

Drugs and Alcohol at the Workplace in Malta

The following is the outcome of a seminar coordinated by sedqa with the General Workers' Union on the 26th March 2002. The seminar tackled the issue of substance abuse at the workplace and what can be done to tackle this issue. Both the local and foreign scenes were discussed, emphasising on what policy should be introduced locally.

Study in Malta by Dr Mark Gauci and Dr Noel Vella (1996)

- 190 companies, response from 457 managers;
- 8.5% claimed that they had taken drugs in the past;
- 1% stated that they were currently using drugs;
- 5% knew workers within their company using drugs;
- 21.4% knew workers who drank alcohol at work;
- 42.7% knew workers drinking alcohol heavily off work.

Source: VELLA, N. & GAUCI, M.; *Drugs and Alcohol at the Workplace: Managerial Attitudes; Malta (1996)*. Study by Mr Silvio Farrugia (2000).

Attitudes of a select Group of Public Service Employees to the Use and Abuse of Drugs

- 86 potential participants 71 responses
- 47.1% claimed that they had been offered drugs but refused (n=70)
- 12.7%: 9 admitted to have made use of marijuana

Source: FARRUGIA, S.; *Attitudes of a Select Group of Public Service Employees to the Use and Abuse of Drugs*. Abstract, Diploma in Social Studies, Malta (2000).

As one can see from the above information, no company is immune from the problem. From the data collected, it resulted that the age group of persons who abuse illicit substances is between 18 and 34 years, an age group that would generally be gainfully occupied. Looking at the data collected by the research team at *sedqa*, out of the 935 clients attending Detox in the year 2001, 50% were gainfully occupied. Another factor that one has to keep in mind is the fact that substance misuse can be found throughout every stratum within the workplace, from managers to machine operators.

Consequences of substance misuse at the workplace which employers / supervisors would have to face:

- Absenteeism
- Accidents
- Health Problems
- Human Resources
- Workplace Integrity
- Company Image
- Low Productivity and Performance

The objectives of Prevention Programmes at the Workplace:

- To inform and support employers and employees on how to maintain an Alcohol/Drug Free Workplace;
- To increase awareness on the related risks of Alcohol/Drug misuse and its effect on work performance and productivity;
- To introduce or review the companies Alcohol/Drug Policy in relation to Health and Safety at the workplace.

The S.A.F.E. programme sessions cover several aspects connected with substance abuse, mainly drugs and alcohol and their physical effects, legal implications, compulsive gambling, stress management and the consequences of substance misuse at the workplace.

Tips for managers and supervisors: the early steps

- Document all performance problems of the employees;
- Problems are a pattern and not isolated incidents;
- Early detection is very important: you have to prevent the deterioration of the situation, saving the company's image and the security of other workers;
- Delayed action would only leave more room for manipulation; you would be enabling the abuser rather than helping him/her;
- Request that an employee devise a strategy to correct behaviour;
- Monitor the employees' progress weekly.

Do's for Managers / Supervisors

- DO emphasize that you are ONLY concerned with work performance or conduct
- DO have the documentation of performance in front of you when you talk with the employee
- DO remember that many problems get worse without assistance
- DO emphasize that conversations with an "assisting agency" are confidential
- DO explain that referral to the "assisting agency" is voluntary and exists to help the employee
- DO call the "assisting agency" to discuss how to make a referral

Do's for Managers / Supervisors

- DON'T try to diagnose the problem
- DON'T moralize. Limit comments to job performance and conduct issues only
- DON'T discuss alcohol and drug use
- DON'T be misled by sympathy-evoking tactics
- DON'T cover up. If you protect people, it enables them to stay the same
 - DON'T make threats that you do not intend to carry out

The Policy: what it's all about

A comprehensive Policy should:

- Include procedures for offering help and counseling to employees with an early or developed substance misuse problem with the aim of keeping them in work;
- Introduce alcohol and drug awareness education and training for the workforce with the aim of preventing problems developing and identifying substance misuse as early as possible;
- The treatment record of employees will remain strictly confidential;
- Health and safety as regards to other employees;
- Employees who come to the notice of management through work deterioration or alcohol/drug related problems will have the opportunity to discuss their problems and will be offered the opportunity of assessment and help;
- Employees have a right to be represented by their trade unions.

For further details or for an individual appointment, do not hesitate to call the Prevention Team on tel: 21 244226.