Employee Opinion: Workplace Alcohol and Other Drug Use

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ABSTRACT

When assessing whether and how to act to address safety problems associated with alcohol and other drug use, Canadian employers and government decision makers have considerable data at their fingertips. In addition to the scientific information linking drug use to performance problems, and the increasing number of field studies examining what these impacts may be, there is a further perspective to draw on - that of the employees themselves. Specific survey findings in the transportation sector, including alcohol and drug use patterns and reported impacts, will be examined, as will implications for policy decisions.

For example, British Columbia truck drivers reported (1989) drug and alcohol use was compromising safety on the job; seven out of ten knew drivers who had worked while affected by alcohol, half knew drivers who drink during their shift, and three quarters of respondents reported drug use has compromised safety. There were similar responses from truck and bus drivers the next year in a nation-wide Transport Canada survey. Adding to this, a comprehensive workplace study in Alberta found 2.4% of transportation workers reported drinking on the job in the past month, 11% were current drug users, 27% knew a coworker with an alcohol problem, 10% with a drug problem, and nearly one quarter felt there was a moderately to extremely serious problem with drugs and alcohol in their own workplace.

Ninety per cent of Imperial Oil employees involved in distribution (1991) reported being current drinkers, 24% drank at above average/heavy levels, and nearly 4% reported being current marijuana users. A small percentage reported their own use of a substance had caused an accident or near miss in the past year, while a significantly higher percentage reported alcohol or drug use by a member of their immediate work group had caused accidents or other negative effects.

INTRODUCTION

Substance abuse, and the impact it may be having on employee health and workplace safety, continues to receive increasing attention in companies across Canada. As they determine how to address safety problems associated with alcohol and other drug use on the job, Canadian employers can turn to the considerable data now available from the research community to assist them in both assessing the problem and formulating solutions. Increasingly, Canadian companies are using this data to support the development of comprehensive workplace policies to reduce health and safety risks, and address potential legal liabilities. (eg. liability for the actions of impaired employees in the course of their
work, due diligence responsibility around workplace safety, actions in response to possession or trafficking, and responsibilities with regard to employees with a disability, which in Canada can include dependency on drugs and alcohol.

Their policy decisions must be based on assessed needs (clear articulation of the problem that must be addressed) and solutions should be directed at resolving those needs. When communicating with employees and implementing policy decisions, or when faced with legal challenge, the data used to assess current problems/needs becomes fundamental to the justification of actions taken. This is where the scientific research on the effects of alcohol and other drugs on human performance, and the field studies of the specific impacts of alcohol and drug use in the workplace, including accident data, play a valuable role. A third very important contributor to understanding the problem is provided by employees themselves, through their responses to rigorous, scientifically valid surveys on the nature and extent of alcohol and drug use in Canadian workplaces and its impact on job performance, as well as their views on possible solutions.

THE VALUE OF EMPLOYEE SURVEYS

When embarking on a policy development process, Canadian employers are faced with a multitude of strong and often conflicting viewpoints on the nature of the workplace problem and what should be done about it. Various provincial and federal occupational health and safety officials have suggested there is no problem at all, while human rights, privacy, and civil liberties organizations - supported with the official positions of various labour organizations - have stated the problem does not justify strong deterrent measures (e.g., drug testing, discipline), and solutions should depend on self- or peer-referral to confidential assistance, or normal performance management processes. However, employers have great difficulty balancing these viewpoints with their understanding of the impacts of drug use on performance, particularly in light of their own operational liabilities. This is why the perspective of the employees themselves, who can be in the best position to assess the problem, is of great value in helping decision makers understand more precisely the nature of the problem they must address. The information around use patterns reported in these types of surveys can be very valuable in painting a general picture of the nature and extent of alcohol and other drug use, however, even more important can be the information provided about the effects that substance use may be having on performance in terms of such factors as absenteeism, accidents, incidents, and other negative effects. It is through the confidentiality and anonymity of employee surveys that individuals can honestly express these concerns without limitations or sanctions imposed by their union or co-workers. In fact, self-report measures are the most commonly used method of collecting information about substance use, and can be one of the best tools that policy makers have as they begin to assess the situation in their own work place, and design a policy to meet their specific needs.

Policy makers have two choices; they can initiate their own survey of employees, or draw from other survey data, on the assumption that the findings would not significantly differ from those of their own employee population. While information from their own employees would clearly be of greatest relevance, designing and conducting such a survey to meet the rigorous standards of confidentiality and anonymity can be very costly and time-consuming. Therefore, most employers draw on the results of the general employee surveys, and augment
this data with anecdotal information (known situations where alcohol or other drugs have been a factor, employee assistance statistics, accident and productivity rates etc.), as well as the practical input of employees they involve in the policy development process.

INCREASING PARTICIPATION AND VALIDITY

Questions may be raised about the validity of self report surveys, particularly when they collect confidential and potentially self-incriminating data. Opponents of this method of data collection have suggested that people will not report their own consumption patterns accurately. Despite such a view, however, self reports can be considered valid when steps are taken to enhance the accuracy of the survey. These include assurances of the survey’s confidentiality and the anonymity of responses such that participation will not result in adverse personal consequences (and a method of conducting the survey that reinforces this), enhancing memory recall by focusing questions on recent events, clarifying definitions and using complex questions carefully, and using knowledgeable and capable interviewers with an interview method most sensitive to local or job function needs and conditions.

Concerns have been raised that even when these precautions are taken, people may not respond honestly, or will consciously under-report behaviour describing their drinking and drug use habits. Under-reporting may indeed be a factor in all of the studies reviewed in this paper, however, the researchers found that once someone decided to participate, they did the best that they could in answering the questions honestly - provided they were assured of anonymity and confidentiality of reported results.

FINDINGS FROM RECENT CANADIAN WORKPLACE SURVEYS

Labour force data analysis from the 1989 National Alcohol and Other Drugs Survey, and a variety of employee surveys, has found that work-related alcohol and other drug use closely reflects societal levels. Despite the differences in sample size and methodologies, the findings across industries and across the country do not differ widely; in fact certain trends stand out.

- Alcohol is by far the most prevalent substance used by working adults; despite the trend toward moderation of drinking habits, the actual prevalence rates of alcohol consumption remain higher than in the general population (85%). Men (91%) and women (85%) in managerial and professional positions are the highest proportion of current drinkers, but blue-collar workers consume more alcohol per week than any other group. Higher levels of current use are found in the financial, upstream oil, forestry/mining and construction sectors.
- Ten per cent of the labour force is in the heavy-drinking category, and this is spread fairly evenly across the provinces (more heavy drinkers are found on either coast); research suggests that heavy use and a propensity toward multiple drug use places these people and others around them in a substantially higher risk category for workplace accidents. Alcohol consumption on the job and/or the delayed effect of hangovers is also reported to be responsible for the majority of negative effects in the workplace.
Past year Illicit Drug use by active labour force participants was reported at an average of 8%; the pattern is fairly even across the country, with the highest level of reported use on the west coast, however, higher use levels were reported in construction, transportation, upstream oil and forestry/mining industries. Cannabis is the “street drug” most commonly used by employees; use of other illicit drugs generally accounts for between 1% and 2% of the responses. Although fewer employees report negative impacts in the workplace from illicit drug use, there is no question that illicit drugs are being used both by employees and new hires, and that drug use is having a negative impact.

Workforce alcohol and other drug use is of concern whether use occurs on or off the job, as many drugs affect work performance for hours, if not days, after consumption. Consequently, issues concerning hangover or residual effects of alcohol and other drugs taken when not at work, including withdrawal symptoms, are also of critical importance, as they may also affect workplace performance. Employees have reported a number of negative effects due to their own, or co-worker use of alcohol and other drugs.

Railway Industry

In a 1987 survey of more than 1,000 randomly selected railway workers holding operating positions identified as “safety-sensitive”, respondents were asked about their own behaviour related to alcohol and drug use and perceived impacts of use on the job. More than one in ten were aware of workers reporting to work feeling the effects of alcohol; 6.6% were aware of workers drinking during their working shifts; over half felt that alcohol use by railway workers had, at some time, comprised job safety; and most respondents believed that between 5% and 10% of workers came to work under the influence of alcohol. In addition, more than a third felt that drug use compromised job safety, and that approximately 5% of workers came to work under the influence of drugs. The researchers concluded “there is clear cause for concern given the level of alcohol consumption as well as its perceived impact on the job”. Respondents showed a high degree of support for drug testing provided there was a safety risk identified.

Trucking Industry

In a 1988 random roadside survey, British Columbia truck drivers reported drug and alcohol use was compromising safety on the job; seven out of ten knew drivers who had worked while affected by alcohol, half knew drivers who drink during their shift, and three quarters of respondents reported drug use has compromised safety in the industry.

Transport Canada

Transport Canada conducted a 1988 survey of 18,000 public and private sector transportation employees in “safety-sensitive” positions to identify the nature and extent of substance use and its in the transport industry. Overall, the research found that the percentage of people using alcohol or specific drugs in the transportation professions was similar to the figures found in the broader population, which was of some concern given
respondents held positions which could put public safety at risk, and were already under regulation to limit substance use. Alcohol was more frequently reported as a contributor to accidents and dangerous situations than street drugs or medications, however, the analysis found that in proportion to the level of self-reported use, medications and street drugs were cited with relatively high frequency as contributing factors. Almost half of the workers in various occupations noted that alcohol and drug use was a little or much more important than other contributors to safety risk. Respondents showed strong support for employee assistance programs, and there was no outright rejection of drug testing, even on a random basis, if a safety risk was identified. The greatest support for testing came after a reported accident or incident, while the lowest support was for testing when returning to work after leave or lay-off; support for random testing was generally slightly higher, and significantly higher in a number of job categories.

Imperial Oil Limited
Imperial Oil Limited conducted an extensive employee survey in October 1990 to collect information on the use of alcohol, illicit drugs and medications as they affect the workplace and obtain employee input on policy and program options, to contribute to policy decisions. An anonymous questionnaire was mailed to all regular employees (13,000+, entire regular employee population), which included a broad mix of occupational groups, found that alcohol and drug use broadly paralleled the adult population use patterns for Canada as a whole.

The percentage of employees reporting an accident where their own use of alcohol, drugs or medications may have been a contributing factor was 0.5%, while near misses were reported by 1.7%. Employees reported higher levels of accidents and near misses where substance use by members of their immediate work group was involved. Accidents were reported by 3.3%, near misses by 7.2% and 22.5% of employees identified other negative effects of substance use by a member of their work group. In terms of solutions, there was continued support for the company’s employee assistance program, and the highest support for chemical testing for risk sensitive jobs on reinstatement, for cause, pre-employment, and after an accident or incident. In all cases, there was slightly lower support for testing of employees in jobs that are not risk sensitive, and there was support for random testing in both instances.

Alberta Workplace Survey
In 1991 the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission conducted research on the prevalence and impact of substance use in the Alberta workplace, and found a variety of workplace incidents were associated with substance use. Two-thirds of those reported consisted of low profile productivity problems mainly related to absenteeism or to work slowdown or mistakes due to impairment or hangover. The researchers suggest that despite their low profile, this set of performance problems is the most widespread, and most likely to affect each workplace in Alberta; moreover, the cumulative costs of these performance problems can be considerable. The remaining third of reported accidents included problems leading to supervisory action (drunkenness or using drugs on the job), security problems
(dismissal due to problem, theft, sabotage) and health and safety problems (accidents damaging equipment/property or injury, reassignment).

There was strong support for initiatives to address substance abuse, with the majority of respondents indicating that more needs to be done in the workplace, that employers should take the lead in addressing the issue, and that the priority should be on more education for workers and supervisors.

Gallup Survey

Approximately 1,000 employed workers randomly located across Canada were surveyed in 1992 on the workplace impacts of alcohol and other drug use. Seventeen per cent of respondents reported they had seen or heard of illicit on-the-job drug use by co-workers, and 26% had seen or heard of illegal drugs being used before or after-hours. Alcohol was reported as being more of a concern in the workplace; 43% of employees reported they had personally seen a co-worker come on duty impaired by alcohol. One in five workers reported they had personally seen a co-worker use alcohol on the job where it affected their ability to perform. The reported impacts of drug use in Canadian workplaces are shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Greatly Affect</th>
<th>Somewhat Affect</th>
<th>Not at all Affect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employee attendance</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morale &amp; motivation</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your company's productivity</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your company's health care costs</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety at your workplace</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime on the job</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of solutions, 95% of respondents said they thought drug testing should be allowed at least in certain circumstances. There was additional support for employee assistance programs (77%), awareness and education (76%), establishment of a company policy (70%), family counselling (67%) and disciplinary action for policy violation (63%). Three quarters of all respondents favoured their company adopting and maintaining a policy on alcohol and drugs.

CONCLUSION

The detailed information in each of these reports has been valuable to policy makers. It helps reinforce data obtained from scientific and field studies by providing a reliable employee perspective on the problem, and a more complete picture as employers assess their
policy needs. It also reflects a changing tolerance with regard to workplace drug use, by confirming that employees do support strong measures to deal with it, not only through education and awareness and employee assistance programs, but also through deterrence in the form of testing and discipline.

REFERENCES


Campbell, Goodell Consultants Ltd, A Survey of Truck Drivers in British Columbia, Canada (B.C. Trucking Association, July 1989)


Imperial Oil Limited, Report: Substance Use and the Workplace Survey of Employees (Ottawa: Canadian Facts, 1990)


Details of these and other studies can also be found in Barb Butler, Alcohol and Drugs in the Workplace (Toronto: Butterworths, 1992)