Workplace-Facilitated Recovery Through Substance Use Policies

CoRE Canadian Centre of Recovery Excellence

Research Focus

This article examines how workplace substance use policies should evolve from a primarily deterrence and punishment-oriented model to one that actively supports recovery for employees dealing with substance use disorders (SUDs). The authors explore how workplace substance-use policies can support those in recovery and help them maintain employment while ensuring workplaces are safe and productive.

Research Overview

The article is a narrative review that uses existing Canadian and international literature, workplace policy analyses, and legal frameworks related to substance use and employment. It draws on findings from sources such as the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA), occupational health research, and case studies across sectors, including construction, energy, transportation, and healthcare.

CoRE Insights

1 **Recovery is an Important Workplace Function:** Employment can be a social determinant of health; workplaces can either impede or facilitate recovery. Integrating recovery principles into substance use policies has measurable benefits for employee well-being and productivity

2 **Policy Gaps are Systemic:** Canadian workplaces often have inconsistent or incomplete substance use policies, particularly among small and mid-sized organizations. Policies tend to focus on punishment rather than prevention or support.

3 **Cultural and Structural Barriers Exist:** Fear, confidentiality concerns, and lack of leadership engagement prevent employees from seeking help. A recovery-friendly culture requires explicit confidentiality of safeguards and management training.

4 **Workplaces can be a Place for Recovery:** With most Canadians spending significant time at work, employers have a unique opportunity to advance health promotion within their workplaces by aligning substance use policy with frameworks like the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, which provides best practices for health policy creating supportive environments.

Key Findings

- Substance use in the workforce is widespread, contributing to an estimated $22.4 billion in productivity losses across Canada in 2020, underscoring the scale of the issue.

- Safety-sensitive and decision-critical industries (e.g., construction, healthcare, engineering) often have more robust policies, but these are mostly deterrence-based and not recovery-oriented.

- Six major policy gaps are identified: 1. Limited integration of recovery principles in workplaces 2. Overemphasis on punitive measures 3. Inconsistent application across sectors 4. Stigma and confidentiality challenges 5. Outdated considerations for emerging substances (e.g., cannabis) and 6. Limited evaluation of policy effectiveness.

- Fear of judgement and confidentiality fears remain the primary reasons employees avoid seeking help.

Key Findings Cont'd

- Educational, recovery-focused, and peer-support approaches ensure confidentiality, promote early intervention, and support sustained recovery.

- Evidence of best practice exists in structured, health-professional programs (e.g., Physician Health Programs), but similar recovery models are largely absent in other professions.

- Leadership buy-in is critical for policy evaluation. Policies should be treated as "living documents" and assessed iteratively using frameworks like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Program Evaluation Model.

How to Take Action

Decision Makers
- Encourage employers to adopt comprehensive, recovery-oriented workplace policies that go beyond prohibition and testing to include education, prevention, and supportive measures for employees affected by substance use.
- Develop workplace policies collaboratively with key stakeholders, including employees, unions, and management, to ensure buy-in and a supportive environment for disclosure and recovery for employees affected by substance use.
- Establish structured and compassionate return-to-work programs that include phased reintegration, relapse prevention planning, and case management to sustain recovery.

Employers
- Encourage workplace leaders to foster supportive and psychologically safe workplace environments by training leaders, promoting empathy, encouraging peer support, and ensuring confidential access to counselling and recovery resources.
- Integrate education and early intervention into workplace wellness programs to improve substance use literacy, reduce stigma, and encourage timely help-seeking.
- Embed equity, inclusion, and confidentiality in all recovery policies to address systemic barriers and ensure fair access to supports across diverse employee groups.
- Continuously evaluate and improve workplace recovery policies using workplace data, stakeholder feedback, and evidence-based frameworks to strengthen outcomes and adaptability.
- Encourage leadership to have a visible commitment to recovery-friendly practices by aligning organizational culture and policy implementation with long-term recovery support.

Links to Research Materials

Workplace-Facilitated Recovery Through Substance Use Policies

Lead Authors

Stone Li, Riley Stewart-Patterson, Julie Menten, Sebastian Straube, Charl Els