

# The Rising Cost of Drug Use



As drug use becomes more prevalent, the impact it has on business and the economy overall is becoming harder to ignore. Many industry sectors are now at significant risk of failing to meet their WHS obligations – and it is no longer just transport, construction and other trades in the firing line.

Employers need to give priority to providing a safe workplace, which includes identifying whether individuals are fit for duty.

The Australian economy loses around \$6 billion per annum due to illicit drug use and within individual workplaces, adverse effects can include an increased probability of injury, decreased productivity and compromised customer service.

The question is now whether we can collectively afford to continue turning a blind eye to a clearly escalating problem.

## The rising cost of drug use to Australian business

For many business owners and managers, there is a distinct delineation when it comes to employee drug use. While it's hard to imagine any employer tolerating an on-the-job habit, when it comes to out-of-hours use, an individual's time is usually considered their own. But where is the line drawn?

What if off-duty social drug taking had the potential to render employees unfit for work, was negatively influencing the bottom line for many companies and was costing the Australian economy \$6 billion dollars a year? It turns out it is doing all of these things and the reality is that employers can no longer look the other way.

## How far does it reach?

The National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) is conducted every two or three years and gathers information on tobacco, alcohol and illicit drug use among Australians. The last published data was collected from 24,000 households between June and December 2013 and the report released by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare in early 2014. Results are not only presented as a snapshot of the current situation, but also measured against previous studies in order to gauge changes and to identify trends.

According to the 2014 release, in 2013 just over 40% of Australians either smoked daily, drank alcohol in ways that put them at risk of harm or used an illicit drug in the previous 12 months; and 3.1% identified as engaging in all three.

When delving into specific habits, the report found that illicit drug use had remained largely unchanged between 2010 and 2013. Within the drugs sub-categories, usage of some types of substances (heroin, GBH and ecstasy) had actually fallen slightly.

While methamphetamines showed no overall increase, the break-down by form of the drug used highlighted a significant difference; the use of powdered methamphetamine (such as speed) is dropping, with crystal methamphetamine (ice) escalating sharply in contrast.

The study discovered that users of cannabis and methamphetamine are more likely to consume regularly, with most users indicating use at least every few months – 64% for cannabis and 52% methamphetamine. By contrast, ecstasy and cocaine use is less frequent, with users typically only indulging once or twice a year (54% and 71% respectively).

Among illicit drug takers, 60% of recent users also drank alcohol in quantities deemed risky by health authorities. Cannabis is the drug most often used in addition to other illicit drugs and users of other psychoactive substances also show a higher propensity to use additional illicit drugs. People aged between the ages of 20 and 29 are the most likely to use (27%) and males are more likely to partake overall. The picture that this paints suggests a prevalent 'one-in, all-in' mentality; if users have a predilection for one type of substance, they are more prone to take others, often simultaneously.

### The lines that divide

In 2009, the Federal Government Department of Health conducted exploratory research into usage patterns and harms associated with methamphetamine use in particular population groups in Australia. Given the current escalation in ice use, this data is still highly helpful in identifying these patterns and understanding the triggers.

The research discovered that behaviour and motivation were a better predictor of methamphetamine use than pure demographics. It determined three distinct behavioural contexts:

**1. Social users** – are primarily motivated by the reduced inhibition resulting from drug use. These users claim to experience enhanced confidence, ability and motivation to socialise, greater levels of energy, alertness and physical sensation. Methamphetamines for this group are always used with others, in social setting such as parties, clubs and other events. Drug use is considered a shared experience, not a solo activity.

Maintaining this social aspect is how this group differentiates their own drug use from those who develop a dependence. The study found that social use also occurred during work times for those in the construction, labouring and hospitality industry sectors.

**2. Functional users** – associate the drug with achieving a specific task, often in relation to their employment. The motivation here is the enabling effect of drugs including increased concentration, alertness and stamina. This group is less inclined to acknowledge the illicit nature of drug use (unlike social users) and commonly justify the behaviour as a 'means to an end', according to the report. These users were found to be widespread across many industries including unskilled and semiskilled roles. Trades, construction, labouring, driving, hospitality, IT, management, finance and health all exhibited users from this group.

**3. Dependent users** – are typically seeking to escape existing problems (lifestyle, psychiatric or other). They are demonstrably uncontrollable, compulsive cravers of the drug and more frequent users than either of the other groups. These users are employed across a range of industry sectors in varied occupations.

All of these groups recognised symptoms of a post-drug use comedown including; depression, feeling 'scattered', increased anxiety and short temperedness, nervousness, paranoia, lack of motivation and difficulty in sleeping.

None of the identified groups see these symptoms as harmful, but merely a part of the process. Social users regard the effects as something to be managed until they pass (sometimes with the assistance of cannabis and alcohol, or sleeping it off) whereas, for functional and dependent users, these symptoms generally act as a trigger for more amphetamine use.

The concern here for employers is whether or not staff are fit for duty post a weekend binge, as it's not uncommon for the side-effects to present themselves well in to the working week. If employees regard these effects as non-harmful, they are liable to exhibit poor judgement when assessing their own suitability for work. A short-tempered, anxious or scattered employee is, at best, likely to be less productive than the job demands and, at worst, capable of putting themselves and their co-workers at risk of harm.

## What does it mean for employers?

According to Odyssey House, one of Australia's largest alcohol and other drug rehabilitation services, employers need to give priority to promoting a safe workplace culture and to understanding addiction-related behaviours.

They suggest that many factors have an impact on consumption patterns of workers. Workforce culture is a consistent explanation for drug use and other identified associated factors include:

- › Workplace stressors including shift work
- › The work environment
- › Poorly designed equipment
- › Fear of losing one's job
- › Conflict with a supervisor
- › Peer pressure
- › Discrimination and/or prejudice
- › Personal stressors including marital or personal relationship problems and financial problems

Among the adverse effects on the workplace are an increased probability of injury, decreased productivity and compromised customer service.

The Australian Industry Group (AIG) has recently voiced concerns in their submission to a parliamentary enquiry. They say that the construction, manufacturing and transport industries are at significant risk of increased work health and safety issues (WHS) due to the jump in ice use.

The AIG says that entrenched union opposition to drug and alcohol testing means that many employers are failing in their duty of care. Under WHS legislation, employers are obligated to ensure safe systems of work, safe use of plant, structures and substances, effective systems for monitoring the health of workers and workplace conditions and, ultimately, a safe work environment. Staff members presenting any of the common post-use symptoms can effectively diminish the safety of the workplace for everyone.

In a complete about-face, the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union declared support for blanket drug and alcohol testing in March of this year, on the basis that ice is a 'game changer', but drew the line at urine testing, opting instead for saliva.

And it's no longer just the usual suspects either, with white collar workers now on the radar as well. While ongoing media reports that highlight our society's ice use 'epidemic' deserve some of the credit for creating increased interest in drug testing, it is suggested that the prevalence of roadside drug testing, and the number of positive results it has drawn, has also become the impetus for companies keen to avoid problems before they surface.

It's relatively difficult to detect (or prove) ice use without drug testing, so employers are aiming to identify issues before they become an outright danger, with many companies now reportedly including drug testing in the pre-employment phase.

## Counting the cost

Determining the actual economic impact on business in Australia is difficult, but conservative estimates put it at around \$6 billion per annum. While absenteeism, injury and productivity loss can be counted, it is difficult to formally draw a direct link between these effects and the out-of-work activities undertaken by employees. This is unlikely to change, as there is little incentive for workers to volunteer information to employers on any illegal behaviours carried out in their private lives.

It is no longer only the domain of large companies in industries traditionally recognised as having high incidences of drug use, such as long-haul transport and mining. Businesses of any size are now equally susceptible, given the shift in drug consumption habits. It's easy to dismiss drug testing as an attempt to police the private lives of employees, but the fact is that employers have an obligation to provide a safe environment for staff and determining whether individuals are fit for duty is part of that obligation.

If we look to the United States as a guide, in the 1980s around 10% of the domestic workforce undertook regular drug testing. Today it stands at 70%, due to legislative changes and a shifting business mindset that recognised the financial and health costs associated with doing nothing.

On home soil our numbers are much lower, but a combination of factors is increasingly seeing employers rewriting company policy and implementing programs that aim to mitigate the effects of out-of-hours employee behaviours... before they become a cost to business.