

Alcohol as a Work Perk, Tread Carefully Here



Headline news today is all about opioids and its effects on just about every aspect of life. But substance abuse isn't just an opioids issue. Alcohol still plays a significant role in the workforce and we're seeing changes in who is abusing it and how cultural trends are contributing.

One of the most surprising changes is that drinking is actually on the rise. According to the [**National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism \(NIAAA\)**](#), in a comparison of data from 2012 – 2013, drinking is now two to three times higher than it was at a similar comparison point taken a decade earlier. The data also pointed to a significantly higher rate of extreme binge drinking, defined as four or more drinks on an occasion for women and five or more for men. In particular, [**binge drinking has risen 58 percent for women**](#) narrowing the gender gap between men (who are more likely to be problem drinkers) and women in drinking disorders.

While there are no real answers on the facts for the increase, [**changing social norms and likely, increasing levels of stress**](#) due to societal pressures are playing a key role. Also playing a role is the increasing focus on alcohol in our culture, generating high interest in related epicurean pursuits. Think of pre-arranged vacations with exotic names such as Adventures for the Wine Obsessed, local craft beer

festivals, scotch tasting events, wine tasting night at the grocery store, and the list goes on. There are even radio and television shows that cater to these interests such as *Booze Traveler*, airing four seasons and hosted by a “cocktail connoisseur” who traveled the globe consuming regional liquor and learning its origins. Culturally, there is a large focus on alcohol as an experience.

Social norms in the workforce are also changing. While decades ago, it was common to have an ashtray on your desk and a bottle of scotch in your drawer, workplace mores changed with the times and workplace alcohol became less common. Almost non-existent. But the times have changed, again. Let's look at the tech industry that has boomed with start-ups popping up like gnats on ripe bananas. These new organizations need to compete aggressively for talent. One way to differentiate an organization is through the perks offered to employees. From nap pods to free beer in kegs available on-site, the perks in the tech industry are creative to say the least. Offering on-site alcohol does more than attract employees; it keeps employees at work and softens the impact of the longer working hours many of these jobs demand. In addition to the pressure that comes with working longer hours, added workforce stress particularly impacts [**women who experience higher levels of anxiety and psychological distress**](#) at work than men do.

In Alliant's own 2017 [Tech Perks & Benefits Survey](#), 57 percent of the companies participating in the survey offered on-site alcohol in some capacity. However, the life of the alcohol perk may be fizzling out. Recently several large tech companies have moved to [take alcohol out of the office](#) for reasons ranging from a lack of inclusivity for those who do not consume it to cleaning up what's become too much of a party-like culture. An alcohol-friendly workplace culture may not be any more attractive to recruits than companies without one according to a [study by Oregon State University](#). And, there are other ways to make the workplace more relaxed and fun. Corporate team-building experience events are available nearly everywhere, and don't need to rely on alcohol to create the bonding outcomes sought.

If your organization is considering offering on-site use of alcohol as a perk, think through it thoroughly and a bit differently. It must be viewed in the light of tying together the health, safety, and risk management objectives of your organization, along with the direct and indirect costs associated. Employers need to break through the usual silos of benefits, risk management, and wellness and look at your organizational culture as a whole. Is the perk giving your organization the return on investment you're looking for? Can you tie hard dollars from the perk to the longer hours employees are working? Is the break and fun atmosphere more important to your culture than the risk assumed? How does this perk fit with your goals to support healthy, safe, and productive employees?

Here are a few [key facts employers need to take into consideration](#) about alcohol:

- Breathalyzer tests detected alcohol in 16% of emergency room patients injured at work.
- Analyses of workplace fatalities showed at least 11% of the victims had been drinking.
- Employees with alcohol problems are more likely to have injury-related absences.
- Excessive drinkers who use opioid pain relievers are at a [much greater risk of not only overdose, but also death](#).

Even if your organization does not permit alcohol on site, it's important for employers to recognize that drinking is on the rise, as is use of other substances like opioids and marijuana. From popular work perks to absence management to workers compensation, Alliant helps employers break through the barriers of traditional approaches.

Want to know more? Ask your Alliant representative.

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