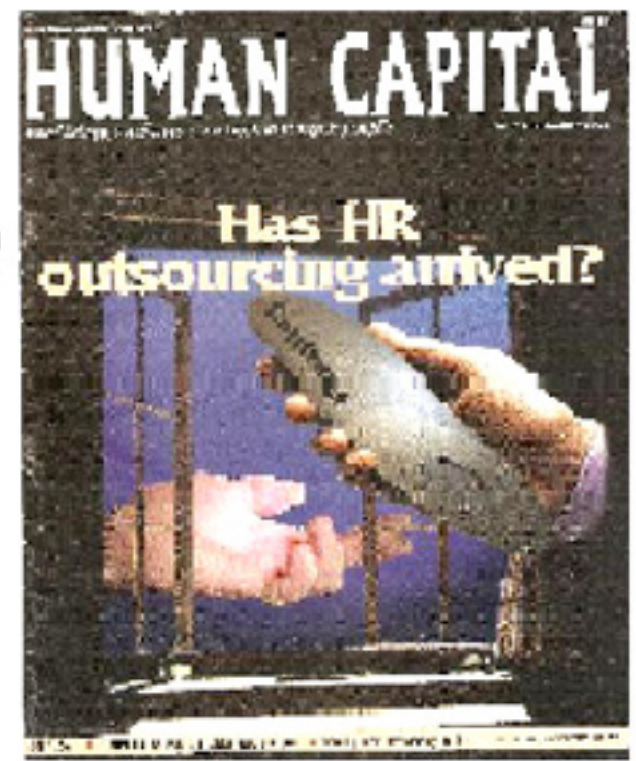




Substance abuse in the workplace

By R. S. Jagdev



According to a survey, only a minority of people - 19.1 percent - have actually talked to a coworker about his or her use of alcohol or drugs. The rest - 80.6 percent - say nothing.

But as a manager or an HR professional you can't look the other way. "Concern about alcohol and drug use in the workplace is something that is central to the role of the HR professional," says Pankaj Suri, HR Manager of Daksh Call Centre, Gurgaon. Any problem that the workforce brings to the job - either when they're hired or on daily basis at work - are going to be the bane of their existence if they can't effectively identify, intervene and resolve it.

Cost of ignoring problems

Employees avoid discussing substance abuse problems for a variety of reasons. Many feel that raising the issue is too much of an intrusion into the personal life of the colleague. Others fear that discussions could provoke the colleague's anger. Some managers don't feel they have the time to deal with substance abuse issues, and others don't think it's their responsibility to get involved: "What employees do on their own time is their business. I was not hired to be a police officer or a counsellor."

But ignoring the problem is perhaps the worst choice HR can make, according to substance abuse experts. "There are negative consequences associated with having one's head in the sand and pretending that the problem does not exist," says Suri.

First of all, ignoring a problem

can be dangerous. Studies show that alcohol and drug abusers have two to four times as many accidents as people who do not use drugs and alcohol, that they can be linked to 40 percent of industrial fatalities, according to Occupational Medicine Magazine.

Second, ignoring the issue is costly. Accidents can be very expensive. But also costly are the less dramatic, day to day financial losses that accrue in a company when its workers are impaired and performing below potential. Alcohol and drug abusers are absent from work two-and-a-half times more frequently than nonusers; they use three times the amount of sick leave as nonusers; their workers compensation claims are five times higher; and they are generally less productive. These costs hurt the bottom line.

"A typical company is very much at risk for incidents, for example, when drivers come to work under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Accidents could happen, causing the disruption of deliveries or other activities. Vehicles could be damaged; people could be hurt or killed. These have an immediate impact on the bottom line for a small or medium-sized company," says KK Sharma, Sr. Manager - SRPR. But, he adds, companies are also at risk when high-level pros come to work under the influence of alcohol or drugs. The judgement of someone in a position to make decisions about day-to-day practices might become impaired, and that person might make a huge mistake that costs the company tens of thousands of rupees in not completing a

product on time or misallocating resources. This kind of problem can become very apparent in a hurry, especially in a small or medium sized company.

Take for instance, the case of an insurance company that AK Singh worked with, but prefers not to name. It experienced the costs of substance abuse firsthand when one of its key professionals - an actuary - developed an alcohol problem.

First, the person began missing deadlines. Then, he failed to contribute adequately to the company's planning process. "It caused company to miss its deadlines in its planning cycle", says Singh. Then, the actuary's absences increased. Coworkers tried to cover for this person. They finished reports for him and

The warning signs of substance abuse

The following changes in behaviour could signal a substance abuse problem. They should be documented by managers and then discussed with human resources.

- ▶ Increased absenteeism and tardiness, especially on Mondays and Fridays and before and after holidays.
- ▶ Frequent unreported "emergencies".
- ▶ Frequent colds, flus, upset stomachs, headache etc.
- ▶ Higher- than -average accident rates on and off the job.
- ▶ A depressed or anxious disposition.
- ▶ A tendency to over react to real or imagined criticism.
- ▶ A tendency to be overly withdrawn or improperly talkative.

supplied some of the planning inputs that was needed.. But still, deadlines passed, unmet. Finally, the department brought in extra help to get the work done, at significant expense. There was a conspiracy that protected this person from observation and intervention into the consequences of his behaviour. In the end, the actuary was fired for cause - his performance had deteriorated too much and he had refused the counselling help that was offered. This, of course, brought more costs. "There are a lot of resources involved in the recruiting and selection of replacements for key positions" says Singh. "I have seen figures as high as 2 lacs to replace certain kinds of individuals and upto 5 lacs to replace others", adds Pankaj Suri.

What to do

Companies can avoid or at least reduce the costs associated with substance abuse in workforce by observing the following practices:

Have a policy. The policy should take a clear stand against the use, possession, sale or distribution (particularly on company time) of any mood-altering substances. It should also outline a very clear sequence of events that will ensure if the rules are broken. "HR has a key role in developing and renewing workplace policies that have to do with alcohol and drugs and safety," says Pankaj.

Train managers on how to recognize the signs of substance abuse among employees. These include increased absenteeism and tardiness, as well as socially inappropriate behaviour. One of the roles that HR frequently plays is to partner with the management to identify what the essential elements of the training program should be, and to identify who is the best qualified to deliver it," says Sunil Yadav, senior manager, employee relations, Honda Car.

Consider an employee

assistance program. For Rs.100 to 500 per employee, per year, your company can purchase an employee assistance program (EAP) that provides counselling to employees on substance abuse and other personal problems. In the absence of an EAP, you may contact a dedicated alcohol and drug clinic to perform assessments and perform drug tests, a certified mental health counsellor to provide assessments.

Encourage employees to get involved. There's a responsibility to address alcohol and drugs in the workplace at all levels, from the CEO to the line worker. "I would encourage everyone not to look the other way, and to be willing to do something about it," says Sunil Yadav.

Very effective in this regard is an education program that makes substance abuse unpopular and encourages people to get help. Shriram Pistons has just such a program. Replete with T-shirts and caps displaying slogans like 'drugs and alcohol don't work here, the problem is designed to send a simple message, like 'using drugs and alcohol on the job is unacceptable'. Dinesh, who helped design the program, says it is a success. "The real strength of our prevention program is not so much the intervention piece (getting employees the help they need). It's more the visibility in the workplace of the message that substance abuse is unacceptable."

Teach employees how to intervene. Often employees want to get involved, but they don't know how. To them, Yadav offers the following advice: "If you have some sort of relationship with the person, talk to the person. Let him or her know what your concern is and what you have seen. Don't set yourself up as a substance abuse expert. Don't accuse the person of having an alcohol or drug problem. Simply say that something is going on and it really concerns you, and you need help." Most EAP's advise employees on how to intervene.

Intervene early. "We strongly feel that managers and professionals do not have to wait until there is a crisis or an emergency to intervene" adds Yadav. "If they are picking up rumours they need to find a way to informally approach the employee with the problem and say that you are concerned and mention the reason for it. If there's some help that you need let me know," he goes on to say.

Teach employees how to deal with a failed intervention. It is troubled employee refuses help - or his or her behaviour continues to affect your safety or your work - the issue should be brought to the person's manager and to HR.

Document performance. Managers should carefully document the performance of substance abusers so that they can assess the success of the intervention and make a case for termination, if necessary.

Follow up. Once a substance abuser enters treatment, the manager or the HR department can check on that person's progress by asking the EAP to verify that the individual is enrolled in treatment. EAP's do not share a lot of personal information with the employer, but they can tell the employer whether or not the employee is following through with treatment, provided the employee signs a document permitting the EAP to release the information. "We would never reveal, even that an employee had contacted us, without a signed release" says Yadav. "The real goal of the EAP is to give employees and their families the opportunity to get help before their problem ever impacts the job," he adds wistfully. But it does not always work that way. HC

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