



Supervisor Newsletter

The Importance of Employment in Addiction Treatment

Research has shown that employment is linked to positive treatment outcomes with drug abusers and alcoholics, and many addiction treatment professionals know that work plays an important role in recovery from addiction.

There are four models for the role of employment in addiction treatment. The primary model is *Work as a Positive Outcome*. This approach emphasizes gainful employment as a desirable outcome of treatment. The *Work Infusion Model* applies the process of work as a therapeutic factor in treatment. The *Work as Reinforcement Model* makes paid work available as a reward for complying with treatment requirements, and the *Contingent Sanctions Model* requires that patients remain employed to avoid undesirable consequences while in treatment.

According to the *Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development*, people in treatment and recovery from drug abuse and alcoholism do as well or better at work than those who have no history of addiction.

Most of those in recovery are capable of competitive employment. They have completed treatment, and are no different than any applicant with a manageable condition such as asthma, diabetes, or addiction. Recovered drug addicts and alcoholics will usually rise to accomplish what is expected of them. If given responsibility, many of those in treatment/recovery will work even harder than their coworkers to keep it.

But unfortunately many treatment and recovery programs do not emphasize vocational services, and those that do, under-utilize those services.

Additionally, too often, when an individual does successfully complete a

counseling/treatment program, he or she struggles to find employment.

Why Work Matters

Most people in recovery from addiction and alcoholism want to work. Being employed helps them feel needed and valuable, and makes it possible for them to live their lives as productive members of society. These are individuals who quite often just want to be normal and to give back to the community. They need to occupy their time to remain out of destructive cycles, and being able to work helps keep them focused on their recovery.

But many recovering addicts find themselves facing a difficult job market, and depending on company culture, it can be difficult to return to the same workplace one left when entering rehab. And even though the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination based on medical history—including past history of drug use and rehab—many former addicts say that it can be extremely difficult to find work. (Remember that *current* illegal users of drugs are not “individuals with disabilities” under the ADA. However, persons addicted to drugs, but who are no longer using drugs illegally and are receiving treatment for drug addiction or who have been rehabilitated successfully, are protected by the ADA from discrimination on the basis of past drug addiction.)

It is sad that there are not enough employers willing to give people in recovery a second chance. Many of those in recovery are skilled workers who, when given a chance, are not only able to perform well, they become devoted employees who remain loyal to the company out of an appreciation for the opportunity to work.

An Opportunity to Help

Supervisors who work for companies with a drug free workplace program in place

have an opportunity to help employees suffering from addiction and alcoholism. Helping an employee who has problems with alcohol or drugs to seek counseling—and encouraging and supporting them during the recovery process and during their return to work—is beneficial to the employee, his or her family, the company, and the community. For a person to be successful after treatment, the individual needs to be a part of the community, and that almost always means being employed.

Many people experienced in 12-step programs recommend to newcomers that they not make any drastic changes in their first year of recovery. That includes changing jobs as well as major relationship changes. Another reason it is important to keep one's job is that when everything else in life is changing, it is important to have something steady, reliable, and familiar to fall back on.

When possible, it is always better for those entering recovery to be able to keep their jobs. People in recovery need to be able to exercise their skills, talents, and creativity, and to remain engaged in society. Being able to keep one's job adds meaning to life, maintains self-value, and in a drug free workplace setting provides a safe substance-free place to go every day.

For many reasons, drug free workplace programs provide powerful prevention and treatment follow-up opportunities.

Supervisor-Referred Treatment

Because drug free workplace programs are governed by formal, regulated relationships and processes and actions

are well documented by trained supervisors, employees who agree to seek treatment in the context of the workplace cannot get away with giving only lip service to a treatment plan, or with manipulating their way out of what they may view as a "temporary mess."

Often, the most effective way to get an alcoholic or drug addict to deal with his or her problem is to make the person aware that his or her job is on the line and that he or she must get help and improve performance and conduct—or face serious consequences, including the possibility of losing his or her job. Drug free workplace programs make this possible.

Employment-required treatment can occur in a variety of settings, in many different forms, and for different lengths of time. Treatment methods range from detoxification to residential drug and alcohol treatment to outpatient day treatment to intensive outpatient treatment. But regardless of the treatment method, having a job to return to or while in treatment greatly increases the chance of success.

After the employee's return to duty, there is often some type of follow-up care such as a 12-step program or other group meetings, therapy, EAP sessions, or any combination of the foregoing to help prevent relapse.

Companies without drug free workplace programs do not have this formal system for harnessing the unique workplace characteristics that are so important in the battle against addiction and alcoholism.

In short, drug free workplace programs matter, and supervisors must always keep in mind that in the case of helping employees beat addiction, they matter a lot.

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