

Focus on Safety: Substance Abuse: This past week in Santa Fe New Mexico, a person that was involved in a multi-fatality car collision and cited for driving under the influence (his blood-alcohol level was twice the legal limit) was found not guilty of manslaughter charges. This is not to say that he was innocent; the jury, based on evidence determined that, although he was drunk, he did not cause the accident. While this may be true, one has to wonder that if he was not intoxicated, would he have had the awareness to quickly respond and therefore, help to have avoided the subsequent tragedy. I suppose that will be a question which will plague him, quite possibly, for the rest of his life.... Without a doubt, the families of the victims will be thinking about that as well. April is National Alcohol Awareness Month, and therefore, it is appropriate to have a discussion on substance abuse in the workplace. Of course, it's not only alcohol that's a problem; illegal drugs, as well as prescription medication are also major concerns. As OSHA has recently acknowledged, the vast majority of drug users are employed, and when they arrive for work, they don't leave their problems at the door. American industry pays a high price for alcohol and drug abuse. Some costs—increased absences, accidents and errors—are obvious. Others, such as low employee morale and high illness rates, are less so, but the effects are equally harmful. The loss to companies in the United States due to alcohol and drug-related abuse by employees totals \$100 billion a year, according to the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information. Costs can be measured in the expense of absenteeism, injuries, health insurance claims, loss of productivity, employee morale, theft and fatalities. According to NCADI statistics alcohol and drug users:

- Are far less productive.
- Use three times as many sick days.
- Are more likely to injure themselves or someone else.
- Are five times more likely to file worker's compensation claims.

When the issue of workplace substance abuse is addressed by establishing comprehensive programs, it is a "win-win" situation for both employers and employees, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. A study of the economic impact of substance abuse treatment in Ohio found significant improvements in job-related performance:

- 91 percent decrease in absenteeism
- 88 percent decrease in problems with supervisors
- 93 percent decrease in mistakes in work
- 97 percent decrease in on-the-job injuries.

A comprehensive drug-free workforce approach includes five components

- A policy,
- Supervisor training,
- Employee education,
- Employee assistance,
- Drug testing.

Such programs, especially when drug testing is included, must be reasonable and take into consideration employee rights to privacy. A sobering point for small businesses is that since they are less likely than large companies to have programs in place to combat the problem, they become the "employer-of-choice" for illicit drug users. Individuals who can't adhere to a drug-free workplace policy seek employment at firms that don't have one, and the cost of just one accident caused by an impaired employee can devastate a small business. Yet small businesses have enormous power to improve the safety and health of their workplaces and employees by implementing drug-free workplace programs that educate employees about the dangers of drug abuse and encourage individuals with related problems to seek help. One thing that we can all do to ensure our safety, as well as the safety of our fellow workers, is if we notice someone not acting in a fully cognizant manner, go over and talk with them or bring it up to your supervisor. You might feel that are "busting a friend," but if that person was truly impaired and caused some one to get hurt, would you be able to justify your silence?

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