

## Risky Business ■

There are dozens of ways to deal with the problem of drinking and drug use in the new workplace. But most experts agree the best way is one that targets the *causes* of the problem.

On the management side, that could include paying greater attention to quality-of-life issues such as alienation, boredom, family problems, and simple burn-out. On the employee's side, it comes down to plain old responsibility.



Workers need to remind themselves (or be reminded) of their duty to themselves, their co-workers, and their employers, not to come to work in an impaired state—*any* impaired state—whether caused by drinking, drugs, illness, or stress.

Employers, for their part, need to actively promote safety and sobriety in the workplace and provide services for impaired employees. Research has consistently shown the success and cost-effectiveness of such programs.

And common sense underscores the advantages of lower accident and absentee rates, as well as decreased job turnover and training costs.

Still, to be effective, the changes need to come now.

Because substance use is risky enough in the first place. In the workplace—old or new—it's a riskier business still. ■



This is one in a series of publications on drugs, behavior, and health published by Do It Now Foundation. Please call or write for a list of current titles, or visit our web site at [www.doitnow.org](http://www.doitnow.org).



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# SUBSTANCES & Safety



## ■ Drinking, Drugs & the 'New Workplace'

A Do It Now Publication by Jennifer James

## Old And New ■

You hear a lot of talk these days about the “new workplace.” And in many ways, it's more than just a media myth. It's a reality.

The new workplace is a place where labor and management recognize their own interdependence, and work together.

It's a place where men and women coexist comfortably, and where the needs of individual employees and their families are taken into account in the planning process.

Still, it's got a lot in common with the old workplace, if you believe statistics. Because about 6 million American workers use drugs regularly on the job, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, often with serious consequences to themselves and their fellow workers.

Mishandled shipments and mislaid tools add up. Estimates of accidents, absences, falling productivity, and rising insurance rates range up to \$171 billion a year.

Workers carry their share of the burden, too. A recent study of municipal employees in Texas found that one in 10 drank or used drugs in the workplace.

And it was alcohol use during work hours that resulted in the most job-related “consequences” (injuries, absences, and disciplinary actions) for over half these employees.

That's why we've developed this pamphlet: to point out some of the dangers of drug and alcohol use on the job and review options about where we go from here.

Because the cost in dollars is staggering.

But in human terms — in accidents, injuries, lost jobs, and damaged lives — the real cost is off the charts.



**Critical mess.** Transit accidents helped barden public attitudes against workplace drug and alcohol use.



## About 6 million workers

*use drugs regularly on the job, often with serious consequences to themselves and co-workers.*



## Depressants ■

Drug use in the workplace usually keeps pace with substance use trends in other segments of society. If a drug is used at all, it's used in the plant or office, and if it's a problem anywhere, it's a problem there.

So it shouldn't be surprising that drugs that depress, or slow down, the central nervous system often turn up on the job—sometimes with disastrous consequences.

The depressant drug group includes alcohol and a spectrum of sedatives and tranquilizers, such as Valium® and Xanax®. We'll focus on alcohol, though, since it's so widely used and because it offers such a clear example of how depressants affect performance.

That's because alcohol is a central nervous system depressant. It slows a variety of brain functions, from breathing and heartbeat to thinking. Effects vary by amount consumed and other factors, including age, sex, and body size.

Perceptual abilities, such as vision and hearing, aren't affected—at least not at low doses and not at first. Still, the brain's ability to coordinate mental and physical activities is reduced even after a drink or two, making alcohol particularly dangerous on the job.

Other depressants produce similar effects in similar ways.

At even small doses, sleeping pills and tranquilizers slow brain activity and impair thinking and judgment.

A study of Valium's effects on driving linked it to problems in speed control and concentration, even at normal doses. In fact, dose for dose, Valium proved as dangerous on the road as alcohol.

And the problems don't stop when the drugs wear off.

Breakdown products from depressants can stay in the body for days after use, subtly affecting coordination, concentration, and judgment. And since all depressants cause dependence, the risks just keep on coming.

## Stimulants ■

The stimulant group includes chemicals that speed up the brain and central nervous system, such as cocaine, crystal meth and other amphetamines, and over-the-counter diet and stay-awake tablets. They all reduce appetite and cause increased feelings of energy and alertness.

One reason stimulants are so widely used at work is the user's belief that the drugs sharpen attention and improve performance. However, positive effects on performance are short-lived and involve only simple tasks.

On the other hand, the drugs trigger changes that can cancel out the benefits of an energy boost, including:

- ▶ tension, irritability, and aggressiveness
- ▶ fatigue and dizziness
- ▶ impaired concentration and judgment

Like alcohol, cocaine and stimulants can increase the tendency for impulsiveness and risk-taking, making use a particular risk on the road or around machinery.



**Delayed reactions.** Depressants and other drugs can impair judgment and slow responses for hours after intoxicating effects wear off.

And since stimulants can also mask the effects of alcohol and other drugs, users may overestimate their ability to drive or perform other hazardous activities.

And also like the depressants, stimulants can produce a serious long-term dependence—which can affect a lot more than job performance.



**Pot's intoxicating effects typically fade within a few hours, but dulled reflexes and performance can last even longer.**

In fact, a recent study at Stanford University showed that pilots continued to perform below par for up to 24 hours after use, even though they were unaware of any “hangover” effects.

## Other Drugs ■

Other substances can pose other risks to workplace safety and performance. In fact, a survey by the Bureau of National Affairs found that many managers blame *legal* drugs—including prescription and over-the-counter medications—for a big share of on-the-job problems.

Common examples include cold and allergy remedies and antihistamines which can cause drowsiness and slow

reaction time. Even caffeine, in big-enough doses (like those in “stay awake” pills, diet aids, and industrial-strength office coffee) can disrupt concentration and trigger anxiety.

Smoking has been getting its share of attention lately, too, as “new workplace” managers see it for what it is: a main cause of employee illness and reduced productivity.

And they have numbers to back them up. In fact, the American Lung Association currently estimates that each smoker costs industry an average of \$1000 in health care costs and accidents *every year*.

Also, studies show that smokers in non-smokefree workplaces spend up to three hours a week in “smoking behaviors” (lighting, smoking, and handling cigarettes, emptying ashtrays, looking for matches, etc.), activities which distract from safety—and from the task at hand.

## What Works at Work

In the new workplace—just as in the old—employers can choose to respond to drugs and alcohol use in a variety of ways.

Some work better than others, depending on such factors as company size, severity of the problem, and corporate “style.” But three approaches are most common:

▶ **Drug Testing.** Businesses are increasingly testing employees and job applicants. According to the Society for Human Resource Management, 84 percent of U.S. businesses tested at least some of their workers in 2006.

▶ **Employee Assistance Programs.**

Probably the best approach to drug and alcohol abuse in the workplace, EAP's offer a range of services, from chemical dependency counseling and family services to treatment and placement.

▶ **Health Promotion Programs.** Quality-of-life services, from smoking cessation and stress management programs to nutrition and exercise counseling, seek to improve employee wellness overall, rather than limiting services to those with chemical problems. ■



## Marijuana ■

Still the most widely-used illegal drug, marijuana is one of the most-often used drugs in the workplace.

A main reason for pot's visibility on the job is its “invisibility” everywhere else, since its high produces few physical signs of use. And while most smokers think they can function normally—and unnoticed—under its influence, new research indicates this isn't always true.

Even at low doses, marijuana slows cognitive skills. Complex tasks, particularly those involving calculation or problem solving, seem most affected, but pot also disrupts concentration and short-term memory. Other effects include:

- ▶ slowed reflexes and reaction time
- ▶ impaired peripheral vision and reduced visual-tracking ability
- ▶ distractibility and reduced attention span

Pot's intoxicating effects typically fade in a few hours, but dulled reflexes and performance can last longer.

## ▶ Splitting Hairs: Testing the Limits

Everything changes and drug screening has been doing its share of changing lately, along with everything else. A few years ago, the only real drug test in the workplace was the urine screen. And even though urine remains the undisputed king of testing—its dominance may be eclipsed in coming months and years.

That's because big business is nothing if not responsive to market trends, and drug testing is a **big** business and getting bigger by the minute, to judge from recent surveys.

As they've gotten bigger, testing labs have also gotten diversified, in their quest for the holy grail of drug testing—a test more accurate and less intrusive than current methods. In the process, they've left virtually no body fluid untapped—or, at least, unanalyzed. (See chart at right.)

The latest entry is hair analysis. It detects drug breakdown products in the hair shaft, and can reveal use over a much longer period—months, even years, rather than the days or weeks in which use is detectable in urine.

Besides its wider detectability “window,” proponents tout hair testing as less intrusive and more difficult to contaminate than urine.

Still, hair analysis is more time-consuming and expensive and less likely to show recent use than urine (since hair takes time to grow), a main reason that number two remains number one for now in the workplace—and is expected to stay that way. ■

### ■ Drug Screens: Time Lines & Limits

