

By Donna Burt, Project Manager, WorkSafe New Zealand

Cracking down on drink and drugs

Potentially dangerous jobs and drink and drugs don't mix. That's why it's time to change the culture in construction and institute a drugs and alcohol policy.



IT'S A SIMPLE enough story. It's Saturday morning in central Christchurch. A dozen construction workers drag themselves into a café, ordering the big breakfast and multiple rounds of coffee and muttering about how hungover they are from the night before.

There is a problem

We might shrug this off as normal. After all, it's the day after Friday night - the guys

obviously had a good night. But as they fold their chairs in and head off to the nearby building site they're working on, it's clear they really are hungover. And the questions begin - how safe will they be on site? Are they really fit to work in a high-risk industry today?

Alcohol and other drugs are a significant issue for many in the construction sector. WorkSafe research carried out by Neilson in

2014 is reported in *Health and safety attitudes and behaviours in the New Zealand workforce: A study of workers and employers*. This found that nearly one in five construction workers indicate colleagues are working hungover or stoned from time to time or a lot at their workplace.

Significant consequences

The impact of alcohol and drugs in the workplace has significant consequences including fatalities, serious injuries, reduced productivity, higher turnover, absenteeism and reputation risk - to name a few. That doesn't include the emotional and mental effects on the worker's wellbeing.

From the construction companies we've worked with, particularly those in the Canterbury Rebuild Safety Charter, we know they want more information on dealing with this complex issue of alcohol and other drugs.

Talk to teams and put a policy in place

So, for a construction company battling this issue, where do you start?

Start by having a conversation with your teams, establish the boundaries and the organisation's expectations and provide support where you can.

First, talk to your workers, site supervisors and managers. If you don't have one in place already, consider developing an alcohol and drug policy for your company. This is not about stopping work, banning alcohol or suggesting everyone abstain in their life beyond work. It's about supporting the prevention of harm in the workplace with a focus on education, training and, where it's needed, rehabilitation.

The Charter has developed a factsheet to help develop an alcohol and drug policy - this may be a good first step for many.

As part of developing and improving your policy, you should be continually talking to your teams. Talk to them about the organisation's expectations and the policy itself, and listen when they provide ideas and suggestions.

A good real-life example is Corbel Construction. Their Business Excellence Manager Kristina Wischnowsky presented at a recent WorkSafe event on why they developed an alcohol and drug policy and exactly how they did it. This is available online.

Testing employees one option

Alcohol and drug testing is something to consider as part of your policy. There are many different types including pre-employment, random and reasonable-cause testing.

Your policy should outline which, if any, of those tests you will be carrying out and who will do the testing for you - many companies use an external agency.

Think about what you will do if a test comes back positive and outline this in your policy. Remember, you must give the worker the opportunity to explain before deciding on appropriate action.

The carrot, not the stick

It may not all be about disciplinary action either. Here's a case in point. One organisation had 15 people fail the first testing round.

Twelve of those people received rehabilitation or support, and 6 months later, all but one of the 15 people passed the tests. What did the manager do to congratulate them? It wasn't a round at the local. Instead, he organised a diving trip to say thanks and well done.

It is stories like this that will help to change the culture around alcohol and drugs on site. Start by having a conversation with your teams, establish the boundaries and the organisation's expectations and provide support where you can. ■

For more ▶ See the Charter's resources on alcohol and other drugs in construction at www.safetycharter.org.nz/improve-health-safety. Select Impairment and then Alcohol and other drugs. This includes the factsheet and presentation by Kristina Wischnowsky.

The full research report carried out by Neilson for WorkSafe is available at www.business.govt.nz/worksafe.