

Strung out at work

Whether hard liquor before work, a glass of prosecco at lunch, the joint added to the “crime scene” or the daily line of coke in the company’s restroom: work, alcohol, and drugs do not work well together – especially when **SAFETY AND EXPERTISE** suffer. Workplace intoxication can present difficult situations for superiors, colleagues, and the addicts themselves.

On Mondays the dyers skipped work. Clothing colored with indigo hung on the lines, waiting for the sun to turn the dye into a brilliant blue. A little way away the wage workers lay around in the grass chewing the fat. Since the chemical process by which indigo becomes blue required a lot of urine, they downed large quantities of alcohol.

Four hundred years later, Ludwig Eickemeyer* had a blood alcohol level of 1.8 per mille when he crashed his motor-vehicle. He was coming home from a night shift. He was not a dyer, nor had he drunk anything that morning; but his blood was carrying enough residual alcohol to knock most people out. It was the normal state of things for the mining electrician, and not just on Mondays. This went on for 18 years.

Driver’s License Traded for a New Life

That there was no accident caused by him during this period, borders on a miracle. Up to 30 percent of all mishaps at work take place under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.

The International Labour Organisation estimates that, globally, 3-5% of the aver-

age work-force is alcohol-dependent, and up to 25% drink heavily enough to be at risk of dependence. A survey carried out in December 2007 for insurer Norwich Union Healthcare found a third of employees admitted to having been to work with a hangover and 15% reported having been drunk at work. One in 20 employees reported hangovers at work once a week.

For businesses, the economic consequences are considerable. German employer associations calculate that damage to the economy caused by the consumption of alcohol at work amounts to 15 billion euros, while more pessimistic estimates cite 30 billion. Each year 92,000 Germans are declared unfit to work on account of alcohol-related addictions or psychoses. As consumption increases, employees miss work up to 16 times more frequently and forfeit 25 percent of their working capacity. There are no comparable, statistically backed figures describing the effects of cannabis, cocaine, heroine, or other intoxicating substances taken at the workplace. It is estimated that between 5 and 7 percent of employees take drugs with some degree of regularity.

Ludwig Eickemeyer never stood out. Among friends he was the buddy who liked a drink or two. He did his job in a way that meant no one was bothered by his addiction – neither his colleagues nor his superiors. “At a certain level I could do all of my work so that everyone was satisfied,” says Eickemeyer. “But I may have never been below 1.2 per mille during this time. I needed it to function.” Up to this small, harmless accident after work, where the police took away his driver’s licence – and gave him a new life.

Co-Alcoholism Encourages the Disease

“Sometimes I feel shocked and sad when I reflect on how I could have done everything differently in my life if my alcohol addiction had been discovered,” says Eickemeyer, today Chairman of a support group in the German Ruhr area.

Recognizing people’s dependency on alcohol or other drugs, and helping them, is therefore one of the main themes of global campaigns and projects around addiction at work. When colleagues and superiors tolerate addic- >

Clear guidelines aimed at helping addicts out of their dependency

> tions, this is known as co-alcoholism, and it can extend to ignoring addiction-related absence or even covering it up, burdening business operations and encouraging the illness itself. Managerial staff are legally bound to protect the safety and health of people working under them, which means relieving addicts of their work and requesting that they seek help.

For colleagues and more especially for superiors, it is crucial to take note of increased unreliability, frequent

absences, and mood-swings. “Addicts are masters of camouflage,” explains Sabine Morati*. For 20 years she went to work every day – sober, but suffering from withdrawal symptoms which she made up for by overzealousness. “Never look negative!” Her colleagues at the bank appreciated her, although she was considered ill-tempered. That was a smokescreen. Fritz Lehmann* succeeded in completing his apprenticeship as a roofer even while addicted to heroine. In the evening he stole

materials from the company and on the weekend he smuggled drugs across the border. He was in the German Armed Forces, and later as a fitter, regularly on drugs, never facing the consequences. Maybe he was noticed, maybe not, but nobody ever offered him help or committed him to a treatment program.

Increase the Pressure But Don't Forget Your Social Obligations

Germany's statutory social accident insurance body, the DGUV, recommends a clear action plan, for the person in the first steps of consultation and omission to move through to the advanced stage of addiction therapy.

While these actions begin with a focus on resolution (in the hope that the odd slip will be noticed by colleagues who recognize the danger of addiction and the associated risks), if the lapses continue then they advise colleagues to up the pressure in conversations. At the end the DGUV recommends getting addiction experts, employee organizations, management, and people from the addict's private sphere involved to help them see reality – and take action. If their behavior does not change, then official warnings and dismissal are the last resort, and even they should include a reinstatement clause which allows employees to return to their old jobs if they abstain.

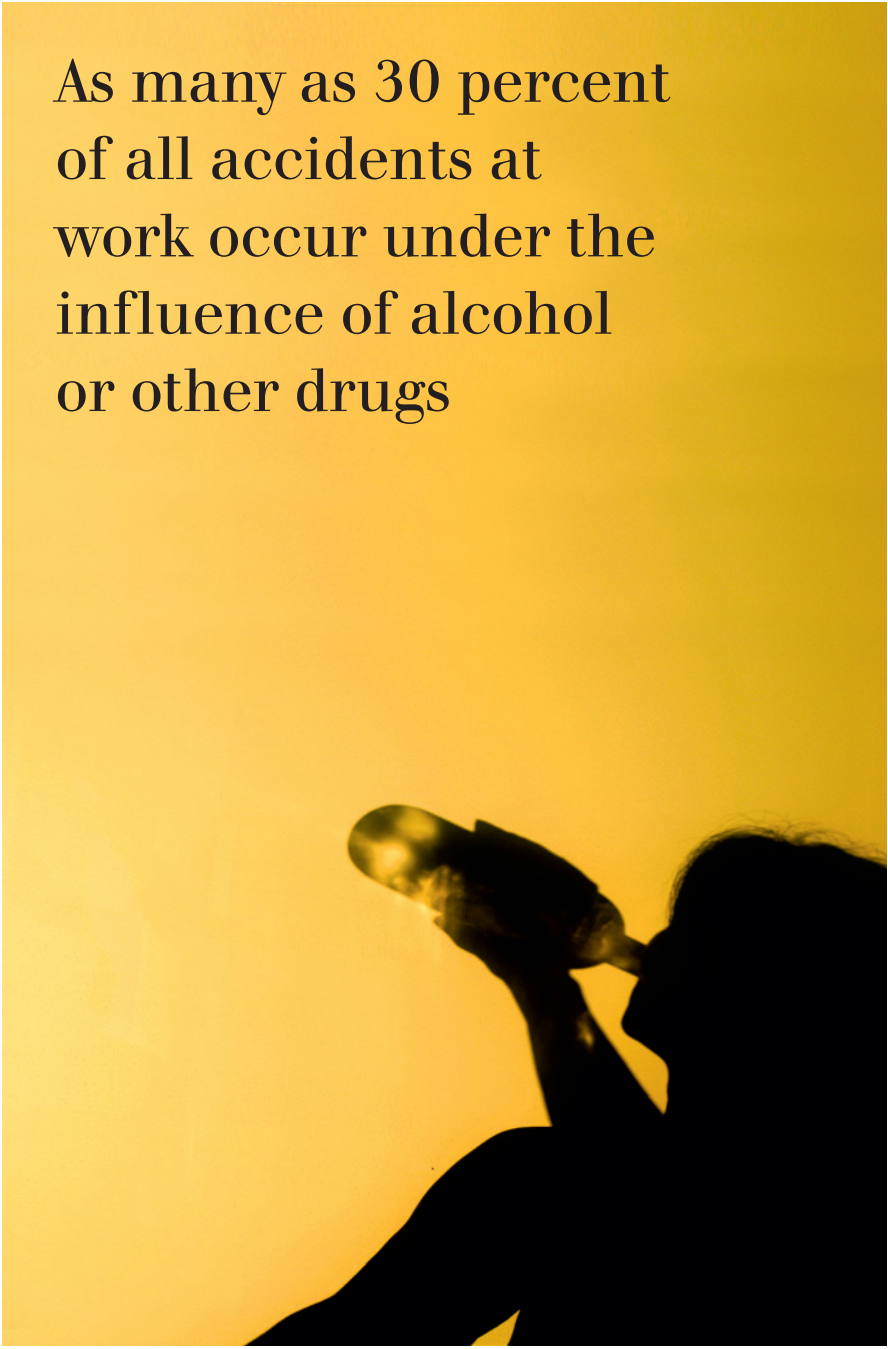
This is because the loss of a job can be the worst possible punishment for an addict, usually even

worse than breaking with their families and friends. It was a social obligation to take into account, the option of returning as motivation, according to the DGUV.

Fear of losing one's job is often the reason why addicts and other employees who notice their behavior do not act earlier. Even colleagues with courage often lack knowledge of how to handle such situations. Is their coworker really an addict, or does he just like to have a good time? How do you speak to somebody if you think they can't do their work properly in the state they are in today – and probably tomorrow? People often worry about the consequences their colleagues will have to face. Social abuse perhaps, widespread discrediting – or even getting fired on the spot? Few will know that it is not so much the person's job which is at risk, but rather the insurance provided by professional associations to cover the eventuality of an accident at work, which is forfeited if the employee has alcohol in his or her blood (even a residual amount) or is under the influence of drugs. Dismissal really is the ultima ratio, since addiction is considered an illness and does not represent a reason in itself to get fired.

Universal Approaches, Cultural Differences

Around the world there are countless associations, groups, clinics, and universities working on strategies aimed at teaching employers and employees how to handle the dangers of addiction, >



As many as 30 percent of all accidents at work occur under the influence of alcohol or other drugs

Prevention and Help

► **Change drinking customs:** To what extent is the consumption of alcohol taken for granted inside the company? Are corporate celebrations always boozy, and is a forthcoming vacation or a business milestone jointly achieved reason enough to crack open a bottle? A general ban on alcohol could make sense, but is not always the solution, since often it merely postpones the problem.

► **Check what drinks are on offer:** Is the bubbly always at hand in the canteen? That case of beer on the office floor or in the foreman's office at the construction site could be replaced with water.

► **Teach your staff when and how addiction arises:** The risks of the occasional slip-up, and how a weekend of heavy partying can affect your performance and your willingness to take risks.

► **Promote health awareness:** Addiction prevention is part of preventative healthcare, which management and factory bosses should encourage among their workforce.

► **Set up works advisory centers:** It is not possible for every company to have a full-time addiction help, but voluntary helpers trained in seminars and by self-help groups can assist.

► **Tell people about the therapy which is available:** Contact with addiction counselors, self-help groups and specific therapists can open doors for addicts which by themselves they may not have seen. Nobody can be forced into therapy. But if the pressure is great enough, they will often consent.

Only very few companies have the working conditions, the stress, and the cultural environment in mind

> how to prevent it, and how to deal with alcohol and drug abuse. The approaches are basically universal, although they do display cultural and legislative differences.

“The thing is that there is a triangle of action – three points that encompass and influence the whole affair,” explains Steve Allsop, PhD Expert at the Australian National Drug Research Institute. “You have the individual, the drug, and the circumstances.” To achieve meaningful prevention you have to assess on the one hand the availability of substances – for instance, whether alcohol can be purchased inside the company.

“A person has to be treated in terms of education or therapy,” adds Allsop, remarking, “It is on these two areas that most companies focus worldwide. Only a very few look at working conditions, the stress, and the cultural environment.” But think of this: it is essential to consider the fact that construction workers in assembly or mining jobs, often located far from civilization, have very few opportunities to spend their evenings in a meaningful way.

Strict Bans on Alcohol are Rare

Foremost among preventative measures is education inside companies about the health aspects of alcohol and drug consumption, as well as the far reaching legal, safety-related, and social consequences. In countries such as New Zealand, Australia, and the USA, tight alcohol and drug monitoring

among employees is common practice in certain professions. In Germany on the other hand, this is legally impossible: drug and alcohol tests may only be insisted upon before employment commences, but not afterwards.

Many companies now rely on employment agreements incorporating addiction prevention measures. These include guidelines for anybody confronted with alcohol or drug abuse, and create a clear legal situation.

Fritz Lehmann, Ludwig Eickemeyer, and Sabine Morati can no longer imagine how they managed to work at all: strung out, brought up to the bearable limit, cold and sweaty, because their bodies lacked substances. Following their treatment they were different people, but they were allowed to stay in their jobs. None of them have relapsed. “The realization of who I am and what I am really doing here is too great,” says Eickemeyer. So too was the shock of contemplating the circumstances in which he had worked all those years. Shock enough indeed to say no to a beer at the next office party – and the one after that – and to earn the admiration of his colleagues. **Isabell Spilker**

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