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Rethinking Substance Use and Abuse Among Hospitality Employees

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There is a growing recognition worldwide that the "war on drugs"—the sets of domestic and international policies that are intended to fight the illegal drug trade and discourage the production and consumption of psychoactive drugs—has been an utter failure. The Global Commission on Drug Policy (a panel of 22 world leaders including a former Secretary-General of the United Nations, a former US Secretary of State, and former presidents of Brazil, Columbia, Chile, Poland, Portugal, and Mexico) issued a detailed report (2014) concluding that the war on drugs has resulted in devastating consequences for both individuals and communities and that it should be "replaced by more humane and effective policies shaped by scientific evidence, public health principles and human rights standards" (p. 6). Specifically, the commission calls on governments to "stop criminalizing people for drug use and possession—and stop imposing 'compulsory treatment' on people whose only offense is drug use or possession" (p. 8).

But change is in the air. Today, most Americans support full legalization of marijuana (Gallup, 2015), and so far 23 US states have legalized cannabis in some form (mostly for medical purposes), with four states and the District of Columbia also passing legalization of marijuana for recreational use. Other forms of legalization, decriminalization, and less restrictive policy regimes have also been implemented in other countries with impressive results. Prominent European countries have chosen to reform their regulations concerning illegal drugs, abolishing custodial sanctions for the possession of cannabis or for illicit substances in general. Despite pessimistic warnings, this liberalization concerning enforcement has not resulted in an increasing prevalence of marijuana consumption or any other significant negative outcome (Raschzok, 2015). Focusing on the Netherlands, MacCoun (2011) found that the coffeeshop system does not appear to encourage escalation to the use of hard or dangerous illicit drugs (e.g., cocaine and amphetamines), thus refuting the "gateway drug theory." Studies in the US have also consistently demonstrated that cannabis consumption is not associated with an increased probability of getting into a car accident (e.g., Compton & Berning, 2015).

Despite such reassuring evidence, alarmism^[1] about the use of illicit drugs continues in many circles, including the workplace. Tourism scholars and researchers have not delayed to jump on the alarmist bandwagon, enthusiastically endorsing the "war on drugs" rationale and rhetoric. For example, according to Kitterlin et al. (2015), in a recent study published in the *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, employee substance use is a matter of serious concern for the hospitality workplace. Similarly, in two editorials published in the *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Pizam (2010, 2012) expressed his deep concern regarding "the unhealthy lifestyle of hospitality employees" (2012, p. 631), as manifested in excessive alcohol consumption and in the use of illicit recreational drugs. Indeed, surveys conducted in Australia and the USA indicate that hospitality employees, particularly those in the food service sector, have an exceptionally high rate of substance use in comparison with both the general population and other occupational groups (ASCC, 2007; Frone, 2013; SAMHSA, 2009). The studies of Belhassen (2012) and Belhassen and Shani (2012) revealed similar patterns in the resort city of Eilat, Israel, indicating substantial consumption of illicit drugs and alcohol among hotel workers.

Prevalent substance use among hospitality employees appears, therefore, to be the norm, but should this be a cause of concern for employers and the industry as a whole? This commentary illustrates the main shortcomings of current references in the hospitality literature to substance use among

employees, calling for a cautious and skeptical approach on the part of hospitality scholars and practitioners in the face of a general alarmism regarding the impact of substance use on the workplace.

A Clear and Present Danger

Despite the decisive conclusions of the above academic studies on substance use among hospitality employees and its consequent implications, such studies nevertheless suffer from some severe drawbacks. In particular, these works often cite disputed figures from questionable sources. For example, Kitterlin et al. (2015) cite "evidence" that substance-abusing employees are 3.6 times more likely to be involved in work-related accidents or injuries, and Belhassen and Shani added that they are four times more likely to file compensation claims. These figures are quoted repeatedly on numerous occasions, although they are based on the so-called "Firestone Study", which in fact never existed (Morgan, 1987). The "study" is basically an address given by an executive at the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company during a luncheon, based on data that according to White (2003, p. 1896) were "produced out of thin air." In addition, as noted by Henriksson (1991), other statistics that are often utilized to support alarmist arguments are derived from survey or interview data gathered mainly from heavy drug users, thus skewing the gravity of the problem.

It would thus appear that the consequences of employee illicit drug use in the workplace, particularly with regard to employee productivity, are by no means crisp and clear. In a study conducted at six US worksites, French et al. (1998) found "insignificant relationships (both direct and indirect) between drug use and both wages and absenteeism" (p. 334). Using US national data sets, Foster and Vaughan (2005) found that "abuse-based absenteeism is, at best, an incidental cost to business and is insufficient to justify significant...investments of scarce human resource dollars to achieve an abuse and dependence free workplace" (p. 27). Although some studies did detect a difference in absenteeism rate between drug users and non-users, a report by the US National Academy of Sciences (NAS) noted that "the evidence does not necessarily show that use causes high absenteeism. It is possible that other variables can account for the relationship" (Normand et al., 1994, p. 158). Counterintuitively, in yet another study it was found that nonchronic illicit drug use is not significantly associated with employment and labor force participation (French et al., 2001). More broadly, a review of the scientific literature led Zimmer and Morgan (1997) to conclude that there is nothing in the relevant data to suggest that marijuana (by far the most popular illicit drug) decreases people's motivation to work, negatively affects their employability, or diminishes their capacity to earn a salary.

Similar results have been obtained regarding other employee performance measures. As stated by Frone (2004), "[d]espite the widely held belief that the use of alcohol and other psychoactive drugs...among employees may negatively affect employee productivity, past review of the literature suggest that this relation is neither consistent nor robust" (p. 129). Regarding workplace safety, the above-mentioned NAS report (Normand et al., 1994) could find no clear evidence that drug use meaningfully contributes to the overall rate of industrial accidents. It was concluded that, similarly to moderate off-duty alcohol consumption, moderate illicit drug intake by employees during off-duty hours is not likely to compromise workplace safety. Frone (2004) noted that since there is no credible scientific evidence to support the assertions that the mere consumption of an illicit substance leads to workplace injuries and accidents, alarmist claims to the contrary should be viewed as unsubstantiated exaggerations.

These findings point to the futility of random drug tests, which mainly identify employees who use illicit drugs and alcohol on the weekend or during vacations, rather than while at work. In other words, a positive drug test indicates neither intoxication nor impairment. It should be mentioned that not only have drug tests proved to be of limited practicality, since they do not measure actual impairment (Normand et al., 1994), but they have also recently been shown to have adverse effect on employee morale, as drug testing is perceived to be a degrading and demeaning act and an invasion of workers' privacy (Char, 2014). Indeed, in an earlier study on US high-tech companies, Shepard and Clifton (1998) revealed the potential damaging effects of pre-employment and random drug testing, as both were associated with lower productivity. It was posited that the drug testing generates a negative work environment that deters competent applicants and creates an organizational culture of distrust and disrespect. More recently, Mehay and Webb (2007) found negative net benefits of the US military's "zero tolerance" drug testing policy and consequently advocated the abandonment of this policy in favor of counselling, rehabilitation and educational programs.

Substance use alarmism debunked

It is thus evident that the above alarmist observations and interpretations regarding employees' substance use in the hospitality industry and its consequences are not consistent with the existing body of knowledge. Most fundamentally, 'alarmist' studies have failed to adequately distinguish between substance *use* and substance *abuse*. While the former is defined as "taking a drug in such a manner that sought-for effects are attained with minimal hazard", the latter is regarded as "taking a drug to such an extent that it greatly increases the danger or impairs the ability of the individual to function adequately or cope with the circumstances" (Nicholson et al., 2002). As noted by Nicholson et al. (2013), it has been consistently demonstrated that among the users of illicit drugs, the vast majority are occasional or moderate users (not abusers), being typically normative, well-adjusted and productive members of society. These authors therefore advocate focusing only on the prevention and treatment of drug abuse rather than implementing the current prevalent policy of a "war on drugs," which targets illicit substance users whoever and wherever they are. In this regard, there seems to be no rational justification for tolerating employees' moderate off-duty alcohol consumption, but applying harsher standards for the similar use of marijuana, which is the drug most often used (Cook, 2006). Leslie Iversen, Professor of Pharmacology (University of Oxford), sums up the relevant scientific literature on the effects of marijuana by stating that "[o]verall, by comparison with other drugs used mainly for 'recreational' purposes, cannabis could be rated to be a relatively safe drug" (2005, p. 69). The in-depth review of Fox et al. (2013) demonstrates that alcohol is clearly a more hazardous drug than marijuana, in terms of effects on driving ability, acute toxicity, health consequences of heavy consumption, and occurrence of addiction. Considering the issue from public policy perspective in Canada, Thomas and David (2009) found that "the health costs per user of tobacco and alcohol are much higher than for cannabis" (p. 13).

Another related issue is the failure of commentators in the hospitality literature to address the context of substance use among hospitality employees rather than the more frequently considered overall drug use. As is argued by Frone (2004), differentiating between off-the-job and on-the-job substance use is essential if we are to accurately assess the relation between illicit drug use and job performance, as on-the-job use is "more predictive of performance than measures of overall (i.e. off-the-job) substance use" (p. 136). He adds that most individuals who use illicit substances do so in such manner that their ability

to work is not impaired. Referring to overall use as a meaningful measure is misleading, since the mere consumption of illicit drugs is unlikely to significantly affect workplace safety and other productivity outcomes. Thus, both research and managerial focus should be directed to employees' on-the-job substance use and/or drug-related impairment rather than to their personal lifestyle choices away from the workplace.

Conclusions and implications

Hospitality managers and scholars should now acknowledge that – as is the case for alcohol consumption – moderate off-duty consumption of illicit substances is the rule and not the exception. The vast majority of users lead normative and productive lives, without deteriorating to substance dependence, destructive behavior and/or impaired performance at work. The privacy and personal habits of employees outside of the workplace should not be infringed, provided that their choices do not result in lost productivity or put workplace safety in jeopardy, as is typically the case for moderate off-the-job illicit drug use. The rate of substance use among hospitality employees is indeed relatively high, but recent alarmist references to the issue in the hospitality literature are based on unreliable figures, with a tendency to disregard counter-evidence and to rely on erroneous stereotypes about both drugs and drug users. Illicit substance users in Western society comprise vast groups of people with diverse socio-demographic and psychological characteristics, along with other individual differences. Thus, making generalizations about how their lifestyle choices impact on the workplace is incongruous and gives rise to exaggerated alarm regarding substance use and its consequences. Such generalizations may also result in recommendations to implement costly employee assistance programs and drug testing, both of which are of little value to employers while having unintended deleterious effects on employee well-being.

In summary, hospitality scholars should avoid unreliable generalizations and instead rely on rigorous empirical evidence that properly distinguishes between substance use and abuse and between off-the-job and on-the-job substance use. Managers and workplace policymakers, for their part, should implement alternative approaches (other than drug testing) for dealing with serious substance abuse. Such measures could include training managers and supervisors to identify (based on deterioration in job performance), confront and refer impaired workers to appropriate intervention programs, conducting impairment testing of employees in specific sensitive positions, and ensuring thorough reference checking of job applicants. According to a report of the American Civil Liberties Union (1999), such alternatives are more cost effective and are not perceived as an unfair infringement of employee privacy. However, future research should assess the validity of these claims in the hospitality industry through empirical studies.

Hospitality employers, for their part, should refuse to join the "war on drugs" by not targeting workers who use drugs recreationally. Although employers may not approve of certain personal lifestyle choices of their employees, imposing their own views on others is both impractical and immoral. "The right to be left alone", stated the late Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court, Louis Brandeis, is "the most comprehensive of rights and the right most valued by civilized men." The private lives of hospitality employees along with their pharmacological tastes should not be an exception.

[1] This includes excessive and exaggerated alarms about substance use and its consequences, “deliberate ignorance” regarding counter-evidence, and the communication of supposed facts concerning illicit drug use through emotive language.



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