



*Drug alcohol  
abuse*

## Drug and Alcohol Abuse in the workplace by Jo Trimarco

### Introduction

Employees drinking alcohol at work or disappearing for a sneaky spliff? During the pandemic, drug and alcohol abuse spiked along with a significant increase in mental health issues. As an Employer you have a legal duty to protect employees' health, safety and welfare. Understanding the signs of drug and alcohol misuse (or abuse) will help you to manage health and safety risk in your workplace, develop a policy to deal with drug and alcohol-related problems and support your employees.

### What happened with my client

My client, Dan called me a few months ago concerned about a brand new employee they had just taken on. On day two they appeared to be under the influence of alcohol and were staggering around the office and slurring their words. Dan had his suspicions that they were drinking alcohol at work, disguised in a water bottle.

I advised Dan not to make assumptions but to talk confidentially with the employee to voice his concerns and ascertain whether they had a problem. I advised he find a space away from the main office where they wouldn't be disturbed - provide evidence where possible and take notes. During the meeting the employee advised they had no issues and denied drinking alcohol at work. The meeting ended. I asked Dan whether he questioned what was in the water bottle, he hadn't. The employee was called back in and asked about the contents of the water bottle. They advised it was water. Dan asked for a sample, to which the employee then admitted it was in fact vodka. They advised the vodka was to steady their nerves.

To make matters worse the employee had driven into work and would have driven home, as they had done the previous day. If my client had known for sure then, there was no way he would have let the employee drive home. On this occasion, the employee was told not to drive and to seek alternative transportation home.

This is not the first time I have come across incidents like this. Employees will try to disguise alcohol in many ways, in a coca cola bottle or coffee mug and others may pop out at lunchtime for a sneaky spliff.

### **What to do**

Drug and alcohol dependence are recognised medical problems. Someone who is misusing drugs or alcohol has the same rights to confidentiality and support as they would if they had any other medical or psychological condition.

You should encourage them to get help from their GP or a specialist drug or alcohol agency and refer them to your organisation's occupational health service (if you have one).

Think about whether drug and alcohol misuse in your workplace is treated as a disciplinary matter or a health concern. If you dismiss someone because of drug or alcohol misuse without trying to help them, an employment tribunal may find that you've dismissed them unfairly.

If you don't have access to occupational health services, you can still support employees' health and wellbeing. You can make sure there is information at work about where they can go for advice and help if they're concerned about drug or alcohol misuse.

In this case, as the employee was only on day three of their new job, the matter, in line with company policy was treated as gross misconduct and the employee dismissed.

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Email: [jo@jt-hrconsultancy.com](mailto:jo@jt-hrconsultancy.com)

Mobile: 07715 026128

