

Workplace fun, after-work socializing can lead to employee substance use

November 14 2023, by Tony Picardi



Credit: Helena Lopes from Pexels

Fun in the workplace can yield positive benefits to employees and employers alike, but it may also lead to an increase in after-work employee substance use, according to new research from the Penn State

School of Hospitality Management.

Researchers led by Michael Tews, associate professor of hospitality management, found that fun activities for employees inside or outside the workplace and a manager's support for fun are both correlated with [substance use](#) through coworker socializing. They [published](#) their work in the *Journal of Drug Issues*.

"We know that fun has a positive impact in the workplace, but this research shows that it can be a double-edged sword," Tews said. "We found that workplace fun lowers stress and employees in turn are less likely to use substances because of their lower stress. On the other hand, fun can increase substance use because it makes people more friendly with one another."

Initially, workplace fun can attract applicants to organizations during the [hiring process](#) and then contribute to increased [job satisfaction](#) and organizational commitment, according to [prior research](#). [Other findings](#) have also indicated that fun in the workplace may help reduce turnover and enhance retention.

"Fun has a history of positive effects," Tews said. "Although workplace fun demonstrates benefits for [human resource management](#) and coworker bonding, I wanted to unwrap this relationship of how it works and see if there was a downside to it, particularly in the area of substance use."

To better understand the potential downside of fun and its relationship to employee substance use, Tews and the research team used the online crowdsourcing data collection platform Prolific to survey 378 participants who were employed for at least 20 hours a week in the retail and hospitality industries.

They specifically examined if fun activities and a manager's support for fun are related to substance use. This included whether fun could decrease substance use because employees are less stressed and if fun could increase substance use because of an increase in alcohol or drug use at [social activities](#).

For this study, the researchers said substance use could include drugs or alcohol alone or with other people. The study did not test whether the effect of stress on substance use was larger or lesser than socialization but rather if these effects existed.

They developed a two-wave survey to assess employee perceptions of fun at work, coworker socializing, subjective stress and substance use by working individuals. They collected data at the start and end of one week.

After collecting and analyzing data, the research team found that socializing among coworkers and a manager's support for workplace fun were both positively correlated with substance use.

"Fun can lead to greater bonds among employees," Tews said. "When coworkers are bonded more, they're more likely to cut loose, and this could lead to increased substance use. Even though there's a link between coworker relationships and substance use, those coworker relationships can lead to all these other good things."

"Relationships are essential to the experience at work, and fun is an antecedent of that. If you have these better relationships at work, you're going to be more committed and want to come to work. It's going to lead to greater workplace relationships."

Tews said organizations should think about other ways to mitigate drug and alcohol use, whether through training or awareness, encouraging use

in moderation or giving [employees](#) alternative ways to socialize after work. This could include increasing micro-moments throughout the workday, such as bringing in cookies or going out to lunch, rather than relying on larger-scale parties or get-togethers for fun occasions and coworker socializing.

"Does this mean not to incorporate fun in the [workplace](#)?" Tews said. "Absolutely not. Fun is not a panacea for anything, but it's an important ingredient in the human resources equation. If you don't have it, particularly in more social industries like hospitality, you're going to have greater employee turnover. I think you need to support fun but also have a climate that promotes good health and well-being."

More information: Michael J. Tews et al, Fun in the Workplace and Employee Substance Use: A Double-Edged Sword?, *Journal of Drug Issues* (2023). DOI: [10.1177/00220426231187284](https://doi.org/10.1177/00220426231187284)

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Workplace fun, after-work socializing can lead to employee substance use (2023, November 14) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-11-workplace-fun-after-work-socializing-employee.html>

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