WORKPLACE CULTURE AND ALCOHOL USE

DR KEN PIDD, NATIONAL CENTRE FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING ON ADDICTION, ADELAIDE

The workplace is one setting where attempts have been made to prevent or minimise problems associated with alcohol. However, most of the work concerning alcohol use and the workplace has focused on drinking that occurs within work hours or 'on the job'. Less attention has been focused on how the workplace setting interacts with a broader notion of 'culture' and how this interaction impacts on the behaviour of individuals and organisations with respect to alcohol.

Culture plays an important role in determining our patterns of alcohol consumption, and contributes to our definitions of 'problematic' and 'non-problematic' drinking. This makes it important to understand how workplace culture can impact on the drinking patterns of workers when attempting to minimise alcohol-related risks in the workplace.

All workplaces set formal and/or informal rules and norms regarding appropriate work behaviour. Workplaces also have procedures, developed from these rules and norms, to regulate work behaviour. These rules, norms and procedures extend to alcohol, including defining what constitutes problematic and non-problematic drinking in the workplace.

Each workplace culture is usually quite unique. Some workplaces have established rituals, for example, workers may be pressured to join co-workers in regular 'end of week' drinking rituals. Some of these workers may not normally drink in their own leisure time but may find it expected of them at work or in work-related situations. Recent research has highlighted the pressure that women often experience in relation to conforming to workplace drinking norms (Ames & Rebhun 1996).

Cultural dimensions relating to alcohol in the workplace

Four main cultural dimensions have been outlined by Ames and Janes (1992) that influence alcohol use in the workplace:

- normative regulation of drinking
- the quality and organisation of work
- drinking subcultures
- factors external to the workplace.

Normative regulation of drinking is the most important dimension of workplace culture regarding alcohol use. Normative regulation involves elements of the workplace that form and maintain beliefs, values and behaviours related to drinking including both formal and informal social controls regarding alcohol use. Formal social controls include workplace policies and procedures concerning alcohol use at work. Informal controls involve attitudes and expectations concerning alcohol use in specific work contexts. These attitudes and expectations may vary between work groups within a work organisation. They may be consistent, or inconsistent, with the organisation's formal policies. Formal and informal social controls determine the degree to which alcohol is available, or perceived to be available, in the workplace.

The quality and organisation of work concerns factors that contribute to work stress such as dangerous or high-risk work, shiftwork, task complexity, and lack of control over the planning or pace of work. Workers often consume alcohol as a coping strategy for dealing with stress particularly if the cultural norm supports drinking as an appropriate coping strategy. This has been highlighted in high stress occupations such as policing (Davey, Obst & Sheehan 2001).

Drinking subcultures can occur when a category of workers forms a subculture that has distinctive beliefs about their drinking. These drinking practices continue because they are informally defined as appropriate and expected in certain circumstances. These drinking practices can serve functional work-related purposes. For example, drinking subcultures may consider frequent and heavy drinking as an acceptable method for dealing with work conditions, expressing social solidarity between workers, or celebrating work-related achievements. Thus, within drinking subcultures, drinking becomes defined as a normative behaviour that can influence the overall workplace culture regarding alcohol use.

Factors external to the workplace relate to the interaction between work and social life. While workplace culture is distinct from the culture of the wider community, there is a large degree of overlap and interaction between the workplace and the wider community. The values and norms gained within the family unit and the wider community interact with workplace norms and values concerning alcohol use. Thus, workers bring to the workplace their existing values, norms and behaviours concerning alcohol use and these can influence workplace values, norms and behaviours concerning alcohol use.
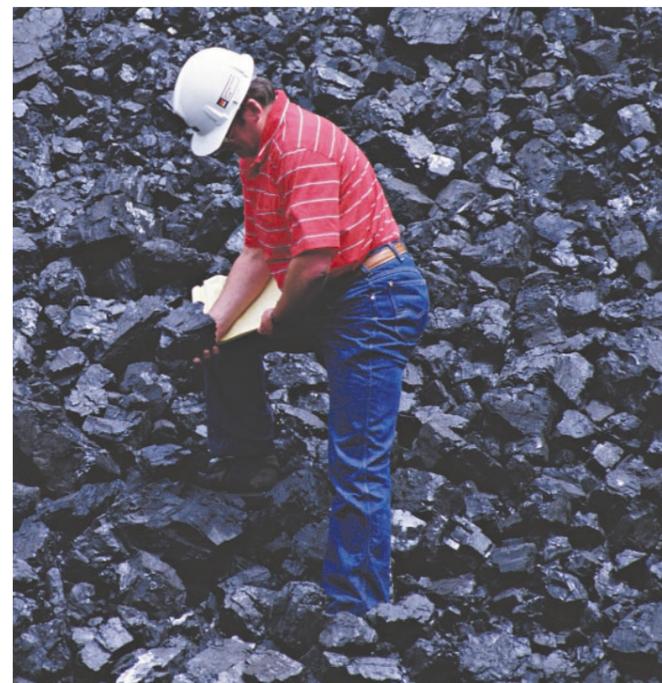
Sharing leisure activities with co-workers

Employees spend many hours together and therefore significant social relationships can develop leading to shared leisure time after work. This sharing of leisure activities off the job often shapes workplace culture. The involvement of alcohol in these activities can lead to development of work-based drinking networks. Worker participation in these networks may result in the development of occupational drinking subcultures which, as outlined above, are a cultural dimension of the workplace that can influence workers' alcohol use.

Workplace culture and drinking initiation

For many young Australians, socialising with work colleagues is one way in which they 'learn to drink'. Drinking norms are often established in these settings and levels and patterns of risky drinking are often shaped by workplace cultural norms in relation to alcohol. For example, a recent series of Australian workplace studies (Pidd 2003) found the behaviours and expectations of supervisors and co-workers had a significant influence on the drinking patterns of adolescent or new entrants to the workforce.

The role of supervisors and managers

The way in which direct-line supervisors and senior management deal with alcohol use in the workplace can impact on workplace culture in regard to alcohol. Often there is:

- alcohol use at business lunches
- alcohol use at conferences and office parties
- the use of alcohol for team and morale building
- alcohol use in ritual ceremonies that celebrate work-related events.

Other management practices can influence higher levels of work-related drinking, including emphasising the importance of production quotas over dealing with alcohol issues and relying on informal as opposed to formal measures to deal with alcohol issues. Workplaces that have poor management/union relations also tend to have higher levels of work-related drinking (Ames, Grube & Moore 2000).

Recent research on workplace culture and alcohol use

There is very little Australian research concerning prevalence of alcohol use in the Australian workplace (Phillips 2001), or the relationship between the Australian work environment and alcohol use (Allsop & Pidd 2001).

In order to address this issue, the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction recently analysed data collected as part of the 2001 National Drug Strategy Household Survey to identify the alcohol consumption patterns of the Australian workforce and to determine if these consumption patterns were associated with aspects of workplace culture. A total of 13 582 Australians, working for pay on a full-time or part-time basis, completed the survey.

The measurements of alcohol consumption patterns used in the Survey allowed for respondents to be classified according to three 'risk levels' of alcohol consumption (see Table 1 below).

The Survey also asked respondents to record their occupation and the industry within which they worked.

Analysis of the Survey data indicated that the alcohol consumption patterns of Australian workers varied considerably according to industry classification. There was evidence that these consumption patterns were associated with negative workplace outcomes. The results also indicated that workplace culture may play a role in influencing workers' consumption patterns.

Table 1: Risk levels of alcohol consumption	
Levels of risk	**Definition**
1. NHMRC short-term risk	7 or more (males), 5 or more (females) standard drinks per day
2. NHMRC long-term risk	5 or more (males), 3 or more (females) standard drinks per day 29 or more (males), 15 or more (females) standard drinks weekly
3. Risk due to infrequent but high level consumption	More than 10 standard drinks (on each occasion) monthly or less for males and more than 7 standard drinks (on each occasion) monthly or less for females

(continued over page)

Table 2: Percentages of workers drinking at risk levels grouped by industry

Short-term risky or high risk (%)	Long-term risky or high risk (%)	Infrequent high consumption (%)
Average 13.9%	Average 9.7%	Average 25.3%
Hospitality (24.1)	Hospitality (13.7)	Mining (34.6)
Retail (19.6)	Construction (11.6)	Hospitality (31.5)
Agriculture (16.5)	Retail (11.2)	Wholesale (28.5)
Manufacturing (15.4)	Agriculture (10.9)	Construction (28.2)
Transport (15.1)	Manufacturing (10.8)	Financial (28.2)
Financial (13.8)	Transport (10.5)	Transport (27.3)
Construction (13.4)	Wholesale (9.2)	Admin/Defence (26.6)
Wholesale (11.8)	Financial (8.7)	Retail (25.9)
Admin/Defence (11.7)	Services (8.6)	Manufacturing (25.4)
Services (11.1)	Education (7.5)	Agriculture (25.1)
Mining (7.7)	Mining (7.0)	Services (22.4)
Education (6.7)	Admin/Defence (6.4)	Education (15.2)

The hospitality industry

The hospitality industry had the largest percentage of workers who reported short- or long-term risk drinking (see Table 2). Several possible reasons may account for this pattern:

• within the hospitality industry alcohol is readily available

• a culture of alcohol promotion exists within the hospitality industry

• the hospitality industry traditionally attracts younger workers (across all industries, younger workers were more likely to engage in at-risk alcohol consumption).

Further support for a culture of alcohol use in the hospitality industry was evident when data concerning alcohol-related incidents in the workplace were examined. Compared to other industries, the hospitality industry had the highest percentage of workers:

• missing a work day due to their alcohol use (7.2%)

• attending work under the influence (13.3%)

• usually drinking at their workplace (17.7%).

The mining industry

While only relatively small percentages of workers reported drinking at risk levels for short- or long-term harm, the mining industry had the largest percentage of workers who engaged in infrequent high consumption.

Many mines now have clear policies on the use of alcohol at the mine site and management actively discourages the use of alcohol – which was not the case a decade ago. Even on mine sites that serve alcohol in their canteens, this is usually restricted to low alcohol beverages, or they limit the number of full strength alcoholic drinks an employee can purchase each day. However, mining industry workers are often employed on a roster system for two to three weeks on site, then they have one week of recreational leave.

Therefore, workers may consume only a small amount of alcohol on site and then engage in heavy alcohol consumption during leave periods. From this perspective, normative regulation of drinking in mining workplaces restricts workers' consumption of alcohol while at work. However, these restrictions do not extend to employees' recreational leave away from the mine site. This may account for workers engaging in infrequent high consumption.

Drinking more than intended

Further support for the impact of workplace culture on workers' consumption patterns was evident from respondents' experiences of drinking more alcohol than intended and unsuccessfully trying to cut down on alcohol use. Respondents who reported that they usually drank at their workplace (such as those employed in the hospitality industry) were 1.4 times more likely to also report occasionally drinking more alcohol than they had intended. This may indicate social pressure to consume more alcohol than intended in workplaces with a culture of alcohol use (typified by workers who usually drink at their workplace).

Unsuccessfully tried to cut down

Similarly, respondents who reported that they usually drank at their workplace were 1.4 times more likely to also report having unsuccessfully tried to cut down on their alcohol use. This may indicate that these workers recognise that they may be drinking more than they should. However, due to social pressure to consume alcohol at their workplace, they may find it difficult to reduce their alcohol intake. Conversely, these findings may also indicate that certain occupations or industries attract people with a propensity to develop alcohol problems.

Implications for harm minimisation in the workplace

The relationship between the workplace culture and alcohol use has important implications for responding to alcohol-related harm in the workplace. Many traditional approaches to dealing with workplace alcohol problems, such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), focus on the treatment of individual workers with alcohol problems. In addition, more workplaces are adopting drug and alcohol testing as a method of detecting individual workers with alcohol or other drug problems.

These individualistic approaches are no doubt important for detecting and dealing with individual workers who represent a risk to safety and productivity. However, strategies that focus on individual 'problem' workers have little impact on the cultural aspects of the workplace that can influence the consumption patterns of a much larger number of workers. Individualistic approaches are of little benefit to the much larger number of workers who are not problem drinkers, but whose drinking patterns also represent a risk to safety and productivity.

Similarly, unless alcohol education and training strategies target workplace culture they are unlikely to have any substantial impact on minimising the risk of alcohol-related harm in the workplace. A recent study that evaluated the effectiveness of a drug and alcohol training program (Pidd 2004) provides an example of how the success of this type of training depends on workplace culture. This study indicated that training:

• had a significant long-term impact on the *attitudes and beliefs* of trainees

• but a limited impact on alcohol-related *behaviour*.

The strongest change, in terms of reducing work-related drinking, occurred only for trainees employed in workplaces where the workplace culture reflected an intolerance of work-related alcohol use.

Effective minimisation of alcohol-related harm in the workplace requires innovative strategies that go beyond traditional approaches that focus on individual workers. In many cases, these individual workers are merely a symptom, or indication, of a workplace culture of alcohol use. Thus, focusing on these workers is treating the symptom rather than the cause.

Strategies aimed at minimising alcohol-related risk to workplace safety and productivity need to be multifaceted and acknowledge the cultural dimensions of the workplace that influence the consumption patterns of all workers. These strategies need to target normative regulation of drinking, the quality and organisation of work, workplace drinking subcultures, and alcohol-related factors external to the workplace. It is unlikely that strategies such as EAPs, drug and alcohol testing, or education and training alone will have any substantial impact on minimising alcohol-related harm in the workplace unless they also acknowledge and target the cultural dimensions of the workplace that influence workers' alcohol use.

References

Allsop, S & Pidd, K 2001. The nature of drug-related harm in the workplace. In Allsop, S, Phillips, M & Calogero, C (eds), *Drugs and work: Responding to alcohol and other drug problems in Australian workplaces*, Melbourne, IP Communications, pp. 5-19.

Ames, GM, Grube, JW & Moore, RS 2000. Social control and workplace drinking norms: A comparison of two organizational cultures. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, vol. 61(2), pp. 203-219.

Ames, GM & Janes, C 1992. A cultural approach to conceptualizing alcohol and the workplace, *Alcohol Health & Research World*, vol. 16(2), pp. 112-119.

Ames, GM & Rebhun, LA 1996. Women, alcohol, and work: interactions of gender, ethnicity and occupational culture, *Social Science and Medicine*, vol. 43(11), pp. 1649-1663.

Davey, J, Obst, P & Sheehan, M 2001. It goes with the job: Officers' insights into the impact of stress and culture on alcohol consumption within the policing occupation, *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy*, vol. 8, pp. 141-149.

Phillips, M 2001. The prevalence of drug use and risk of drug-related harm in the workplace. In Allsop, S, Phillips, M & Calogero, C (eds), *Drugs and work: Responding to alcohol and other drug problems in Australian workplaces*, Melbourne, IP Communications, pp. 20-41.

Pidd, K 2003. *The work-related drug use of adolescent apprentices: Testing a revised theory of planned behaviour*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Flinders University, Adelaide.

Pidd, K 2004. The impact of workplace support and workplace identity on training transfer: An Australian case study. *International Journal of Training and Development*, vol. 8(4), pp. 274-288.

THE BUILDING TRADES DRUG AND ALCOHOL PROGRAM

The building and construction industry is the second most dangerous industry in Australia (mining is the most dangerous). It is also widely acknowledged that the industry has had a culture of alcohol use, with many building and construction workers regularly drinking at high levels. According to the building industry drug and alcohol program, at least one in four people in the building industry drinks at a high or moderate risk level.

The combination of a high safety risk industry and a culture of alcohol use can be a dangerous mix. The World Health Organization estimates that one in four of all industry accidents worldwide can be attributed to drugs and/or alcohol.

To address this, the Building Trades Drug and Alcohol Program take a nationally consistent, whole-of-industry approach to the prevention of alcohol use (as well as other drug use) on worksites. The program works with the three main stakeholders to ensure it addresses the culture of the building industry effectively. These three groups are the workers, the employers and the unions. The program is peer-based and encourages workers to improve safety on building sites, as well as informing workers of available treatment options. To achieve cultural change in the industry, the program utilises a range of strategies including consultation, education, training and referral.

While the program is ongoing, it has been successful in achieving cultural reform regarding alcohol use. An example of this is a change in managerial support for work-related alcohol use. As outlined, alcohol was a pivotal part of the culture of this industry for many years. It was used in important work-related rituals, such as site barbeques, which were traditionally used to mark completion stages of the job. These events usually involved the free supply of alcohol by the employer.

The introduction of the program has altered this managerial support. Barbeques are still conducted to celebrate the completion stages of the job. However, they are now either alcohol free, or the worksite is officially closed and the barbeque is conducted with alcohol away from the workplace.