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Substance Use Disorder & Recovery in the Workplace

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John, a skilled tradesman and a loyal employee, has worked for a construction company for the last ten years. After undergoing back surgery, he received a prescription for opioid pain killers. John unwittingly became addicted to prescription opioids. Unfortunately, heroin often is the next step because it's cheaper. For a time, he was still going to work every day, but he started arriving late and leaving early. To pay for his he would occasionally pocket some of the company money that came from "cash jobs." Luckily, for him and his company, John never had a serious accident or injury on the job. His company eventually decided to 'let him go.' As a result of his disease and the company's decision to dismiss him, both John and the company paid a price. The company lost a competent, dedicated employee. Without a job and no access to treatment, he traveled in a vicious downward spiral. He was not able to maintain safe housing, obtain adequate healthcare, or provide for his family. On the precipice of being homeless, he fell deeper into the thralls of his addiction and died of an accidental overdose.

The story for those with a substance use disorder is not always so tragic. Cynthia is a preschool teacher with more than twenty years of experience. Students enjoy being in her classroom, and she has the respect of parents, colleagues and administrators alike. Cynthia also has an alcohol use disorder. However, with support from her union and an understanding school administration, Cynthia was able to gain access to treatment and recovery support services. After spending time in treatment, she returned to work and is now thriving in her recovery. With renewed passion and joy, she is actually a better teacher than ever before.

I myself am a person in long-term recovery. Unlike John or Cynthia though, my alcohol, heroin and crack-cocaine addiction was so crippling that I was completely unemployable. Since entering recovery in 2007, I have been able to not only secure stable employment but, truly build myself a lucrative career. I am grateful for the employers who were willing to look past the gaps in my resume and my previous criminal justice involvement. All too often, individuals like me are stigmatized and seen as liabilities instead of assets. Because of my recovery – not in spite of my recovery – today, I am a valuable employee, a hard worker, a team player. I am reliable, empathetic, purpose driven and innovative.

Facts about Substance Use & Recovery in the Workplace

- More than 70% of those using illicit drugs in America are employed. (National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence)
- Due to lost productivity, increased absenteeism, utilization of sick time, higher turnover rates, theft in the workplace, substance abuse and misuse costs American businesses and nonprofits an average of \$81 billion in lost profits every year. (Center for Disease Control - Worker Productivity | Alcohol & Substance Misuse Evaluation Measures)
- 20.2 million Americans identify as living in recovery from an alcohol/drug use problem. (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration – 2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health)
- Although it can be a time-consuming process, 42-66% of people with substance use disorder achieve full remission. (Recovery Research Institute)
- Treatment for addiction, facilitated within or by the workplace, has been shown to be successful in increasing employees' legal, mental, and social functioning, as well as decreasing absenteeism rates, workplace conflict, and productivity problems upon return from treatment. (Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment -
- Investing in employee treatment yields high returns, with an estimated gain of 23% among employees with an income of \$45,000 per year or an estimated gain of 64% for employees earning \$60,000 per year.

Failure of employers to deal appropriately with substance misuse can have a negative impact on not only the health of their employees, but also bottom line. Additionally, substance misuse in the workplace can contribute to low morale, decreased motivation, engagement, and trust, thereby weakening the company's culture.

Addressing Substance Misuse in the Workplace

Substance use disorder is a chronic medical condition, and as such, it is vital that companies take a proactive approach rather than a reactive and/or punitive approach. A comprehensive approach would mean combining preventative screening and detection programs with resources and assistance programs to help employees with substance use disorders find the treatment and support needed to stay in remission. Engaging in health and education programs can prevent a possible problem from occurring in the first place, or from escalating. Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) can work to offer short-term counseling and/or assistance in linking employees with alcohol and/or drug problems to local treatment resources, including peer support/recovery groups. EAPs have been found to be highly effective resources for addressing substance abuse issues.

Hiring individuals in recovery is also a "smart business decision," says Philadelphia-based recovery scientist, Robert Ashford. Emerging data is showing that employees in long-term recovery have higher job performance than the average employee; with increased productivity, consistent attendance, lower turnover, less sick-time utilization and work-related accidents and claims. Additionally, individuals in recovery, fueled by renewed *joie de vivre*, are oftentimes full of compassion, optimism, purpose, loyalty and gratitude.

In conclusion, substance use disorder is a multifaceted ever-growing public health crisis, enslaving our citizens and draining our resources. Employer involvement is now more important than ever. Dr. John Kelly, founder and director of the Recovery Research Institute states, "Employers can play a key role in the recovery process, motivating employees for positive change and facilitating treatment engagement and retention, ultimately enhancing health and saving lives." *Creating a culture of wellness and investing in recovery is not only the right thing to do, it pays off.* Normalizing (destigmatizing) behavioral health, promoting help-seeking behaviors and providing individuals with linkages to treatment, and supporting those in recovery is truly an opportunity to humanize the workplace; and, can help to reduce suffering, and avoid painful, sometimes deadly consequences.

About the Author: Mariel S. Hufnagel is the Executive Director at [The Ammon Foundation](#). As a person in long-term recovery from a mental health and substance use disorder, she uses her lived experience to share hope, smash stigma and help create recovery-informed systems of care. Mariel is recognized as a dynamic and passionate advocate, servant leader and motivational speaker. She sits on local, state and federal coalitions and boards, has been acknowledged locally and nationally with numerous awards, and featured in countless media outlets.

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