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Substance use disorders (SUDs) cost employers an average of $81 billion annually. Creating a recovery-ready workplace can help break down the barriers that prevent employees with SUDs from seeking help.

by | **Isabelle Wettergren**

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rkplace:

The Next Frontier
for Employee Wellness

The concept of employee wellness has evolved significantly from a traditional focus on physical health to a newfound emphasis on mental health. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the imperative of addressing this critical facet of well-being. Organizations grappled with an unprecedented demand for support as individuals turned to alcohol and substance misuse to cope with stress.

As a stark reminder, 70% of adults with substance use disorder (SUD), sometimes referred to as addiction, are part of the workforce, making this a pressing workplace concern.[1] This transformation brings into sharp focus the emergence of the "recovery-ready workplace," a concept that not only supports employees' mental health but also challenges the stigma surrounding SUD by recognizing it as a mental health condition, not a moral failing.

Postpandemic Surge

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most employee wellness programs primarily focused on healthy eating, physical activity, biometrics, ergonometric workstations, stress management and various health screenings. The pandemic upheaval brought to light the need to address a crucial component of well-being: mental health.

At the onset of the pandemic, organizations scrambled to find meaningful ways to support their employees during this highly traumatic period. Employee assistance programs (EAPs) and mental health professionals struggled (and continue to struggle) to keep up with the demands that have increased in numbers and severity. People turned to alcohol and substance misuse to self-medicate and alleviate stress. The National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics found that 60% of the adult population admitted to having increased their use of alcohol, and 46% cited "stress" as the reason for their increased drinking.[2]

The Cost of SUD

The silver lining of the pandemic is that the stigma associated with mental health is slowly lifting and more leaders are investing time, energy and resources to support their employees' mental health and well-being. SUD remains one of the costliest mental health conditions in the United States as demonstrated by the following statistics.

- Drug-involved overdoses killed more than 106,699 people in 2021.[3]
- On average, 141,000 people die each year from the effects of alcohol.[4]
- Two out of three adults report being impacted by addiction, personally or within their family.[5]
- The U.S. Surgeon General estimates the annual economic impact of substance misuse to be $249 billion (alcohol) and $193 billion (illicit drug use)—a total cost to the U.S. economy of $442 billion annually.[6]
- 13.3 million workers (nearly 9%) report that they are in recovery or have recovered from a past or present substance use problem.[7]

The cost of SUD to employers averages $81 billion yearly.[8] Revenue loss is attributed to a combination of factors such as increases in absenteeism and use of extra sick days, injuries and accident rates, premature deaths and fatal accidents, theft and turnover. Employee productivity decreases, thus lowering the morale of co-workers who have to pick up the slack.

Organizations can use "The Real Cost of Substance Use to Employers" tool to calculate their specific costs of substance use (including prescription drug use and misuse, alcohol use and misuse, opioid and heroin addiction, as well as the use of other illicit drugs and cannabis). The tool was jointly developed by the National Safety Council, NORC at the University of Chicago and Shatterproof, a national nonprofit dedicated to combating addiction.

SUD: A Mental Health Condition, Not a Moral Failure

Understanding SUD as a mental health condition rather than a moral failure is pivotal in combating stigma and plays a crucial role in how employers can effectively support employees on the vast spectrum of substance use, misuse and abuse. This perspective shift not only promotes empathy but also creates an environment where individuals feel safe seeking help and employers can better assist them.

Stigmatizing SUD as a moral failing perpetuates harmful stereotypes and misconceptions. This judgmental view assumes that individuals with SUD lack willpower or have flawed characters, deepening the shame and guilt they already feel. In a workplace context, this stigma can manifest as discrimination, ostracization or even job loss. As a result, many individuals with SUD are hesitant to disclose their struggles or seek help, fearing the potential repercussions of admitting to their condition.

Recovery-Ready Workplace at a Glance

A *recovery-ready workplace* is a compassionate and supportive environment that prioritizes the well-being of employees. It is a place where organizations recognize addiction as a mental health condition, not a moral failing, and actively take steps to alleviate stigma and provide practical assistance.

In a recovery-ready workplace, employees with SUD are encouraged to seek help early without fear of judgment or reprisal. The organization develops policies and practices that facilitate access to treatment, counseling and recovery support resources. It fosters a culture of understanding, where open conversations about addiction and recovery are encouraged, and employees are educated about the complexities of the disease.

Moreover, a recovery-ready workplace goes beyond the individual and extends support to their families. It acknowledges the interconnectedness of personal and professional lives and offers comprehensive assistance to those affected by SUD.

Overall, a recovery-ready workplace is a safe haven where individuals in recovery can find the necessary resources and understanding to regain their health, stability and productivity, contributing to a healthier, more supportive work environment for all.

Employers play a critical role in challenging this stigma. By recognizing SUD as a mental health condition, they can foster a culture of understanding and compassion. This shift allows employees to approach their supervisors or EAP without fear of judgment or reprisal, increasing the liklihood that they will seek assistance when needed. It also acknowledges that SUD is a complex interplay of genetic, environmental and neurological factors, far removed from moral judgments.

Supporting employees with SUD means offering them access to resources and treatment options. Employers can implement or enhance utilization of their EAPs, which provide confidential counseling and referral services, or they can offer comprehensive mental health benefits that encompass addiction treatment. These initiatives signal to employees that their well-being is valued and that help is available without judgment.

Furthermore, employers can educate their workforce about addiction as a mental health condition, reducing stigma within the workplace. By facilitating open discussions, providing resources and encouraging a nonjudgmental atmosphere, employers can contribute to breaking down the barriers that prevent employees from seeking help.

Championing a Recovery-Ready Workplace Initiative

One of the most common misconceptions is that only clinically trained people can provide services to prevent, support and educate employees about SUD. Highly trained and certified nonclinical professionals, including the following, can also play a role in creating and sustaining education and prevention efforts. Employers may choose to train existing employees, contract with outside providers or partner with their EAPs to fill these roles.

- **Certified facilitators** in addiction awareness are trained to create psychological safety, engage participants in personal reflections and group discussions, and offer evidence-based tools to cultivate well-being components such as resilience, healthy boundaries, honoring values, exploring career interests, emotional triggers, mindfulness, etc. These emotional regulation and life tools can benefit everyone in the organization. While some organizations prefer to train their managers, safety specialists and HR specialists, others use contractors. Organizations such as the International Center for Addiction and Recovery Education

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takeaways

- Seven in ten adults with substance use disorder (SUD) are part of the workforce, and SUDs cost employers an average of $81 billion annually in the form of increased absenteeism, injuries, deaths and more.

- The increase in alcohol and substance misuse during the COVID-19 pandemic has brought a new focus on mental health for wellness programs.

- Employers can contribute to breaking down the barriers that prevent employees from seeking help by building a recovery-ready workplace.

- A *recovery-ready workplace* is a safe haven where individuals in recovery can find the necessary resources and understanding to regain their health, stability and productivity. Organizations develop policies and practices that facilitate access to treatment, counseling and recovery support resources.

- Key steps for establishing a recovery-ready workplace include gaining leadership buy-in and conducting a needs assessment. Other steps include providing education and training on SUD and recovery, establishing or enhancing employee assistance programs (EAPs), and promoting employee involvement through affinity groups.

(ICARE) can provide more information on how to find certified facilitators in addiction awareness.

- **Certified professional recovery coaches** assist individuals in overcoming addiction by offering judgment-free and personalized support to help them achieve and maintain sobriety, while also addressing the challenges and obstacles they encounter during their journey to recovery. They typically offer online or in-person individual and group coaching sessions. A list of certified professional recovery coaches is available from the International Association of Professional Recovery Coaches.

- **Certified corporate recovery coaches** hold a higher level of coaching accreditation. They work individually and privately with C-suite leaders and help them navigate the inherent challenges of leadership while simultaneously discovering their personal path to sobriety and wholeness.

- **Recovery peer supports** are typically current employees who provide guidance, empathy and practical assistance to individuals in addiction recovery, drawing from their own lived experiences to foster hope, motivation and sustained sobriety.

- **Current employees with long-term recovery** have faced the demons of SUD as well as the shame, secrecy, terror and bewilderment. They have found a path to freedom. Their stories of self-discovery and resilience can play a crucial role in initiating and leading organizational change. People in recovery often possess a wide range of strengths that have contributed to their ability to overcome addiction and maintain a sober and healthy lifestyle. Their lived experience makes them incredibly valuable assets for the creation of recovery-ready workplaces.

Starting a Recovery-Ready Workplace

Starting a recovery-ready workplace is a transformative journey that requires commitment, empathy and concrete actions. The following are key steps an organization can take to initiate this process:

- **Gain leadership buy-in.** The first and most crucial step is to secure support from top leadership. Leaders must recognize the importance of a recovery-ready workplace and champion the cause. Their commitment sets the tone for the entire organization.
- **Conduct a needs assessment.** A thorough assessment of the organization's current state concerning addiction and recovery involves understanding the prevalence of SUDs among employees and identifying any existing support and policies.
- **Develop and implement policies.** Policies that promote a recovery-friendly environment should encompass aspects such as nondiscrimination, confidentiality, reasonable accommodations and access to treatment resources. Consult with a lawyer to ensure that these policies comply with relevant laws and regulations. The legalization of marijuana and psychedelics

can be a difficult thing to navigate without the help of legal counsel.
- **Provide education and training.** Partner with certified addiction awareness facilitators to provide comprehensive training and education on addiction, recovery and related issues. Train managers and HR personnel to recognize signs of addiction, perform individual check-ins with employees, understand how to create psychological safety and support employees seeking help. Offering ongoing workshops on stigma reduction, resilience, healthy boundaries, values, career interests, emotional triggers and mindfulness will benefit not only those with SUD but everyone in the organization.
- **Establish or enhance EAPs.** EAPs provide confidential counseling, referrals and resources for employees struggling with addiction. Ensure that employees are aware of these programs and know how to access them.
- **Foster better communication and awareness.** Awareness campaigns can reduce stigma and foster open discussions about addiction and recovery. Use various communication channels to inform employees about the organization's commitment to supporting recovery.
- **Create a supportive environment.** Create a workplace culture that encourages employees to seek help without fear of judgment or reprisal. Promote inclusivity and empathy within the organization.
- **Offer reasonable accommodations.** Inform employees in recovery about their legal rights regarding treatment and reasonable accommodations. Consult with a lawyer to ensure that the organization is willing and prepared to provide these accommodations as needed.
- **Form community partnerships.** Collaborate with local addiction treatment centers, recovery-supportive organizations and community resources, and establish partnerships to provide employees with access to treatment services and support networks.
- **Gather feedback and evaluate.** Continuously gather feedback from employees to assess the effectiveness of initiatives. Use this feedback to make necessary adjustments and improvements to recovery-ready programs.

- **Monitor and ensure accountability.** Implement monitoring mechanisms to track progress in creating a recovery-ready workplace. This might include collecting and assessing data on absenteeism or benefits utilization. Hold leadership accountable for the organization's commitment to supporting recovery.
- **Promote employee involvement.** Encourage employees to champion a recovery-ready workplace. Establish affinity groups, employee resource groups or similar forums where employees can share experiences and contribute to the development of supportive programs. These affinity groups could promote the safety and inclusion of sober and sober-curious employees as well as recovery community allies.
- **Celebrate success stories.** With their approval, share success stories of employees who have successfully navigated recovery. Celebrating these stories helps reduce stigma and showcases the organization's commitment to recovery.[8]

While the steps listed above may seem overwhelming, chances are many employers already have several systems in place that can help them start a recovery-ready workplace initiative. Employers should start from where they are and take small steps. For example, organizations can partner with a workplace wellness professional specializing in recovery-ready workplaces, offer socio-emotional training or invite speakers to share their stories of overcoming addiction. Leaders and staff can learn about recovery, perhaps by attending an open meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous or another type of recovery group.

Conclusion

The journey toward building a recovery-ready workplace is a transformative one, rooted in commitment, empathy and concrete actions. By fostering leadership buy-in, conducting thorough needs assessments, developing recovery-friendly policies, and investing in education and training, organizations can take significant steps toward creating an environment that not only supports employees in their addiction recovery journey but also contributes to a culture of understanding and compassion.

The recovery-ready workplace is not only about helping individuals recover but also about creating a healthier, more inclusive and more supportive work environment for all. As employers continue to navigate the evolving landscape

bio

Isabelle Wettergren is a self-employed workplace wellness consultant, trainer and well-being coach. She holds a master's degree in health and wellness psychology from Ashford University. She is a National Board-Certified Health & Wellness Coach, Certified Professional Recovery Coach, Certified Facilitator in Addiction Awareness and Certified Wellness Practitioner. As an Ambassador of Mental Health and Well-Being, Wettergren combines 23 years of experience teaching and leading wellness initiatives with her personal journey of overcoming addiction to inspire others to discover freedom from substance use disorder and live life to the fullest. She has been enjoying the benefits of a drug- and alcohol-free lifestyle since 2008.

of employee well-being, it's evident that the recovery-ready workplace represents the next frontier for inclusion and the betterment of society as a whole.

Endnotes

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