



Research Paper

Alcohol-related absence and presenteeism: Beyond productivity loss

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Alcohol use
Workplace
Absence
Presenteeism

ABSTRACT

Background: Alcohol use by employees is associated with negative consequences for the workplace in terms of absence and poor work performance. The aims of this study were to map the prevalence of alcohol-related absence and inefficiency using survey data from a broad sample of employees, and to explore how alcohol-related absence and presenteeism are experienced and handled using data from qualitative interviews.

Methods: The prevalence data stems from a web survey completed by 1940 Norwegian employees aged 20–74 years. The qualitative data consists of analyses of 24 interviews with managers, co-workers of heavy drinking employees, and heavy drinking employees, from various lines of businesses.

Results: 1–2% reported alcohol-related full day absence in the last 12 months, and 2% reported partial day absence; 11% reported inefficiency due to drinking the previous day. Analyses of interview data revealed that alcohol-related absence and presenteeism may cause a range of economic and practical problems. Managers reported spending a lot of resources and effort on single cases. In addition, the results showed how the presence of a heavy drinking employee may have a negative impact on the broader psychosocial environment, and cause concern for workplace safety. Due to consideration of the drinker's well-being and fear of negative reactions, problem cases can last for years.

Conclusions: Despite the relatively low prevalence of alcohol-related absence and inefficiency, the study suggest that the alcohol-related problems of a few, or only one, employee may still have substantial and far-reaching negative consequences for the workplace.

Background

Alcohol use is associated with a wide range of negative consequences for individuals who drink heavily, for people in the drinker's immediate surroundings, and for the society at large (Babor et al., 2010). Most of the research on harm from alcohol has focused on harm to the drinkers (Forouzanfar et al., 2016), but in recent years, there has also been a rising interest in the harm to others than the drinker (Nutt, King, & Phillips, 2010; Van Amsterdam, Opperhuizen, & Koeter, 2010). The consequences of alcohol use for the workplace is one such area of interest. Alcohol use may cause work absence, and being present at work in an intoxicated or impaired state may have an impact on work performance and the social interaction with colleagues. The current study presents new data on the prevalence of alcohol-related absence and presenteeism in Norway, and explores how these problems are experienced and handled in the workplace.

A recent review article of international studies published in the period 1980 to 2014 found empirical support for an association between alcohol use and both short- and long term work absence (Schou & Moan, 2015). Alcohol-related *absence* is a broad concept which includes

arriving late at work, leaving early, being absent part of the workday, one-day absence, and absence of several days. Being present at work in an impaired state due to drinking (having a hangover or being intoxicated) is referred to as alcohol-related *presenteeism*, and may also involve negative consequences for the workplace and for co-workers by for instance causing inefficiency, non-functional behavior at work and increasing the risk of errors (Frone, 2013; Frone & Trinidad, 2014; Schultz, Chen, & Edgington, 2009). Some recent studies suggests that employees' drinking has negative effects on both productivity and quality of work (Aas, Haverlaen, Sagvaag, & Thørrisen, 2017; Edvardsen, Moan, Christophersen, & Gjerde, 2015; Pidd, Kostadinov, & Roche, 2016). The costs related to alcohol-related absence and presenteeism have been reported as substantial. For example, in the United Kingdom, the cost due to alcohol-related absence was estimated to be the equal to 2.1 billion Euro in 2003, whereas studies in North America have produced cost estimates above 800 million Euro for alcohol-related absence and reduced productivity in the USA and Canada (see Laslett et al., 2010, for review). Finally, in Norway, the costs were estimated to be the equal to 200 million Euro in 2001 (Gjelsvik, 2004). Alcohol-related absence and reduced quality of work are estimated to

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account for the largest proportion of these costs, in Norway (Gjelsvik, 2004) and in the UK and North America (Laslett et al., 2010).

Reviews of the international literature (Schou & Moan, 2015) on the alcohol use-absence association show that many studies, including studies from Norway (Edvardsen et al., 2015; Schou, Storvoll, & Moan, 2014), are based on data from selected samples of employees (e.g., in terms of age- and gender distributions, and selection of industries). Thus, there is a need for updated figures on the prevalence of alcohol-related absence based on data from a broader sample of the Norwegian workforce. Alcohol-related presenteeism has so far received less attention in research (Aas et al., 2017; Edvardsen et al., 2015; Moan, 2014) and there is little specific knowledge on what instances of inefficiency due to alcohol use means in terms of productivity.

Several studies have shown that the employees who drink the most are more often absent from work due to drinking (e.g., Edvardsen et al., 2015; Schou et al., 2014), and they more often report alcohol-related presenteeism and inefficiency at work due to alcohol use (e.g., Aas et al., 2017; Edvardsen et al., 2015). Based on these findings, many would suggest that preventive work should be directed towards heavy drinkers. However, a previous study among employees aged between 25 and 37 years showed that while a disproportionately large share of alcohol-related sickness absence (19%) could be attributed to the heaviest drinkers (i.e., about 6% of the sample), the majority of such absence (81%) could be attributed to more moderate consumers (Schou et al., 2014). This applies to many types of alcohol-related harms, and is referred to as the prevention paradox (Rose, 2010; Skog, 1999). No study seems to have examined the relative contribution of heavy drinkers to alcohol-related absence and presenteeism in a broad sample of Norwegian employees.

Absence and productivity loss are obviously important outcomes for employers and employees, however, there are also other negative consequences of alcohol. Drinking may result in conflicts with managers and/or co-workers (French, Maclean, Sindelar, & Fang, 2011). Dale and Livingston (2010) found that 8% had been negatively affected by a heavy drinking colleague, and 3.5% had worked extra hours as a consequence of a colleagues' drinking. As noted by Dale and Livingston (2010), a substantial proportion of those who reported being negatively affected by co-workers drinking did not report any of the pre-defined consequences that were used in the questionnaire, suggesting that qualitative studies are important to describe a wider picture of possible consequences.

Alcohol-related absence and presenteeism are experienced on both a social and a professional level at the workplace, giving rise to important questions that are not easily addressed with survey data: How do managers deal with employees they suspect to be absent due to alcohol? How do employees with a drinking problem manage their professional lives? And how does the absence or presenteeism of one employee affect co-workers? Alcohol problems at work may involve a complicated interplay between practical and social concerns for all parties; for instance, managers having to balance the care for employees with concerns for work quality and economy, and co-workers' feelings of loyalty to both peers and the employer.

Ames and Janes (1992) suggest a cultural approach to conceptualize the relation between alcohol and the workplace. They demonstrate how different workplace cultures and job conditions may inhibit or promote heavy drinking by employees. Both formal policy (regulations), drinking cultures, and informal norms (social control) may influence employees' alcohol use (Ames, Grube, & Moore, 2000; Ames & Janes, 1992; Nesvåg & Duckert, 2017; Nordaune et al., 2017; Porsfelt, 2007; Walker & Bridgman, 2013). Older qualitative studies (Ames & Janes, 1987; Manello, 1979; Roman & Trice, 1970; Sonnenstuhl & Trice, 1987) show how cultural norms, such as no supervision or collegiality, unwillingness to confront heavy drinking employees, and a lack of knowledge about the company's alcohol policy, may support heavy drinking among workers. Roman and Trice (1970) underlines that it often takes considerable time before management intervene in cases

with problematic alcohol use among employees.

Past research does not seem to have systematically addressed how alcohol-related absence and presenteeism are experienced and handled by different actors in the workplace. Thus, to provide a more nuanced picture of the problems of alcohol-related absence and presenteeism, we explore these issues through combining analyses of survey data with analyses of qualitative interviews with managers, HR-professionals, heavy drinking employees, and co-workers. The results may have practical implications in terms of how the negative consequences of alcohol use in the workplace can be prevented or reduced.

The aims of the present study are to map the prevalence of alcohol-related absence and inefficiency among employees in Norway, and to explore how absence and presenteeism due to alcohol use are experienced and handled at the workplace.

Data and methods

Survey data

An independent market research company collected data from 1940 Norwegian employees aged 20 to 74 years (average = 47) in 2015, 49% were women. The respondents were members of a web panel for market research and received compensation in the form of points that could be redeemed for products and gift cards. The response rate was 51% within the panel (as the recruitment to the panel is a multi-stage process, this figure cannot be interpreted as a traditional response rate). We used survey weights calibrated against the workforce study by Statistics Norway (<https://www.ssb.no/aku>) based on the variables education (2 categories), age (4 categories), and gender. The statistics were computed in SPSS 24. Results from the survey have previously been published in a Norwegian report (Moan & Halkjelsvik, 2016).

Qualitative interviews

Qualitative in-depth interviews with a total of 24 interviewees aged 30–67 (of whom 10 women) were conducted in 2015 with managers and HR-professionals (12), co-workers (9), and heavy drinking employees (3). To recruit informants who had experience with heavy drinking employees/colleagues, we contacted the Norwegian workplace advisory centre for alcohol-related issues (AKAN). They provided us with an e-mail list, including addresses to companies they have been in contact with due to alcohol-related problems among employees as well as other companies. An open invitation was sent by e-mail to all companies in the list, asking them to participate in the study.

The interviewees were recruited from companies in various lines of businesses (i.e., media, public administration, research and education, private enterprises, occupational health and service industries). Most interviews covered several cases of employees with alcohol problems, altogether 48 individual cases. The interviews lasted between one and two hours, took place at the informants' workplace, and were tape recorded and transcribed.

The interviews followed a semi-structured guide with two main themes: drinking culture at the workplace, and individual cases concerning employees with alcohol problems. The interviewer (first author) pursued topics brought up by the interviewees, with a particular attention to themes not covered in previous interviews. The interviewer was open to the informants' focus and presented from time to time provisional interpretations, which could be corrected by the informants. This interaction became an integral part of the material (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

Data from the interviews were initially coded into broad themes corresponding to various consequences of alcohol use for work life. Thereafter, statements relating to alcohol-related absence and presenteeism were coded more systematically into different themes (types of consequences and experience). Quotes were translated from Norwegian to English by an independent translation service.

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