

Effect of Increased Alcoholism and Substance Abuse on Work-from-Home and other Non-standard Job Behaviors During Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 pandemic is a unique situation which has paused the life of individuals all across the globe. The current world crisis has rendered unique experiences for everyone in education, childcare, healthcare, and work culture. As the health departments issued stay-at-home orders for reducing Covid infection risks non-essential organizations quickly shifted to remote working models for cutting down the costs of administrative and infrastructural functioning [1,2]. However, work-from-home (WFH) has also given the scope and freedom for distraction and health hazard, which includes alcoholism and substance abuse. Studies have reported a 54% increase in sales of alcohol commencing March 2020, and online sales from substance purchases have also surged by 262% since 2019 [1]. While some people are taking up excess alcoholism or substance abuse as a defense mechanism for psychological distress caused by the uncertainties of work and life, others are abusing the remote working scenario to indulge in alcohol and addictive substances during work hours. Substance abuse during work can actually pose additional challenges for organizations, H.R. policies, or management. It can have negative impacts on employees' performance, deliverance, and employability, which consequentially affects their social and personal lives. Additionally, consuming alcohol or other substances can induce health risks in employees. This paper attempts to understand the effects that excess alcohol/substance consumption can have on the job behaviors and performance of employees working from home during Covid. Also, we will attempt to analyze how increased substance abuse can affect the personal health and personal lives of these people during a pandemic situation.

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Introduction

Alcoholism and substance abuse can affect human health in many different ways. It can develop fatty acids in the body, affect organs like heart liver etc. and develop long-term life diseases like diabetes, hypertension and many more. However, people are well-adjusted mentally, with the physical ill-effects of substance abuse. But alcoholism or substance abuse during work can significantly impact work output and professional behavior of employees as well. Covid-19 has brought uncertainty along with it. Over 40 million Americans have lost their jobs [2]. In many places, shutdowns have produced massive blow on the economy of different countries. But most non-essential companies and private organizations could maintain their regular work by shifting to a work-from-home model where employees could work remotely from their locations, while social distancing themselves from the world [2]. Companies are finding it challenging to adapt to this new system of work because standard policies can no longer be applied to employees in a remote setting. In fact, the long-standing drug testing policy for employees is also being compromised in most organizations in a work-from-home set up [2]. Many people are utilizing this scenario to indulge in alcoholism and substance abuse during work hours. This can have major impacts on organizational outcomes, profits, insurance companies and healthcare programs,

especially during a pandemic situation like this. But additionally, alcohol consumption and substance abuse during work can affect employees' job behaviors.

The effect of drug and alcohol use on organizational effectiveness has long been in the discussion, and recent empirical researches on the same have proven a significant relationship between employee drug use and job performance indicators such as absenteeism, accidents, organizational turn over, workers' compensation claims, and medical insurance costs[3]. Employees' health and abusive behaviors strongly affect the productivity and profit parameters of organizations; however, little study has been generated on how alcoholism or substance abuse impacts work-group morale, communication between workers, attention span towards work at hand, quality of delivery and other daily employee behaviors [3]. But previous literature have enough evidence suggesting negative consequences of alcoholism and substance abuse during work. On-job accidents, increased insurance claims, regular absenteeism are some of the direct ill-effects of substance abuse in work [3]. Studies had deducted that navy recruits who were tested positive for marijuana upon joining job were more likely to leave jobs within 2.5 years than those tested negative; the reason of leave for most of them were likely alcoholism, drug abuse or other behavioral and performance problems (Blank & Fenton, 1989). Other researches based on the same topic reported that military servants who were found to have started drugs at an early age or who took drugs more frequently, were more likely to be rated unsuitable for the profession (McDaniel, 1988).

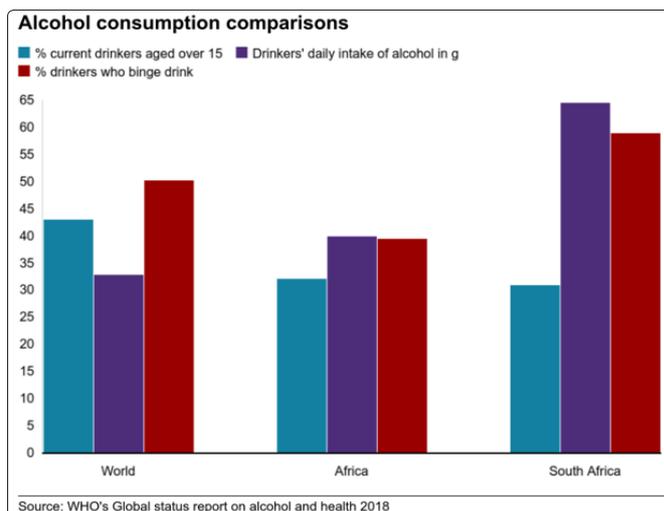
Increased alcoholism and drug abuse during Covid can therefore, have negative impacts on the attention span of employees during online meetings, job assignments etc. which can subsequently impact their delivery deadline, quality of output, client communication etc. Increased alcoholism in the work-from-home set up is not an assumption; Pollard et al. reported in their studies that there is an average 1 day increase per month, in alcohol consumption, among 3 out of 4 adults which include 1 out of 5 women during Covid pandemic from the non-Covid times in 2019[1]. A new study has reported that about one-third of the people in US who are working from home, are also drinking during their work hours [4]. Nine out of 10 individuals have admitted to drinking while working from home [5].

Employment has always been considered a key indicator for improvement among substance users, especially for people with Substance Abuse Disorder i.e., SUD patients want to recover from substance abuse because they want to be employed [6]. But if work is treated unethically by workers in non-standard environments, like the present remote working model, it can badly affect their employment status too. People who are using alcohol and substances during work, at home, can be at the risk of losing their jobs. They can be tagged with SUD which can further affect their future employability because unemployment is a chronic problem among people with SUDs [6]. Among the uncertainties of a pandemic, if work life, employability and financial resources are compromised, it can have a poor impact on people's personal lives too.

Method

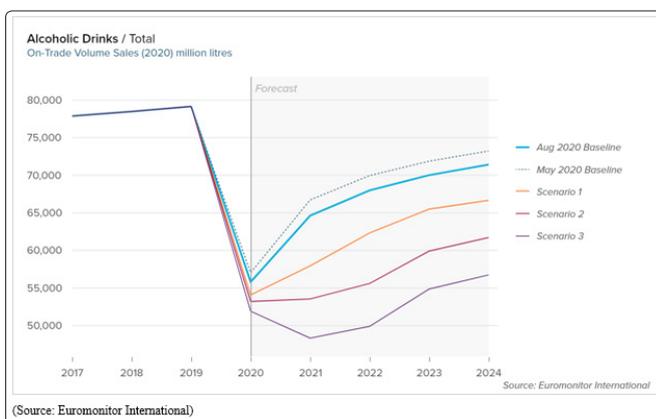
The method of the study is based on analyzing statistical reports and survey results, to establish the increased use of alcohol and other substances, at work-from-home set ups, during Covid pandemic. Additionally, I will also discuss and analyze findings from Lehman et al.'s study and some social case reports to determine the effects of alcoholism and substance abuse during work hours. During Covid-19 pandemic, many people have resorted to alcoholism and substance abuse while staying home because they have unlimited access to their home bars. Additionally, online shopping portals have made liquors and drugs available easily while people socially distance themselves at home, during the lockdowns. In a study conducted by the American Addiction Centers (AAC), 3000 people were surveyed on whether they were drinking while working from home during Covid. About 32 percent of the sample population confessed that they were more likely to drink during work hours at home as opposed to when they worked elsewhere. About 36 percent of men and 26 percent of women said "they're drinking on the clock" [4].

Not only in US but also in other parts of the world like Africa, people share a toxic relationship with alcohol. 59% of alcohol consumers drink more than 60g of pure alcohol on at least one occasion a month - that is six alcoholic drinks, four more than the daily recommended amount for men in Africa [8]. WHO classifies such alcohol abusers as binge drinkers, while comparing alcohol consumption among people of other countries [8]. That is the reason why, South Africa banned alcohol sales during Covid-19 pandemic beginning March, last year. They further reinstated the consumption of alcohol from home, later since June 1st [8].



As the consequence of forced stay-at-home orders, many regular people in US and other parts of the world have become binge drinkers. Health and Safety Software Firm Protecting's founder, Mark Hall, reported that a survey of 1,300 home workers found the majority had consumed alcohol while working in 2020, with consumption ranging from "just a glass or two with lunch" to "getting through a whole bottle of wine a day" [8]. Eight in 10 (83%) said they drank while working from home at least twice per week, while 93% said they had consumed more alcohol during the pandemic than they had previously. More than a quarter (26%) admitted their alcohol consumption increased between March and June, when pubs were closed during the first lockdown [8]. The study by AAC found that 32% of working Americans admitted to drinking during work hours from home [4]. The study's threshold of alcohol consumption was at least "two units." The study said residents of Hawaii are most likely to drink while working from home (67 percent), while residents of Arkansas are the least likely (8 percent) [4]. Hence, it is not unlikely, that work performance during this pandemic may have been drastically impacted.

The following figure indicates key trends in alcohol consumption post Covid as projected by Euromonitor International



Wayne E. K. Lehman with his fellow researcher, D. Dwayne Simpson, studied the effects of alcohol and substance abuse during work, and how it can impact major indicators of job behaviors and job performance. In this quantitative research titled, Employee Substance Use and On-The-Job Behaviors, Lehman et al. assessed 1325 municipal workers from a large city in the United States, belonging to different age groups, ethnicity, and almost all the departments of the organization. The study's purpose was to determine the effects of substance use on work behaviors, which include physical and psychological job-withdrawal symptoms

and antagonistic and positive work behaviors. They conducted a questionnaire on all the participants, which included six sections- a) demographic and personal background, b) job background and work environment, c) job performance, d) perceptions of co-workers' substance use e) self-report of alcohol and substance use, on and off work location and f) a questionnaire evaluation. To validate self-reports, 500 subjects were randomly selected to submit their urine specimens [3].

The researchers implemented the first set of statistical analyses to observe the relationship between substance abuse and the mean difference in job behaviors. On the second set, they performed the hierarchical regression to determine the relationship between job-withdrawal behaviors and other parameters like personal background and job environment [3]. A total of 9.6% of the employees tested positive for marijuana, and 5% tested positive for other drugs, while 12.6% reported using marijuana or other drugs. They found there were significant variances in job physical and psychological withdrawal symptoms and antagonistic behavior due to substance usage, but limited effect on positive work behaviors. However, variance due to substance usage was considerably lower when compared to other factors like personal background and job climate [3]. However, based on their research and previous literature on the topic of substance abuse during work, the authors of the mentioned study have strongly concluded that there is significant relationship between employee drug/alcohol use and organizations' effectiveness, profits and productivity. Alcoholism and substance abuse can cost huge sums on employees' insurance claims, cause accidents at work, and lead to absenteeism [3]. The study results established that even though the amount of unique variance is small (2.7% for psychological withdrawal and 4.2% for physical withdrawal) as compared to other variables, the impact on organizational cost and overall goal can be heavy when this variance is multiplied by the huge number of employees [3]. Needless to say, such irresponsible consumptions can definitely impact employee's attention span, communication, quality of work and delivery deadlines.

Discussion

It is becoming especially challenging for organizations to regulate their employees. Even though the tests remain the same, employees appear for the drug tests remotely [2]. The increased economic and health-related strain combined with the closure of most social gathering places has led to a 55% rise in alcohol consumption compared to the same time last year. Drug use may be increasing as well for the same reasons. Therefore, it's crucial that companies continue to follow their regular drug testing guidelines to make sure that stress-related consumption doesn't impact their workplace [2]. While some medical practitioners have related increased alcoholism and drug abuse to anxiety, stress and depression during times of uncertainty, it goes without saying that organizations are struggling regularly in order to manage the mishaps caused by the unprecedented behaviors of employees. At the same time, they are having to maintain and adapt to the new scenario of remote working with technological interventions etc. hence it is especially challenging for organizations to keep up to their benefit goals. But that doesn't mean, employees are safe in their homes if they substance abuse. Dr. Lantie Jorandby, chief medical officer of Lakeview Health addiction recovery in Florida admits that people working from home and not being seen drinking by anyone could be a probable cause of the increased alcoholism during Covid times but they can still get caught while drinking on the clock [4].

“Companies are switching to telework options like Zoom or GoTo Meeting, and someone who is drinking too much while at home can appear intoxicated, even through the video camera on

their computer, sometimes even missing a meeting or seemingly disorganized on video calls,” says Jorandby [4]. Therefore, increased alcoholism and substance abuse in non-standard work cultures can affect performance, which consequentially can affect the employability of people. Threat to employability can increase uncertainty during a socio-economic crisis like Covid. This additionally may affect the physical and psychological health of employees who are at the risk of losing their jobs. Thus, any form of unethical behavior at work place, be it a standard set up or non-standard work cultures, can minimize productivity of employees and the organization as a whole; leading to lack of employability and trustworthiness. Such consequences may affect personal lives of individuals as well.

Conclusion

Covid 19 has put people on forced isolation. Work cultures have shifted to the remote model of working from home to maintain social distancing guidelines. Many people all across the world are benefitting from the situation as they use this opportunity to increase alcohol and substance consumptions during work hours. There is a 55% surge in alcohol consumption during the last year; online alcohol sales have spiked by 262% from 2019 to 2020. Some may be doing this due to stress, anxiety and depression while others are misusing the situation to indulge themselves in their addiction. However, alcoholism and substance abuse during work impacts the effectiveness of job behavior indicators like absenteeism, accidents, insurance claims, medical costs and organizational productivity. It can also affect the attention span of employees, their communication, quality of work and output time. Such influences can poorly impact the employability of people, and make them more vulnerable during these uncertain times.

Recommendations

There is enough data and statistical reports already available to establish that alcohol sales along with other substances, have been increasing since the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns. In the near future the consumption and sales are going to soar up further as projected by trade reports. The longer people remain in their homes, working remotely, the greater will be the consumption of alcohol and other addictive substances. In fact, health workers providing preventive services to substance abusers are also finding it really challenging to help in the remote working environments. This phenomenon is costing organizations financially and non-financially. Irresponsible employee behavior can affect organizational reputation, increase medical costs, reduce organizational goals and productivity. However, there still remains some important findings on what can be some major harms that alcoholism during work can induce. Can it lead to major failure of a technical system? Can it cause manipulation of data? Can such job behavior lead to crimes like perjury or professional falsification? Can it damage some important service like healthcare? Can increased substance abuse during work hours cost lives or major financial failures? There is still sufficient scope remaining for research in this field to answer these research questions, which can be solved with adequate qualitative interviews or quantitative sample data. HR of companies should speak with their employees on the issues and concerns, conduct regular drug tests and employ more virtual modes of communication to track employee performances systematically [1-10].

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