

## **Opinion Piece: Keeping workplace alcohol consumption under control all year round**

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The fact that alcohol consumption increases over the holiday period is a well-known fact, and many companies implement more stringent controls and policies over these times to reduce risk. However, this piecemeal approach is often ineffective in the long run, as the momentum achieved as a result of improved control is typically lost when this control is relaxed. Not only is the consumption of alcohol in the workplace a contravention of the Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Act, it also puts employees at risk and increases liability. In order to ensure the safety of all workers at all times and effectively minimise the risk of alcohol consumption in the workplace, a proactive approach is necessary all year round.

The effects of alcohol in the workplace are well known – alcohol consumption reduces productivity, decreases concentration and mental clarity, and increases accidents and accompanying injury or fatality. This is particularly true in hazardous working environments such as mining or environments where heavy equipment is utilised such as manufacturing and warehousing. However, even corporate white-collar organisations can be negatively affected, and the OHS Act specifies zero tolerance toward alcohol consumption in any workplace.

Over the festive season alcohol consumption in general sees a dramatic increase. As a result, many organisations implement more stringent controls around this time to prevent intoxicated employees from becoming a liability. When the New Year rolls around, however, these controls often slide, and are only reinforced once more over the Easter holiday period when alcohol consumption once more increases. While in the short-term this approach works to curb seasonal drinking challenges, in the long term it does nothing to change behaviours or improve the situation. As a result, increased effort is required each holiday period and alcohol consumption or intoxication in the workplace at other times of the year may slip under the radar.

A more effective way of dealing with the situation and potentially creating long-term behavioural improvements is to adopt a proactive educational approach. Policies should be checked regularly to ensure that they are up to date, and regular testing through the use of breathalysers should form part of these policies. The same tactics that are employed over the holiday period should be continued at other times. This will help to minimise the number of employees under the influence throughout the year.

In addition to testing and policies, education needs to form an essential component of any effective program, not only on the dangers and risks of alcohol consumption but also how to consume alcohol in a responsible manner. This helps to reduce the feeling of resentment employees may have when they believe their employer is trying to prevent them from enjoying a drink or socialising, where alcohol may play a significant role.

Talks and seminars often form part of this approach, however it is also necessary to provide some sort of takeaway for employees to ensure that the message is reinforced. Having thousands of employees sit through a talk or a video is often not entirely effective. Educational booklets can be hugely beneficial in fulfilling this role, as employees can read them any number of times at their leisure, and they provide a physical guide that helps to drive the message home. Booklets and printed guides are often successful in creating the required proactive approach toward education around alcohol consumption.

Such educational tools usually contain practical examples of how long it takes for a person to become sober after consuming a certain amount of alcohol, how food and water may affect alcohol in the body and how much alcohol a person can drink, at their specific body weight, before they will reach the drink driving limit. These booklets also include images, making this information easy to understand. There are many people that consume alcohol so rather than labouring the dangers of alcohol at the risk of being dreary, it is important to give the reader interesting material such as the above facts and guidelines. This is often more effective to reduce alcohol consumption and abuse in the workplace. The booklets can also be customised for any organisation with their logo and message of social responsibility.

The reality is that South Africa has a 'drinking culture' and alcohol is an integral part of many people's social activities. Preventing this culture from infiltrating the workplace and introducing risk is imperative, not only during the festive season and holiday periods, but all year round. Organisations need to maintain the momentum of their stringent controls over the holidays, and develop a proactive approach, including effective education. This will help them to minimise risk, reduce liability and ensure a safe and productive working environment at all times.