



THE DUPUIS LANGEN GROUP
SOLUTIONS WITH CLARITY

Benefit *brief*

THE EMPLOYEE SOLUTIONS NEWSLETTER FOR THE CLIENTS
AND FRIENDS OF DUPUIS LANGEN

Dealing with Employee Addictions

Supporting an employee who is struggling with a substance addiction can be a huge challenge for employers, and it's one that's not going away any time soon. Given that Statistics Canada reports 1 in every 10 Canadians has symptoms consistent with substance dependency, it is evident that every employer will have to deal with a dependency issue at some point.



THE COST

The Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse reports that addictions and substance abuse cost the Canadian economy \$24.3 billion dollars in lost productivity and another \$15.5 billion in associated costs such as increased healthcare, cost of police involvement, workplace theft, higher workplace turnover, and recruitment and training costs for replacement workers.

Addiction to alcohol, drugs and other substances is not a new phenomenon but employers still struggle with how to support an employee with a dependency issue, what their role is in terms of assistance and how best to accommodate the employee during and following treatment.

Be Prepared For The Inevitable

HAVE A POLICY AND SPELL IT OUT.

- What is considered substance abuse.
- What will happen if an employee is impaired at work.
- How employees with a dependency will be assisted.
- What is expected of the employee with a substance abuse problem.
- What rights the employee has to confidentiality.

Make all employees aware of the substance abuse policy and make it accessible to them.

KNOW THE SIGNS.

- An increase in casual absences, especially on Mondays and Fridays
- Extended lunch breaks and/or long absences from the work station

- Consistently late arrivals or early departures from work
- Failing productivity or missed deadlines
- Presenteeism, or difficulty with focus and concentration
- Change in appearance
- Changes in attitude and demeanor, increased irritability
- Increased accidents, and/or errors in judgement

KNOW THE LAW.

- Substance abuse is recognized under employment law as a disability so employers need to assist and accommodate employees with a dependency problem before terminating their employment.
- But how far does an employer have to accommodate these employees? In Canada, employment law requires accommodation to "the extent of undue hardship" but that can mean different things to different employers. The size of a company, the nature of its industry, and the safety of other employees are some of the factors considered when determining "undue hardship".
- What is clear, however, is that accommodation by the employer requires the employee's active participation. He/she has to commit to both treatment and the accommodation plan.
- Substance abuse does not excuse bad behaviour. An employee who does not behave properly and respectfully in the workplace, or who refuses treatment, can be terminated with cause, regardless of their substance addiction.

PROVIDE SUPPORT

- Employers should have adequate, credible resources available so that employees can self-identify a substance problem in its early states.
- An Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can provide counseling services to both the employee and his/her family, and connect them with additional resources in the community.
- Many EAP's offer self-help resources for employees who feel they are losing control of their substance use, or that it is adversely affecting their work or home life.
- EAP's can also provide guidance to people leaders as they work through this issue with a troubled employee.
- Some Benefit Plans also offer coverage for treatment programs or specialized counselling through the Extended Health Care benefit.
- When an employee cannot be at work due to an addiction, he/she may apply for disability benefits, however, some disability policies require that the disabled employee participate in an inpatient or residential treatment program in order to qualify for disability benefits for an addiction problem.
- Residential treatment is not easily accessible, wait times can be long, the cost is high, and it may only be covered in part by the benefit plan, if at all.
- Employers should ensure they understand the eligibility criteria for substance dependency treatment under their policy, and have a plan to deal with employees who do not meet the criteria but are still participating in treatment.



RETURN TO WORK ACTION STEPS

- When the employee returns to work after treatment, employers should provide the employee with written performance guidelines and expectations, and the consequences if they are not met.
- Employers should schedule regular follow-ups with the employee to ensure a successful return to work.
- Employers should expect relapses and understand that they are part of treating addiction.
- Performance management challenges involving substance abuse can be complex so it's a good idea to speak with a lawyer specializing in employment law.



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