

Part Two: Social Implications of Drug Abuse

Lecture 5: Work and Employment

Objectives

By the end of this lecture, the students should be able to:

1. Analyze the complexities of work status beyond simple employment and unemployment metrics, including underemployment and the informal sector's role in the labor market.
2. Highlight the specific challenges faced by youth in securing productive employment, particularly in cultures where they hold a marginal status, and identify the impact of societal perceptions on youth unemployment.
3. Investigate the phenomenon of "jobless growth," where economic growth does not translate into proportional job creation, and explore policy solutions aimed at increasing employment opportunities alongside economic development.
4. Emphasize the importance of implementing effective drug abuse prevention programs targeted at young individuals before they enter the labor market, thereby fostering healthier workplaces and communities.

Lecture 5: Work and Employment

Work status encompasses more than just being classified as employed or unemployed; it also involves factors such as underemployment rates and the prevalence of informal work. Additionally, perceptions of employment issues can differ based on societal attitudes. For instance, in cultures where youth hold a low status, their higher rates of unemployment and underemployment may not attract much attention from policymakers. When society views young people as marginal until they reach adulthood, it becomes even more challenging for those with a history of drug use to secure meaningful jobs. Similar negative impacts can affect young women, particularly in cultures where they are typically expected to remain within domestic roles and have limited opportunities for employment outside the home.

It is estimated that around 30 percent of the global workforce is not engaged in productive employment. Over 120 million individuals are officially classified as unemployed, while approximately 700 million are considered underemployed (1, p. 89). Additionally, the gap in income between individuals in affluent and impoverished nations are widening. Even in instances where poverty rates have decreased in certain countries, the distribution of income has not seen a similar enhancement (1, p. 19).

Employment has consistently trailed behind economic growth in both developing and industrialized nations. In both contexts, there is a commonality: significant increases in capital investment or productivity have not necessarily led to a proportional rise in job creation. This phenomenon has been labeled "jobless growth" by one study (2, p. 36). Policymakers are actively seeking strategies to boost job numbers alongside economic expansion. The youth population is growing at a rate that outpaces the availability of jobs. The gap between the labor force size and the number of employed individuals is expected to widen throughout the 1990s. For instance, the ILO projects that "the labor force in sub-Saharan Africa will expand by

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3.3% annually during the 1990s, while productive employment will only rise by 2.4% each year. This employment growth is predicated on an increase in GDP growth from 3.7% to approximately 5%. The situation is not expected to improve in Latin America or South Asia, either" (as reported in 2, p. 37).

It is anticipated that unemployment rates will rise among the same age group that is most prone to drug use and related issues. Furthermore, many available jobs are disconnected from the community and the family support systems essential for maintaining employment, highlighting the potential for worsening social issues. While education and training are often proposed as remedies for unemployment, they might actually contribute to the problem, as the number of educated and trained individuals often surpasses the demand in numerous countries. This could lead to heightened competition for jobs, with employers becoming increasingly selective when hiring young individuals.

Drug abuse is more prevalent among young individuals compared to other age demographics. The factors that contribute to drug use typically arise before individuals enter the workforce. Consequently, the community's drug abuse issues are often carried into the workplace. The age group most affected by drug use tends to be between 18 and 35 years, although there is considerable variation across different countries. Therefore, the most advantageous time for implementing prevention programs may be prior to or at the time of entering the job market. Employers have a significant opportunity to aid in the prevention of drug abuse, benefiting both themselves and the wider community. Effective initiatives to combat drug abuse in the workplace should start within the community and target young people who are on the verge of entering the workforce.

In numerous regions around the globe, workplaces and residential areas are often intertwined. Even when property boundaries distinguish these spaces, individuals frequently move between them. This strong link between family life and work environments complicates the use of structured welfare services or support programs to address workers' issues. Additionally, community or government organizations, like

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occupational safety and health departments, find it more challenging to provide support to workers in informal or home-based settings.

The connection between workplace drug and alcohol abuse is heavily shaped by various factors including national, social, cultural, ethnic, religious, and gender dynamics. Certain cultural or group norms may promote substance abuse. In some work environments, a culture of drinking or drug use may prevail, creating a standard that non-users feel pressured to conform to. Moreover, certain jobs expose employees to harmful substances that can lead to dependence, such as adhesives used in shoe manufacturing. Workers might adopt trends or local practices that normalize substance abuse, often holding beliefs that contradict established knowledge about the physical consequences. A recent study conducted in Portugal revealed that "there are still some workers who think they can perform more accurately after consuming a certain amount of wine, and some employers in both the construction and agriculture sectors provide free wine to encourage productivity" (3, p. 17).

The effects of unemployment can differ, but it generally diminishes an individual's capacity to engage in the social, economic, and political aspects of community life (4, p. 127). Unemployment is considered a marginal condition, particularly when having a job is the standard. As more individuals migrate from rural areas to urban centers, job competition intensifies. Young people without training or employment may find themselves marginalized within urban environments. Given that society expects individuals to partake in some form of productive work, unemployment can lead to a state of inactivity. When work necessitates distancing from family and friends, social connections may weaken. For those living at home, being unemployed can create a sense of added pressure on a family that may already struggle to fulfill its members' needs.

The workplace mirrors the strengths and weaknesses of the surrounding community. To evaluate the extent of drug and alcohol issues, a Canadian study (5) conducted three surveys involving over 2,000 individuals in the Alberta labor force, which included both employed individuals and those looking for work (6, p. 24). Fewer

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than 1 in 16 individuals indicated that they had used illegal drugs, primarily marijuana, in the previous year. Among those who currently use drugs, 18 percent reported experiencing at least two personal issues related to their drug use. Alcohol was the substance most commonly consumed.

Over a decade ago, a comprehensive study involving 468 young adults in Los Angeles investigated disruptive drug use, with one-third of the participants identifying as minorities (black, Hispanic, or Asian) (7). The findings revealed that 31% of respondents reported being drunk, stoned, or high on at least one psychoactive substance while at work or school in the previous six months. Additionally, fewer than 13% had sold any illegal drugs during that same timeframe. Disruptive drug use was not confined to a single substance; rather, it typically involved multiple substances. Alcohol emerged as the most commonly used category, while marijuana was the most frequently used individual substance in work or school settings. The strength of the association between disruptive drug use and work-related factors was found to be small to moderate. Nonetheless, it was noted that "the disruptive use of all drugs was significantly linked to the number of times an individual lost a job over the past four years, having lost a job in the last six months, experiencing increased job-related difficulties, and higher instances of vandalism at work, and a greater need for support and advice from family and friends regarding work issues" (7, p. 85).

A recent investigation conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the European Commission focused on the issues of drugs and alcohol in European workplaces. The study gathered data from 237 participants representing employers, enterprises, and workers' organizations, which reflected the drug and alcohol usage patterns of nearly 1.5 million workers across Europe. Over the past three years, information was collected on 13 distinct drug- and alcohol-related issues. As shown in the table below, more than half of the respondents reported specific performance issues and work absences linked to drug-related problems. Approximately 40% of organizations had terminated employees due to drug-related issues. The study

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also analyzed the five most common drug and alcohol-related problems reported by the same 237 participants. Findings revealed that both drug and alcohol use were linked to similar issues, although alcohol-related problems were reported more frequently than those related to drugs. A majority of respondents believed that the incidence of combined drug and alcohol issues was on the rise rather than declining. Furthermore, 87% (N=65) of respondents noted an increase in workers facing problems with prescription drugs over the past three years. The percentage of respondents expressing concern about alcohol and drugs as potential contributors to work-related issues was as follows: alcohol (87%), prescription drugs (64%), cannabis (54%), opiates (53%), and stimulants (50%). Alcohol emerged as the primary concern, with prescription drugs following closely behind. Twenty-three respondents from enterprises indicated that they had identified 1-5 problem drug users within their organizations, while 15 reported identifying between 6 and 50 individuals with similar issues.

Most frequent problems related to drugs and alcohol (N=237)

<i>Alcohol</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Drugs</i>	<i>%</i>
Impaired performance	87.5	Impaired performance	55
Intoxication at work	81.4	Absence from work	54.5
Lateness	81.4	Disciplinary problems	47
Disciplinary problems	80.6	Intoxication at work	44
Absence from work	78	Dismissal	41.8

Source: Jean Paul Smith, "Alcohol and drugs in the workplace: Attitudes, policies and programmes in the European Community", Report prepared for ILO in collaboration with the Health and Safety Directorate, Commission of the European Communities, Geneva, 1993, p. 11.

A persistent debate surrounding substance use and abuse in the workplace revolves around whether employers should be concerned about their employees' substance use. Some employers believe that any use of illegal drugs, regardless of whether it occurs at work or outside of it, is incompatible with productive employment. Conversely, others argue that employers should focus solely on job performance and that employees' personal lives should not be their concern. This complex issue

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is influenced by factors such as the nature of the job, the level of responsibility employees hold for the safety and well-being of others, as well as the social and cultural values of their families and communities.

The environment in which drugs are consumed affects their impact. Given that the workplace is inherently structured to generate products or services, the influence of drugs is shaped by the expectations surrounding job performance, as well as those of colleagues and supervisors. Much like in domestic or community settings, there seems to be no definitive method for evaluating drug use or drug-related behaviors in a work environment. A recent review noted that "the use of alcohol and other drugs by employees cannot be reliably deduced from performance evaluations, as declines in performance may stem from various factors. On the other hand, performance issues may not be readily apparent despite the use of alcohol and other drugs. More direct assessments of worker performance quality show promise for evaluating employees' suitability for specific roles at particular times, independent of the underlying causes of any impairment" (9, p. 10).

The impact of drugs in the workplace is influenced in part by the performance demands of the job. Positions that necessitate higher-level judgment, sustained focus, immediate recall, and precise motor skills are more susceptible to disruption from drugs compared to roles involving physical labor. For instance, marijuana can interfere with cognitive abilities, slow down reaction times, and diminish psychomotor precision. Even small doses of opiates can lead to changes in mood, reduced energy, and hinder psychomotor abilities essential for driving and similar activities. Low doses of cocaine may improve performance on straightforward tasks, provided users do not overestimate their capabilities or engage in risky behavior beyond their skill level. However, frequent use of cocaine, crack, or similar substances can quickly result in compulsive behavior, addiction, and issues both at work and in personal life. Despite these nuances, it is evident that drug-related issues negatively affect job attendance and overall performance.

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Do individuals who abuse alcohol and drugs impose greater costs on the workplace compared to non-users? The aforementioned ILO study (8) revealed that two-thirds of the participants concurred that substance abuse led to considerable expenses in European workplaces. There was no significant difference in responses between enterprises, workers, and employers when statistical analyses were conducted on the questionnaire results. The main costs identified were absenteeism, decreased motivation, and workplace accidents or injuries.

A study examining the link between drug use and job performance at the United States Postal Service analyzed pre-employment tests of applicants and their subsequent job behavior over time. Results showed that positive drug tests were associated with higher rates of absenteeism and involuntary separations. Notably, the gap in absenteeism and turnover between those who tested positive and those who tested negative widened over time. In this research, "updated data on absenteeism and turnover were gathered for a utility analysis follow-up. The latest update (June 1991) revealed that the differences in absenteeism and turnover between the two groups have continued to grow, although the rate of increase seems to be stabilizing. Estimates based on employees with an average tenure of 3.3 years indicate that by excluding applicants who test positive for drugs, the Postal Service could potentially save around \$105 million in absenteeism and turnover costs over the duration of one employee cohort" (10, pp. ii and iii). The cost-effectiveness of this screening method is partially influenced by the baseline rate of the behavior in question. In environments where drug use is already low, fewer applicants will test positive, leading to higher costs associated with identifying positive cases. This point was emphasized during a meeting on workplace drug and alcohol testing, where it was noted that "any economic evaluation of workplace drug screening is likely to be significantly affected by the prevalence of drug use among the screened population" (11, p. 49).

In conclusion, substance abuse issues significantly affect both the workplace and the surrounding community. Both employers and employees are worried about the

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repercussions of drug and alcohol misuse. An expert notes that "the connection between alcohol and drug use and accidents, along with its effects on employment metrics such as absenteeism, turnover, medical claims, safety risks, and lost productivity, clearly indicates that there are direct costs associated with substance use in the workplace" (6, p. 57).

References for further reading & Notes

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11. Craig Zwerling, "Current practice and experience on drug and alcohol testing in the workplace", in Drug and Alcohol Testing in the Workplace: Report of the Interregional Tripartite Experts Meeting, 10-14 May 1993, Oslo (Geneva, ILO, 1994).