

A “Startling” Percentage of US Workers Have Been WFH Under the Influence

HR Brew | Susanna Vogel | December 6, 2021

A survey of American workers found 22% of respondents said they had used alcohol, marijuana, or other recreational drugs on work video calls.



If you’ve ever emerged from a Slack huddle wondering, What were they smoking?, Sierra Tucson, an Arizona–based mental health and substance-abuse clinic, might have an answer for you. Sierra Tucson commissioned a survey of American workers and found 22% of respondents said they had used alcohol, marijuana, or other recreational drugs on work video calls.

The survey asked 1,011 Americans about their alcohol and drug use during the pandemic. According to the survey, 52% of marijuana users have increased their overall consumption during the pandemic, and 57% of marijuana users said they’ve also been drinking more alcohol.

Self-medication nation. Dr. Jasleen Chhatwal, the chief medical officer at Sierra Tucson, told HR Brew that human resources should pay attention not just to the substance usage—which she found “startling” both in its amount and in its occurrence during work hours—but also to the motivating factors.

“At least half, if not more than half, of the people [surveyed] were using marijuana to cope with stress, anxiety, loneliness, or depression—which are all four things that increased with the pandemic,” Chhatwal explained. Survey respondents who used alcohol also said they drank alcohol to cope with those four issues, but in smaller percentages than the marijuana users.

Here’s how HR can help promote mental wellness at work, according to Chhatwal:

Offer an annual “wellness survey” to help employees keep track of their own health over time.

“Check in on people more frequently.” Chhatwal likes to do this “especially if [she knows] that they may be having something going on in their personal life.”

Offer to cover the costs of a teletherapy app like BetterHelp or Talkspace, mindfulness meditation apps, or biometric tracking (e.g., heart-rate monitoring) so employees can track anxiety, poor sleep, or symptoms of depression.

Bottom line: Chhatwal says that HR and executive leadership set the tone for workplace mental health. It’s been a tough year, and management, in her opinion, shouldn’t shy away from these conversations.

“I make sure that our staff knows that we are happy to talk about other issues that may be impacting their work or their well-being or their ability to function well in their life,” Chhatwal said. “Because I think if you open the door before the person has a problem, and you made it okay and essentially normalized the discussion around mental health and wellness, then a person is more likely to come up to you and talk about it, rather than if they believe that you’re really not somebody who may be open to it.”