

Substance abuse: the invisible issue

Communication is a key step in helping
the employee -- and the company.

By RALPH KENYON

Substance abuse is a problem that's not specific to any particular industry or activity. The communications industry is no different than any other in its share of substance-abusing employees. As the recent television advertisements say, "One out of every six working Americans has a substance-abuse problem. Isn't it surprising that none of them work for you?"

Kenyon is an independent consultant in Williamstown, Mass. He served as a U.S. Navy drug and alcohol program administrator for six years.

This industry is also no different in its reluctance to talk about the existence of a problem.



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None of the managers contacted for this article were willing to talk openly about current or former substance-abusing employees. Most claim they have never had any sort of substance abuser on their staffs. One telecommunications manager of a major Wall Street brokerage firm asserts that he's "not aware of any substance abuse problems at Wall Street firms."

Another top telecommunications manager at one of the world's largest electrical equipment manufacturing companies says, "We've been fortunate in that we've never had

such a problem."

Major concerns of those who would speak on the subject include employee relationships with management, customers and other employees; productivity; potential social or professional stigma attached to admitting substance abusers may be on staff; and the long- and short-term costs to the company.

The amount that substance abuse costs high-technology companies is proportionally higher due to the higher training costs of skilled personnel. Salvaging this training - and the employee - requires understanding what substance abuse is and how to deal with it.

A telecommunications manager for a large financial trading firm comments, "Turnover is a tremendous cost in the technical fields. We want to keep people once we've made the investment to train them. When you bring on a new person, even an experienced technician, they still have to learn your operation."

There are other organizational costs,

according to a telecommunications manager with an East Coast entertainment company. "There's a ripple effect. If you have an employee who's marginal, who's a problem and under suspicion of something, that employee may have a very negative effect throughout the rest of the department. Peers usually know better than a supervisor about an abuse problem, and it affects their morale. They think, 'He's getting away with it. How come he's not carrying his weight and I am?'"

Coping with reality

Substance abuse is a coping strategy that is inappropriate to the situation at hand. The simple big picture: Abusing substances can make us feel good, for a while, regardless of whether we do things right or wrong.

A substance is abused if its use detrimentally affects a person's normal performance. Use that is not detrimental to normal functioning is not abuse.

There are various ways to abuse substances, but they all fit

one particular model. The substance is used in a manner that is inappropriate to its purpose; it is used in place of the behavior that would have been appropriate to the situation. The effect of the substance is sought by the abuser as a substitute for normal performance.

The immediate psychological state change rewards the individual, but it does not deal with the situation at hand. Since substance abuse is inappropriate for dealing with the situation, the situation doesn't get resolved.

Substances typically abused include:

- **Alcohol.** Alcohol is the most widely abused substance, since it's legal and socially acceptable. It's easy to take a drink to relieve stress. Continuing with drinking rather than dealing with the source of stress becomes abuse.

- **Prescription drugs.** Psychological state- or mood-altering drugs such as sedatives can be used to help manage stressful situations. However, if the person resorts to the drug as a substitute for dealing

with stress, the result is detrimental and becomes abuse.

- **Illegal drugs.** The mechanism in this case is the same, but the motivation may be different.

- **Food.** If we eat when we feel depressed because eating makes us feel good, then we are abusing food. Sometimes we are depressed because we are overweight, so we eat something to make us feel better.

Chronic abuse

Chronic substance abuse undergoes phases.

A person undergoing substance abuse will be having some problems that are going unsolved. In early stages, the abuse behavior is being substituted in reaction to only a few problems. But as the cycle repeats, the behavior will be substituted in more and more problem situations.

Substance abusers begin to adapt the substance-abuse behavior, which makes them feel good, to more and more stressful problem situations. Job performance is usually the last to go.

The typical progression moves from prob-

lem areas in personal relationships at home, to personal relationships with peers on the job, to personal relationships with supervisors, to personal hygiene and, finally, to performance on the job.

As the financial firm's telecommunications manager comments, "When a person's job performance deteriorates, they'll have excuses ranging across the spectrum of human creativity; they can come up with so many excuses, it's incredible."

The person will begin to fail to meet commitments and to make mistakes on the job. Tardiness and absenteeism will begin to rise. "If you track their attendance, and we do," one telecommunications director says, "you'll see a pattern of Friday and Monday absences." In the case of alcohol abuse, lunch hours often begin to extend. Symptoms include inadequate personal affairs management, deteriorated personal relations, mood swings, increasing inattention to detail and deteriorating job performance.

Intervention

A number of steps must be followed when dealing with substance abuse. The first requirement is that supervisors educate themselves to be able to recognize when

This is usually the hardest stage. It requires that all the symptoms used in identifying substance abuse be thoroughly documented. In addition, the detrimental effect on the employee's performance must be

documented. The employee is called to task to correct the performance. At early stages, the employee is counseled regarding the deteriorating performance and given an opportunity to correct his or her behavior without supervision. If this informal solution does not work, then a more formal intervention is required. Employees are involved in the process by committing to correct their performance.

They are given a final opportunity to correct the performance with the condition that if they fail to perform up to standard, they must agree to submit themselves for treatment. Coercing the commitment by threatening job status may be necessary in some intractable cases.

Substance abuse affects the entire life of an individual, not just the job site, so it's appropriate to bring in family members as well as peers and supervisors to provide a unified intervention structure.

It may be necessary to corner the employee with all the facts demonstrating that substance abuse is the cause of degraded job perfor-

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substance abuse is occurring, such as observing the stages above.

The telecommunications director of a large Midwestern options trading firm says of a former employee, "I noticed physical symptoms such as dilated pupils. He showed general forgetfulness and changes in behavior patterns. The guy was unable to focus on his job, and he was doing sloppy work."

Once cases of abuse are recognized, the abusing individuals must be educated to accept that abuse is what's going on. One must first convince the person that the abuse is a problem.

documented.

Documentation is crucial in handling the problem. "I have seen signs of substance abuse, such as a runny nose, eye redness, drowsiness, peaks in emotion and sudden bursts of energy," says the entertainment firm's telecommunications manager. "But without a smoking gun, I couldn't confront the person. You have this fear that if on bring up an accusation and find out, you're all wet, that would really destroy the relationship you have with the employee."

When a history of degraded performance is documented, the em-

mance.

The employee must agree to cease substance abuse and should be given the choice of treatment or termination in the event of further abuse.

According to the financial trading company telecommunications manager, "We have a structured program in our company where, if someone is confronted with substance abuse, they can choose to go into counseling to straighten out. If they refuse, typically a disciplinary procedure is started, involving probation."

At this point, if failure to meet the commitment to improve is documented and presented to the employee, the choice of treatment or termination must be enforced.

"I tried confronting him, and it didn't work," says the Midwestern options firm telecommunications director. "The employee didn't choose to correct his behavior. On the basis of that and physical evidence, I fired him."

Not all managers feel that the workplace is a suitable arena for reha-

bilitation. "There seems to be a general perception in today's business environment that if a person is an alcoholic, drug abuser, whatever, then the company has an obligation to try to re-

the people had their own agendas, and you can only do so much."

Employee assistance programs (EAP) are welcomed by some managers.

According to the

like that. Companies that have an EAP are spending money very wisely."

Two-way loyalty

The requirements for dealing with substance-abuse problems, then, are relatively straightforward. Supervisors must learn to recognize the symptoms, document the employee's degraded performance and confront the employee. The employee must be required to cease substance abuse and must be given the choice to submit to treatment or lose his job.

When a company helps a valued employee return to full function, it's doing more than simply avoiding retraining costs. As the financial trading firm's manager puts it, "We'd like to avoid turnover cost, and we'd also like to solidify loyalty to the company by having loyalty be a two-way street. We make the effort to help them with their problems, and we hope they in turn will have a certain degree of loyalty to the company."



"There's a perception today that the company has an obligation to try to reform abusers, and I think that's a crock."



form him, to make his entire life better, and I think that's a crock," says the options firm director. "If a person chooses to be any kind of abuser, be it alcohol, illegal drugs, whatever, that's a personal choice, and the business has no obligation to carry that individual's habits."

Formal company programs, however, can help influence that choice.

According to the financial firm's telecommunications manager, "Our program generally works well. The successes far outweigh the few failures. In those cases, obviously,

entertainment company manager, "It's very touchy, for example, dealing with an alcoholic whose whole life is affected." In a previous organization he was with, an alcoholic employee's spouse attempted suicide.

"The EAP case-worker went quickly into action and was able to assist the spouse, who had been hospitalized by that time. That's why I like to leave situations like that in the hands of a professional. I benefited from the EAP being in place, because I sure as hell don't have the expertise to handle a very delicate situation