

# 6

# Alcohol and the Workplace

## Aims and learning outcomes

This chapter introduces the key elements involved in the recognition of harmful drinking patterns in the workplace. It aims to create awareness amongst management and employers regarding their legal and moral responsibilities, which includes setting out specific workplace policies and assisting employees suffering from alcohol addiction problems to receive the necessary treatment and support. After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Describe alcohol's role in the workplace from the 17th century up to the modern era.
- Explain the unique challenges which alcohol present in the hospitality, tourism and retail workplaces.
- Determine the role and responsibilities of managers and employers in the workplace in relation to intervention, treatment and assistance programmes for employees who abuse or misuse alcohol.
- Outline the rationale for adoption by employers of alcohol and drug policies for the workplace, and describe the key elements involved in creating them.
- Describe the most common illegal drugs and identify the symptoms which indicate their use in the workplace environment.

## 6.0 Introduction

Alcohol is the single most used and abused drug in the workplace. The OPM (2014) estimate that the cost to industry in the U.S. alone ranges from 33 to 68 billion dollars annually. This cost can manifest itself in many ways, including lost productivity, increased health care costs, absenteeism, workplace accidents, and fatalities. This chapter will outline the significant factors involved

in the recognition of alcohol addictive problems and their subsequent health effects in the workplace. It is aimed at fostering a better awareness amongst supervisors, managers, and human resource personnel of their respective roles and responsibilities surrounding the issues of alcohol in the workplace. It is not intended to cover all aspects of alcoholism and alcohol abuse, but to give you enough information to understand and recognize the problems and know where to go to get assistance for colleagues. We also highlight how an employee, identified as having a problem or if they disclose that they are suffering from an alcohol addiction, should be treated by the management and work colleagues. It also addresses the appropriate treatment which must be offered at an early stage, reminding us that an employee cannot be in the workplace under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Whilst this chapter is primarily aimed at the hospitality, tourism and retail industries, it may be of benefit to other public and private sector organisations and private industries who wish to set out their own policies for alcohol in the workplace.

## 6.1 The workplace environment

Gamella (1995) argues that throughout history alcohol has been an integral part of the workplace. Spanish workers drank a small glass of aguardiente in the morning to prepare them for work; sailors in the British Royal navy in the 17th century were given a pint of dilute rum a day, plus a gallon of beer and a double ration of rum before battle. Brewery and distillery workers received daily allowances of their alcoholic products. *Brewery Workers* (2000) reports that amongst the union demands for better conditions in the late 1900s was the inclusion of free beer for the employees. In those days in many places around the world employers used alcohol in lieu of wages especially when they were short of cash (Scully, 1992), but in more recent years this practice was outlawed by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 1949). The nature of the workplace in the 1800s and 1900s changed, with the Industrial Revolution and the introduction of machinery, which increased the possibility of accidents and harm brought about through alcohol consumption. Heath (2000) contends that alcohol in this period became part of the private realm, often symbolizing the transition between work and leisure time. The middle 20th century brought further changes to the attitudes to alcohol in the workplace. Alcohol was viewed as a disease which required intervention schemes and approaches like the employee assistance programmes. Sloan et al (2000) add that employers' legal liability for the health and safety of their employees at work in many countries also brought about significant changes to restrict alcohol in the workplace environment. In the 21st century there

are still particular professions and practices with high occurrences of alcohol-related problems. These problems can include the following:

- **Accidents and injuries:** in workplaces where heavy machinery is involved (Frone, 2009).
- **Reduced safety, stressful climate and poor relations in the workplace:** alcohol abuse by some can result in low morale, higher absenteeism, less productivity amongst the whole staff (drinkers and non-drinkers) and poor workplace safety (Frone, 2008).
- **Exhaustion, burnout and poor workplace conditions:** which can include long working hours, can lead to alcohol abuse (Ahola et al, 2006)
- **Specific occupational challenges:** mortality rates appear to be higher where alcohol is regularly available, for example seafarers, bar owners, restaurant and bar staff, and drinks companies (Romeri et al, 2007).

Alcohol consumption in the workplace is related to social norms (i.e. expectations of the local or the company culture) during work hours or break times. Frone and Brown (2010) propose that these norms are either *injunctive* (which incorporates the degree to which other colleagues would approve of working while intoxicated) or *descriptive* (which covers the frequency and amount of alcohol consumed by colleagues before or during work). Both norms have been shown to predict alcohol consumption and impairment at work.

## 6.2 The unique challenges of the hospitality, tourism and retail workplace

The hospitality, tourism and retail industries encompasses a wide range of work environments where alcohol is widely available and viewed positively. Leigh et al (1993) report that as a consequence of this availability, the figures of liver cirrhosis mortality and other alcohol problems are higher in these industries when compared to many other industries and professions. Workplace policies aimed at reducing consumption amongst employees in these industries have been in operation since the 1920s; Kjaerheim et al (1995) highlight that the Hotels Association of British Columbia in Canada prohibited its beer parlour members from drinking on the job. Kjaerheim (1995) adds that a recent hotel and restaurant research study in Norway noted that alcohol consumption amongst these workers was restricted to celebrations and special events. Sloan et al (2000) remind us that the legal liability towards customers allowed to engage in harm-related activities due to intoxication has been a major influence which encouraged these industries to adopt policies for their respective workplaces.

The introduction of training programmes for the responsible sale, marketing and serving of alcohol which help employees to recognise potentially harmful consumption patterns among their customers have been a great success. The International Centre for Alcohol Policies (2002) maintains that these training programmes also cover standard serving practices, information regarding alternative beverages, how to deal with intoxicated customers and monitoring techniques to ensure crowd control. ICAP (2002) also report that 15% of countries around the world use the responsible sale and serving of alcohol training programmes as a component of their national or local policies for alcohol. They add that a series of initiatives are in operation which are run by the hospitality, tourism and retail industries themselves or support groups which surround these industries. For a further discussion and details regarding these programmes please refer to Chapter 9.

### **6.3 Absenteeism and productivity loss**

Abuse and misuse of alcohol pose a major threat and incur significant costs to the workplace, fundamentally as a result of lost productivity (Rehm et al 2006; Saar, 2009). These costs, which include those arising from accidents and injuries, absenteeism and alcohol associated deaths, were calculated to be in the region of €59 billion in the EU for 2003 (Anderson & Baumberg, 2006) and \$134 billion in the US for 1998 (Harwood, 2000). The majority of these arise from alcohol consumption outside the workplace (i.e. after work or at lunchtime), and moderate drinkers, who sometimes consume excessively, are directly responsible for a large amount of productivity losses from absenteeism (Salonsalmi et al, 2009). Abuse and misuse of alcohol will normally result in temporary illness (i.e. severe hangovers) which subsequently leads to employees taking off half or full days (Pidd et al, 2008). The immediate effect of this absenteeism is not only experienced by companies but also by their employees, who as Dale and Livingston (2010) argue, have to take on additional work to compensate for absent colleagues.

Employees who report to work following a heavy drinking episode may be less productive than usual, an effect sometimes referred to as *presenteeism*, categorized as below par performances in the workplace. This is believed to cost industry and organizations a lot more in losses when compared to the losses from absenteeism (Goetzel et al, 2004). Suffering from the effects of an alcohol hangover usually results in lower output, poor quality of work, increased conflict, possible injuries and falling asleep (Ames et al, 2000). Cook (1997) reminds us that the quality of work in some tasks will be affected for a while after the alcohol has been eliminated from the employee's body.