

Helping Small Businesses Benefit from Being Drug-Free

By: Elena Carr

Workplace drug and alcohol abuse compromises the ability of any business, especially a small business, to be profitable and productive. More than three-quarters of individuals who use illicit drugs are employed,* and when they arrive for work, they don't leave their problems at home. Some of the costs – increased accidents, absences and errors – are obvious. Others, such as low employee morale and high illness rates, are less so, but their effects are equally harmful.

To prevent these problems, most large businesses implement workplace substance abuse prevention programs, commonly called drug-free workplace programs. However, small businesses are less likely to address the issue, mainly due to a lack of resources, such as staff to seek information about it and provide assistance to employees who have related problems. This reluctance may be reinforced by confusion over the cost of running a program and what action can legally be taken, particularly regarding drug testing and disciplinary procedures.

A misconception also may exist among some small businesses that they are less likely to be affected by the problem than their larger counterparts simply because they employ less people. But the reverse may be true. Individuals who can't adhere to a drug-free workplace policy may purposely seek employment at firms that don't have one, and the cost of just one error caused by an impaired employee can devastate a small company.

Help for Small Businesses

To help small businesses also benefit from being drug free, the U.S. Department of Labor developed a Web tool to assist them in developing customized drug-free workplace policies and programs – free of charge.

The Drug-Free Workplace Advisor Program Builder provides introductory information about the value of drug-free workplace programs and has separate sections for each of the five components of a comprehensive drug-free workplace: a written policy, supervisor training, employee education, employee assistance and drug testing.

Although drug-free workplace programs can be effective without all five of these components, it is recommended that all be at least explored. The Program Builder allows employers to examine each one and design a balanced, fair program suited to the unique needs and challenges of their workplaces. Because every small business is unique, there is no one right way to establish a drug-free workplace program.

For employers needing to develop a drug-free workplace policy from scratch, the Program Builder's Policy section outlines the different elements of a comprehensive policy and prompts users to select answers to simple, pre-set questions in order to determine the most appropriate style of policy for their company. Based on users' responses, the system then generates a policy statement, which businesses can save or print and further personalize and modify if desired. (The choices users make and the resulting policy are not saved or stored on any system.) The

Policy section is structured around 13 main questions, ranging from “What is the purpose/goal of your program?” to “How will your policy be communicated to employees?”

As users move through the system, they are told that some statements will automatically be incorporated into their policy because they are standard and recommended. Other statements are entirely optional, and users may choose to select or omit sections depending on their organization’s needs. For example, when choosing who will be covered by the policy, options include CEO, executive management, managers, supervisors, full-time employees, part-time employees, off-site employees, contractors, volunteers, interns and applicants. Users can select as few or as many of these categories as they want and have the ability to insert an additional category if an appropriate one is not represented.

After using the Policy section to lay the groundwork for their program, users may want to explore the Program Builder’s other sections. The Supervisor Training and Employee Education sections examine the essential elements of effective supervisor training and employee drug education programs and what employers need to consider in implementing them. They also feature ready-to-use presentation materials, including Microsoft® PowerPoint® presentations and accompanying handouts.

The Employee Assistance section reviews the elements and benefits of Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), which can be effective vehicles for addressing poor workplace performance that may stem from an employee’s personal problems, including the abuse of alcohol or other drugs. The section dedicated to drug testing helps employers learn about drug-testing issues and technologies and develop drug-testing policies for their companies if deemed appropriate.

Benefits of Being Drug-Free

Drug-free workplace programs represent sound business practices, and the benefits are considerable in both financially measurable and non-measurable terms. Paybacks include higher quality applicants, an improved community image, fewer accidents and injuries, better overall job performance, improved employee morale, reduced medical and insurance costs, and reduced liability.

But businesses that make the decision to be drug free do more than just protect their assets – they contribute to the improved safety, health and well-being of their workforce. Their employees gain the benefit of knowing that the drug-free workplace program applies not only to them, but to all the coworkers and managers on whom their safety and security depend.

“Of the 16.4 million illicit drug users aged 18 or older in 2004, 12.3 million (75.2 percent) were employed either full or part time,” according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2005). 2004 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Elena Carr is Drug Policy Coordinator and Director of the Working Partners for an Alcohol- and Drug-Free Workplace program in DOL’s Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy.

The Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and NFIB have established an alliance to enhance safety and health throughout the nation's small and independent businesses. As part of this alliance, they will work together to communicate with small businesses about how they can protect their workplaces from the hazards of alcohol and drug abuse.

- [DOL's Drug-Free Workplace Program Builder](#)
- [DOL's Working Partners for an Alcohol- and Drug-Free Workplace Web site](#)
- [OSHA's Workplace Substance Abuse topic page](#)