

Managing an employee with an addiction problem

Contrary to what we may think, not all addicts live on the fringes of society. In fact, more than 75 percent are employed. Most hide their alcohol or drug abuse from their employers until their addiction starts to interfere with their everyday functioning – and that's when everyone starts paying a price. Alcohol and drug addiction cost Canadian employers \$24.3 billion a year in:

- absenteeism
- sick leave
- errors and lack of productivity
- disability claims
- benefit costs
- insurance claims
- overtime pay for other staff having to carry extra workload
- accidents (workers' compensation claims, replacing damaged equipment and litigation)

And it's not just alcohol and illegal drugs that contribute to this cost. Addiction to, and misuse of, prescription medication is a rising concern.

Know the signs

Often, problems with drugs or alcohol first appear as performance or attendance issues. Some of the signs may include:

- increase in absences, especially on Mondays and Fridays
- extended lunch breaks, long absences from the work station, consistently late arrivals to work or early departures
- falling productivity, increased errors or missed deadlines
- presenteeism, or difficulty with focus or concentration
- change in appearance
- changes in attitude and behaviour or increased irritability

Addressing the situation

It is important to confront an employee about a suspected substance abuse problem as soon as possible, not only to prevent further deterioration in performance, but also to help the individual seek immediate treatment. Most organizations now view substance abuse problems as health problems and manage them as such.

1. **Know your organization's policy.** Become familiar with what the policy permits and prohibits and the penalties for violations.
2. **Know your role.** As a manager, your role is to help improve job performance, document work problems and successes, and effectively implement your organization's policies and programs. You are *not* expected to diagnose or to counsel.

Looking for additional support? Your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) can help. You can receive support through a variety of resources. Call your EFAP at 1 800 387-4765 or visit workhealthlife.com.

3. **Document.** Job performance problems and other work-related conduct needs to be documented. This should include the names of people involved, times, dates, what occurred, names of witnesses and what actions were taken. Always keep in mind that not all problems are related to alcohol and other drugs.
4. **Gather resources.** Contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program to fully understand the services available to both the employee and you. This will allow you to give your employee a place to begin dealing with his or her issue.
5. **Meet with the employee.** Make an appointment at a time when you think you will be able to discuss the problem without distractions. Choose a location that is private yet informal where you can both feel more relaxed. Maintain a nonjudgmental attitude; this will help keep the lines of communication open and facilitate a good manager-employee relationship. Do not become emotional, threatening, angry or accusing. Instead, ask for, listen to and respond to the employee's input.

Describe your observations ("I noticed you lost your temper with Jane twice in the past few days...") or performance concerns ("I counted three serious errors this week and four last week..."). Emphasize the impact that the behaviour or poor performance is having on the organization and other employees. Emphasize that correcting the problem is not a question of "if" but rather "how" and "by when."

If the employee becomes defensive, stay focused on job performance and conduct. The goal of the meeting is to discuss and find solutions to a job performance problem. Remember that while it is important to be understanding, it is not your job to counsel the employee about his or her personal problems. If the employee is unsure of what the next step should be, direct him or her to your EFAP for professional, confidential help. Agree on the actions the employee will take and schedule a follow-up session to review progress. Document and review with the employee.

6. **Follow-up.** Before your follow-up meeting(s) with the employee, review the employee's progress and decide what steps to take from there. If the employee's job performance and conduct has improved, no further action needs to be taken. However, you should continue to monitor his or her progress until you are sure problems have been resolved completely.

If job performance or conduct has not improved as agreed, or if the employee refuses to acknowledge or correct his or her behaviour, document these events and tell the employee the actions you will take next as outlined in your organization's policies.