

Tackling Substance Abuse Challenges for Transitioning Veterans in the Workplace



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The challenges of substance abuse among active-duty military and veterans are well documented. They include the challenges of drug use, prescription drugs, and binge drinking. It was the occurrences of drug use among the military during my service that sparked my research and subsequent writing and speaking for 50+ years [[hr.tracks.com](#)]. Changing legislation and new substances appearing, e.g., fentanyl, are just two of the latest challenges.

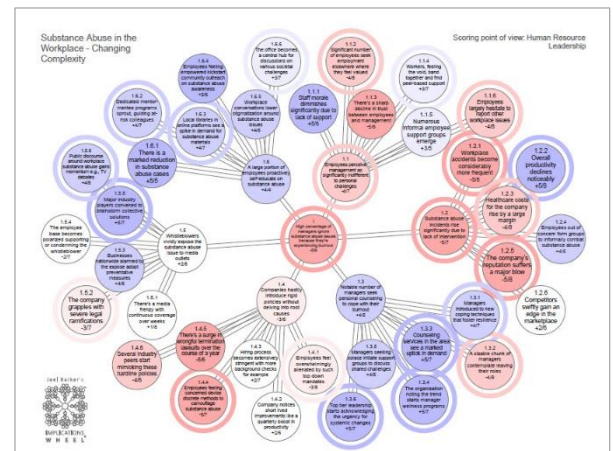
Transitioning from military service to civilian life is a significant change with unique challenges. This is especially true for veterans potentially grappling with substance abuse. As they step into the civilian workforce, veterans often encounter an environment where substance abuse issues may not be adequately addressed. Then, it can be compounded by a lack of managerial oversight due to burnout.

At the same time, there is a growing acknowledgment of these issues. Some organizations are significantly ramping up their investments in preventative measures, focusing on mental health and wellness programs. This dichotomy presents a complex landscape for veterans, necessitating a comprehensive understanding and a multifaceted approach to genuinely support them.

A Strategic Exploration from a Veteran Perspective

The complexity of substance abuse in the workplace was examined using futurist Joel Barker's Implications Wheel. The process is a "Wisdom of Crowds" approach to identifying the short- and long-term consequences of "*the possible implications of the continually changing complexity of addressing substance abuse in the workplace.*" One aspect of the exploration was to take a specific look at possible implications for veterans related to two distinct factors, one positive and one negative:

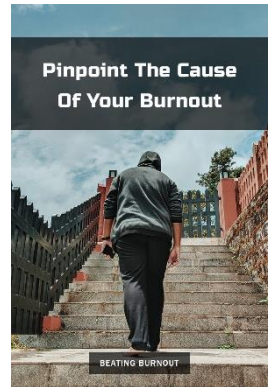
- A high percentage of managers ignore substance abuse issues because they are experiencing burnout.
- Some organizations significantly increase investments in preventative measures, e.g., mental health -- wellness programming.



The Complicated Aspects of Burnout

One of the most concerning realities is the tendency of some managers to ignore substance abuse issues, often attributed to their professional burnout. For veterans who might be contending with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other adjustment challenges, the lack of attentive support and understanding can exacerbate feelings of isolation, misunderstanding, and stress. Substance abuse, for some, may seem like a self-sought coping mechanism, particularly in the absence of adequate support within the workplace.

Management's ignorance or neglect of these critical issues can lead to severe consequences. This includes decreased productivity and the potential deterioration of veterans' mental health. It can also foster a workplace environment where substance abuse becomes a silent epidemic, with individuals hiding their struggles instead of seeking help.



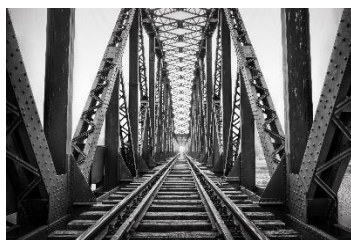
Investing in Change



Contrastingly, as awareness of mental health and substance abuse issues becomes more mainstream, some organizations are leading positive change by investing robustly in preventative measures. These initiatives offer a beacon of hope, including comprehensive mental health programs, access to therapy and counseling, and wellness resources.

For veterans, such programs could be life-changing. Tailored resources that consider their unique experiences and challenges can facilitate smoother transitions into civilian life, promoting resilience and healthy coping mechanisms. These preventative strategies can significantly decrease the risk of substance abuse and addiction, offering viable pathways to wellness instead of the route of self-medication and secrecy. Veterans, particularly those transitioning from the military, should consider these factors in evaluating potential employers.

Bridging the Gap



A gap between two extremes must be bridged to effectively support veterans. First, increasing managerial sensitivity and understanding is paramount. Training programs that educate about substance abuse, PTSD, and other mental health issues common among veterans can equip managers to recognize signs of struggle early on. These initiatives should also address managerial burnout, ensuring that those in leadership positions can mentally and emotionally support their teams.

Moreover, organizations need to extend their wellness programs to specifically embrace the challenges faced by veterans. This approach means partnering with veteran organizations, implementing peer support groups, and offering resources relevant to their experiences. For instance, collaboration with local VA centers can facilitate access to specialized care and advice, ensuring the support provided within the workplace aligns with veterans' needs.

Conclusion

As veterans navigate the profound shift from military to civilian life, the least the professional world can offer is a supportive, understanding environment. Ignoring substance abuse and mental health issues is no longer acceptable, given the wealth of knowledge and resources available today. It is incumbent upon corporate entities to invest in preventative measures and foster an environment of empathy, open dialogue, and specialized support. By doing so, we honor the service of veterans and provide them with the resources they need to thrive outside the military, effectively turning the tide in the battle against substance abuse.

About the Author

James W. Schreier, Ph.D., SPHR, has conducted pioneering research on substance abuse in the workplace with major studies from the 1980s to 2010. His work on substance abuse in organizations, plus programs addressing workplace gambling and workplace bullying, is available at www.hr-tracks.com

