

Train Supervisors to Spot Substance Abuse by Workers



Workers who are drunk, high or otherwise under the influence of alcohol or drugs on the job pose safety risks to not only themselves but also their co-workers. So what can employers do to address this problem?

According to a new study from the University at Buffalo Research Institute on Addictions (RIA), supervisors can play a key role in curbing workers' on-the-job use of drugs and alcohol—but only if they get the proper training.

“It’s only when employees think their supervisor knows how to detect substance use—and is willing to do something about it—that that employees’ drinking and drug use on the job decreases,” explains Michael Frone, PhD, senior research scientist at RIA and research associate professor of psychology.

“Contact with a supervisor, no matter how often, is not a strong enough deterrent for some employees, our research finds.”

Frone’s study, which is part of a \$1.4 million research project, “Workplace Substance Use: A National Prevalence Study,” funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), included 2,429 participants, ranging in age from 18-65, employed in the civilian labor force and from households located in the continental US.

The study found that workers reported drinking less on the job when they thought their supervisors could detect substance-use problems and were willing to take corrective action. But supervisor enforcement had no relation to workers' off-the-job alcohol use and intoxication.

However, when it came to illegal drugs, supervisor enforcement produced lower levels of drug use both on *and* off the job, the research shows.

The results, Frone says, have several practical implications for employers. The study suggests that supervisor training in how to spot and confront worker substance use would help reduce alcohol and illicit drug use on the job, thus improving worker productivity and safety.

"To the extent that supervisor social control reduces substance use at work, our other research suggests that it may also reduce stress and improve morale among the majority of employees who do not engage in such behavior," Frone adds.

Study: [Relation of Supervisor Social Control to Employee Substance Use: Considering the Dimensionality of Social Control, Temporal Context of Substance Use, and Substance Legality](#), *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 73, 303-310, Frone, M. R., & Trinidad, J. R. (2012).