

## **LABOUR MARKET DIALOGUES: EMPLOYING PEOPLE WITH PAST OR CURRENT PROBLEMATIC SUBSTANCE USE**

Labour Market Dialogues is a project of the Community Council designed to explore how employers in BC's Capital Region may be better supported to hire and retain people experiencing barriers to employment. This is one of nine discussion papers that share information on each barrier, with recommendations that could strengthen employers' success in recruiting and retaining staff.

Using research from Phase I of the Labour Market Dialogues and interviews with 10 local employers, the project focused on understanding employers' perceptions about hiring people with past or current history of substance use. This information will be used to design an employer guide to answer questions and concerns by employers about these issues.

### **Employer perceptions of substances**

Employers are more concerned about employing someone with past or present use of drugs such as cocaine, crystal meth or heroin than employing someone heavily using alcohol, marijuana or prescription drugs. The first drugs are seen as "lifestyle" drugs which influence behaviour, and employers believe users are unpredictable, more prone to theft and drug dealing.

Employers in the hospitality sector are also concerned about the temptation of alcohol available in the workplace. Interestingly employers overall are not very concerned about prescription drug misuse.

### **Who tells, and what happens when they do?**

Employers have found that employees often hide histories of problematic substance use as long as possible, so that it emerges with an incident which might have been avoided if employers had known.

Most employers would prefer employees disclose past or present problematic substance use in the interview.

Employers value honesty, and disclosure can be the first step in developing trust and a healthy relationship in the workplace.

Once an employee disclosed a past problem, some employers might follow up with questions about how long the employee had been clean or what supports they were receiving now.

However, in the construction industry, where past substance use is reported as common, one employer said that it was none of his business if there was a history of problematic substance use, as long as it was past.

Most, but not all employers expect employment agencies to disclose agencies' clients' substance use. Some believe that privacy legislation prevents employment agencies from sharing information without their client's permission, saying that it is the agencies' role to encourage clients to disclose.

However, most employers expect employment agencies to tell them indirectly or directly, as part of their communication about any issues they should know before hiring someone.

If an employee discloses past problematic substance use some employers might watch them more closely, looking for potential signs of relapse.

Where employers suspect a past or current pattern of problematic substance use, most would try to get information about this during reference checks.

### **When problematic substance use is not in the past**

Most employers are not comfortable with the idea of employing someone with current problematic substance use. Some are more comfortable if the employee is seeking help or is in some form of recovery.

Several workplaces have policies disallowing substance use on the job, and one construction employer commented that daily mandatory drug testing is common in his industry in the United States. Another employer noted that someone coming to work hung over or smelling of alcohol would be sent home.

Social service agencies and employees say that people with problematic substance use sometimes cope by using their substances on

the job during breaks, stabilising themselves, instead of attempting to function while in a state of withdrawal.

### **Concerns: Problematic substance use and its impact on business**

Employers were most concerned about employee reliability and safety related to problematic substance use, but also concerned about job performance, theft, and influence on other employees and on clients.

Job performance appraisal is often used as a measure to determine if substance use is problematic: is it affecting their work?

Employers are generally concerned about the potential relapse of someone with past problematic substance use.

Employer responses to suspected or confirmed relapse are mixed: some would initiate conversations about it, and are open to second chances, while some would fire the employee immediately.

Employers are concerned about where the line is between interfering in employees' lives and offering a supportive work environment.

### **Recommendations**

Employers can:

- Ask employees what support they need
- Send employees home if they come to work under the influence, and ensure they

get home safely

- Approach employment agencies taking WCB costs for new employees with problematic substance use
- Allow flexible scheduling to allow employees to attend AA or NA meetings
- Provide additional support and supervision, especially when job performance has been affected
- Assist in advocating for their employee to get a spot in detox program
- Give employees a second chance if they miss work or make mistakes
- Grant employees time off to deal with an addiction, with a promise of work when they return
- If a skilled employee is fired because of problematic substance use, still give a good and honest reference about skills as well as problematic substance use.

More information is needed to help employers:

- Identify signs of problematic substance use
- Better understand functional impact of substance use on job performance
- Find local supports for employees with problematic substance use
- Understand how to help employees with problematic substance use.

Vancity Credit Union has contributed funds to this project