drinking.

ICI

The sale, distribution, possession or consumption of alcohol on ICI premises is prohibited without the written approval of appropriate senior management. ICI requires its employees to attend for work in a fit and appropriate state with no impairment from the effects of alcohol. Being unfit for work due to alcohol consumption is prohibited and grounds for termination of employment. ICI recognises that alcohol dependency is a treatable condition. Employees and management will be made fully aware that assistance in the prevention, early detection and diagnosis and treatment of alcohol dependency is readily available. All employees have a responsibility to behave in accordance with the requirements of the substance abuse policy.

Whitbread Plc

Whitbread Plc advocates an alcohol policy on the grounds that as a company with brewing interests, it has a responsibility to promote health and sensible drinking. It was one of the first companies in the UK to introduce a policy. Generally, the main emphasis of the policy is in providing advice and support for employees on alcohol-related issues.