

Tackling Substance Abuse in Construction

How Forwarding Thinking and Modern Technologies are Helping Address Abuse and Addiction



Construction workers can deal with significant physical and mental stress, leading many to self-medicate to cope.

“I worked in construction and was a functioning addict from when I started, when I was 18,” said Tommy, an Australian construction worker trying to overcome his addictions in a recent *Vice* article. “At the start it was always pot. Ecstasy pills. Cocaine. And then after that drinking came into it because it’s just part of the culture. It’s construction: If you can’t drink, you can’t be trusted and be part of it.”

Construction is hard work, and hard work can often lead to aches and pains—both physically and mentally. Drugs are often turned to as an answer. It might start with self-medication. It might start with doctor-prescribed treatments. It might start with recreational use. Regardless, drug abuse and addiction has become a significant issue among construction professionals across the globe.

The construction sector has one of the highest substance abuse and related disorders rates. In the United States, it ranks among the top three industries for things like illegal drug use, prescription drug abuse, heavy alcohol consumption and substance abuse disorders.

That's why many in construction are looking at how new technologies and fresh approaches can help the construction sector address the growing drug abuse problem within its ranks.

Alarming Statistics for Substance Abuse in Construction



The construction industry ranks first in many categories of drug use/abuse, including opioids and other pain killer drugs.

Focusing on just the United States, the construction sector also has one of the country's highest substance abuse and related disorders rates. Statistics show that more than 20% of these workers reported using an illegal substance in the last year. About 12% of those surveyed stated they'd used that substance within the last 30 days.

The statistics surrounding drug abuse in the construction industry are often alarming, especially when compared to other sectors. Among other industries in the U.S., construction ranks:

- Third in illicit drug use — 12.95%
- Second in heavy drinking — 16.02%
- Second in substance abuse disorder — 16.07%
- First in marijuana use — 60.33%
- First in heroin use — 4.42%
- First in pain reliever/opioid abuse — 22.63%

Research shows that construction employees with substance abuse disorders are more likely to change jobs often, experience attendance problems, struggle with productivity or get into

workplace accidents. Opioids create some of the most significant risks for substance abuse because these workers have a higher risk of experiencing musculoskeletal pain or related injuries due to the nature of the job.

According to the CDC, construction workers prescribed opioids for these injuries have a higher risk of developing a substance abuse disorder. Around 15% of those prescribed opioids became long-term users, making them 10 times more likely to become addicted.

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Addressing Construction Substance Abuse



As some state laws regarding marijuana usage have changed, contractors should consider both local and federal regulations as well as their company's contractual obligations when setting substance policies.

Addiction in the construction industry is such a widespread issue in 2022 that it will take extensive efforts to combat it. Here are some of the ways contractors around the globe are working to address the problem:

- **Drug testing:** The first step in addressing a problem is understanding its existence. Regular and random drug testing can help identify substance use and abuse in the workplace. Rather than a zero-tolerance policy, many companies offer resources to help their team members recover from addiction. In some states, substances like marijuana are no longer considered illegal, and such a zero-tolerance policy might

exclude good workers; so consider both local and federal regulations as well as your company's contractual obligations.

- **Counseling and treatment programs:** Inpatient and outpatient treatment programs and counseling are the most common tools for aiding people in recovering from substance abuse. Many insurance programs cover different types of addiction treatment. Publish this information in a place that is clear and easily accessible to your workers.
- **Creating a more nurturing culture:** Construction is a hard job on the best of days, and it can damage the body. Instead of just focusing on the result—the substance abuse—companies are beginning to create a culture that takes steps to minimize the physical and mental stresses an employee experiences, to reduce the chances that they'll turn to drugs or alcohol to cope. Whether it's a subscription to a mindfulness phone app, a gym membership allowance, a cold hard cash bonus for a job well done, or the occasional "You know what? Lunch is on me today!" — a little kindness goes a long way, too.

An Industry-Wide Effort



Many companies and trade organizations have made drug-free workplace commitments and adopted zero-tolerance substance abuse policies.

A growing number of construction trade organizations and associations are also stepping up efforts to help combat this growing problem.

Two of the United States' largest construction trade groups—the Associated Builders & Contractors (ABC) and the Associated General Contractors of America (AGC)—are among a large contingent of construction groups committed to working with the Construction Coalition for a Drug and Alcohol-Free Workplace (CCFDAW) and is inviting companies to pledge to keep drugs and alcohol abuse off their job sites. This includes a firm substance abuse policy and zero tolerance for work-related incidents.

The CCDAFW's mission “is to establish industry-wide recognition, and advocate the implementation of a strong substance abuse policy, as well as provide industry best practices to help achieve the goal of zero substance abuse-related incidences on the jobsite.” It asks its members to take a pledge to create drug and alcohol-free work environments.

Others involved with this effort include the Construction Industry Round Table (CIRT), Independent Electrical Contractors (IEC), Construction Users Roundtable (CURT) and National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER).

Of course, issues like mental health and addiction are not just limited to the work office or job site. Most who struggle with addiction carry it with them 24-hours a day. That's why a lot of programs and prevention efforts go above and beyond work hours.

The Construction Financial Management Association (CFMA) has done a lot of work and industry awareness on suicide prevention and mental health in—and outside of—the workplace. As part of that and related efforts, the organization has also zeroed in on the root causes of addiction among construction professionals, especially as the opioid crisis has worsened in the United States.

Preventative measures and programs are supported by groups like the American Subcontractors' Association (ASA) and the National Electrical Contractors' Association (NECA). In 2021, NECA released a Substance Abuse Safety Brief that provided valuable information for identifying people who might be at risk of developing a substance abuse problem and resources for treatment

options.

We provide programs for counseling, drug and alcohol addiction and financial planning to ensure our employees and their families are cared for beyond the job sites.



Helping employees with addiction problems through measures like counseling programs, addiction treatment and more can help turn the tide.

Contractors are doing their part as well.

Encore Electric, which was named the safest contractor of the year at the 2019 Construction Safety Excellence Awards (CSEA), makes addiction and mental health part of its safety

commitment. “We provide programs for counseling, drug and alcohol addiction and financial planning to ensure our employees and their families are cared for beyond the job sites,” said Jack Cain, the company’s director of health and safety.

Even efforts that might not seem directly correlated to drug and alcohol addiction prevention are helping to stem the tide. Nebraska contractor Hawkins Construction issued its employees two extra checks worth \$1,000 each to help combat rising inflation costs on items like groceries and fuel. “Everybody knows the problem there, but figuring out how to help the individuals who are carrying you, that’s something a lot of companies could learn from,” Nate Harper, a fabricator working at Hawkins told Construction Dive earlier this year.

How Technology is Helping



Some measures, like construction prefabrication in safer, more controlled spaces, are reducing the physical and mental burdens on workers that might typically occur on a jobsite.

While the construction industry long had been among the slowest to adopt new technologies, over the past decade now, it has been among the industries leading the tech charge. With that has come a lot of new applications and devices that can help address substance abuse in the workplace and prevent situations that could cause it.

Here are five ways to reduce opportunities for drug abuse with technology:

1. Reducing Risk Through Prefabrication

Prefabricated construction techniques are gaining popularity because they're more cost-effective and easier to assemble. Getting people away from the traditional job site and removing a lot of the heavy lifting can help prevent the injuries that could lead to opioid prescriptions and later addiction.

2. Digitized Management and HR Management Tools

Physical paperwork is a thing of the past. Digitizing management and HR tools makes it easier for team leaders to track important information, like drug test results. On the HR side, digitization makes getting information out to the entire team easier. That includes identifying those at risk for mental illness or substance abuse and providing information to, or offering insights into, treatment plans.



Drones are another technology helping workers stay safer on the jobsite.

3. Robotics

Robotics and automation can take over many mundane or dangerous tasks that might put construction workers at risk. Preventing injuries is key in avoiding prescriptions for pain medication that can lead to addiction. Adopting this technology can also improve productivity and efficiency, making it easier to meet deadlines.

4. Drones

Worksite safety inspections are essential, but inspecting partially finished projects can get dangerous once you start getting a few stories up. Drones take the risk and the human element out of these high elevation inspections or photo reporting, completing the same tasks without putting human workers in danger.

5. Wearable Technology

Construction wearables can help improve worksite safety in many ways. Even the most basic fitness watch can track heart rate and stress levels. More advanced devices can identify if someone is fatigued, where they are on the job site and even if they've fallen. This tech can't currently identify substance abuse in the workplace, but collected data could help point site managers and business owners in the right direction.

The Human and Business Reasons to Address Drug Abuse in Construction



Creating a positive culture and removing stigmas associated with substance addiction and abuse can create a healthier, happier, and more productive construction workforce.

Substance abuse in the construction industry is both a social issue (where human lives and wellbeing are at stake) and a business issue (where safety incidents and unnecessary rework from errors or mistakes can account for more than a quarter of contractors' costs on any given project).

In addition to traditional methods, such as zero-tolerance policies and rehabilitation facilities, companies can use modern methods, lead by example to create a more positive culture, and leverage technology to help prevent substance abuse in the workplace.

Addressing the issue doesn't mean assigning blame or playing strictly a numbers game. It helps put a human face on the very real issue of addiction—which millions of people struggle with.

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