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## **Alcohol problems in the workplace: A hidden challenge**

About 9 percent of workers in the United States drink in ways that drain productivity while increasing sick days and health care costs, and 79 percent of our nation's heavy drinkers aged 18 or older are employed. These facts mean that almost every employer in America has an alcohol problem.

But according to a new report, the burden is not equally shared. People who work in the hospitality, construction and wholesale industries have the highest rates of alcohol problems. In contrast, people who work in public administration, education and social services have the lowest rates. "Alcohol problems" are defined as alcohol abuse or alcoholism.

The report—"[Workplace Screening & Brief Intervention: What Employers Can and Should Do About Excessive Alcohol Use](#)"—was released in March 2008. It was produced by Ensuring Solutions to Alcohol Problems, which is based at The George Washington University Medical Center.

The report also notes that:

- Men working in the hospitality and construction industries are about 50 percent more likely to have an alcohol problem than women in the same industry.
- In wholesale trade, men are almost three times more likely to have an alcohol problem than women.
- Nearly 18 percent of workers between the ages of 18 and 25 have an alcohol problem, compared to 7 percent of workers 26 and older.

"Most employees represented in these numbers are not dependent on alcohol," said Eric Goplerud, PhD, director of Ensuring Solutions to Alcohol Problems. "But they do use alcohol in ways that lead to short-term safety problems and long-term health consequences."

Focusing on 13 sectors of U.S. industry, the report details the rate of alcohol problems in each sector along with the resulting costs. For example:

- Health care costs for employees with alcohol problems are twice as high as those for other employees.
- People who abuse alcohol or other drugs are three-and-a-half times more likely to be involved in a workplace accident, leading to higher workers' compensation and disability claims.
- Nearly 20 percent of workers say that they've been injured at work or put in danger because of a coworker's drinking.

Despite such findings, less than 10 percent of working people with serious alcohol problems get any kind of treatment.

People who work in human resources (HR) see the contradiction. HR professionals say that substance abuse and addiction is one of the most serious issues they face. But only 22 percent believe that their companies openly and effectively deal with employee substance abuse and addiction.

The survey also reveals that most HR professionals see drug testing as a useful tool for diagnosing substance abuse and addiction, but that confidence is largely unfounded. The human body eliminates alcohol at a much faster rate than illegal drugs such as cocaine. As a result, testing alone will miss many alcohol problems

Researchers at Ensuring Solutions back another solution—screening and brief intervention (SBI). During SBI, employees answer questions about how often they drink, how much they drink, and the consequences of drinking in their lives.

If this screening indicates an alcohol problem, employees get immediate counseling. These counseling sessions may last anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours. Research points to SBI as the most cost-effective strategy for reducing employee alcohol problems, according to Ensuring Solutions researchers.

"The impact of alcohol problems in the workplace is a tremendous hidden challenge—in part because very few people with an alcohol problem are ever identified," said Andrew Webber, president and CEO of the National Business Coalition on Health. "In the past, employers have led the way to doing more for people with chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease. It's time for American industry to do the same for people with alcohol problems."

The report from Ensuring Solutions is available online at [http://www.ensuringsolutions.org/usr\\_doc/Workplace\\_SBI\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](http://www.ensuringsolutions.org/usr_doc/Workplace_SBI_Report_Final.pdf).

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