

Companies used to fire the employee whose drinking got out of hand. Now many have found ways to save the worker his livelihood and themselves money.

They're Rehabilitating the Alcoholic Worker

Condensed from The Wall Street Journal

A Texas oil refinery worker came to work with a hangover one morning and turned the wrong valve. The oil he wasted cost the company about \$50,000.

The highly competent supervisor of a large utility company's motor fleet began disappearing on drinking binges. Cost to the company of resulting foul-ups: an estimated \$4000 per binge.

A large Midwestern manufacturer was pleased at the pickup in business after hiring a new chief executive. Before long, however, business slacked off. Investigation showed that the new executive had taken to heavy drinking, impairing his judgment and damaging the company's standing with customers.

These men were alcoholics, whose excessive use of alcohol to meet the ordinary demands of living caused them serious problems on the job as well as home. Their cases illustrate why there is growing concern over alcoholism in industry.

"Whether management likes it or not - and there is much to tempt us to shun the subject - we must combat the increasing menace of alcoholism," says James F. Oates, Jr., chairman and president of Equitable Life Assurance Society. A big reason: alcoholism's direct cost to industry is estimated to be in excess of one billion dollars annually.

Nearly all companies used to

treat excessive drinking among workers as a moral problem that was better left alone. If an employee's drinking got out of hand he usually was fired, not helped. But as companies have become aware of the high cost of alcoholism in their plants and offices, many have started tackling the rehabilitation problem head-on.

Some have set up their own programs for directing and rehabilitating alcoholic employes. They include Eastman Kodak, Western Electric, Allis-Chalmers, du Pont, Chicago's Commonwealth Edison and New York's Consolidated Edison. Other concerns are working closely with such community groups as Chicago's Portal House and the Houston Committee on Alcoholism.

Industry's problem centers on an estimated two million alcoholic workers out of a total U.S. alcoholic population of five million - up one million in the past five years, according to the National Council on Alcoholism, the central clearing-house for information on this subject. Absenteeism of these workers because of alcoholism will this year cost employers more than double the time lost through strikes in 1957.

Alcoholism's impact on an individual company and its workers often is much greater than management may suspect. In 1956, for example, the Norton Co., a Worcester, Mass., abrasives and grinding-machine manufacturer, made

a survey of 33 employees with known drinking problems. They were skilled workers with an average of 16 years' service apiece. Eleven of the men were in an acute stage of alcoholism and on the verge of being discharged. They averaged 45 days of lost time per year, at an annual cost to each man of more than \$700. The findings spurred Norton to help the workers in cooperation with Alcoholics Anonymous.

The corporate cost of excessive drinking includes such things as increased accidents, the expense of replacing trained workers and the reduced output and higher work spoilage from a disturbed drinker. "Our biggest problem is the so-called half-man - the alcoholic worker whose effectiveness is off 50 percent or more from normal," says one company personnel chief. "His mistakes may not be spectacular, but he doesn't get much done."

Companies are sometimes shocked to learn that as many as three per cent of their workers are alcoholics. That's because many management men still stereotype an alcoholic as a skid-row bum. These workers may present a fairly normal appearance.

Discovery of "hidden" drinkers is a major part of most company programs. Seldom will workers tip off the company about a colleague's excessive drinking. And usually the inroads of alcoholism on a worker's efficiency are made at such a slow pace that supervisors may miss the signs. (Researchers say that most alcoholic workers have a history of 10 to 15 years of increasingly heavy drinking before their illness interferes with their vocational life.) Supervisors at Consolidated Edison are trained to watch for clues: consistent tardiness or absenteeism on Mondays and frequent early departure on Fridays; unexplained disappearance from the

job; recurrent accidents; unexplained changes in an employe's work habits or personality.

Unions, too, have stepped up their efforts to help detect and rehabilitate workers with drinking problems. "thousands of union counselors across the country are trained to recognize alcoholics and to refer them to the proper agencies," says Leo Perlis, director of AFL - CIO Community Service Activities. In Birmingham, Ala., seven companies and 17 unions have joined their efforts to help alcoholic workers.

Companies with alcoholism programs generally are enthusiastic about the results. Du Pont claims it's program has been "successful beyond our expectations." Some companies report the rehabilitated alcoholic often out-produces his fellow workers, perhaps out of a sense of gratitude for being helped.

"We feel that we have salvaged some valuable employees by treating alcoholism as a disease and, as with any illness, paying wages during treatment," asserts Volley B. Leister, personnel director of Chicago's Commonwealth Edison. His company uncovers about 15 alcoholics a year, refers them to its medical department, where treatment is determined on an individual basis.

Allis Chalmers a few years ago estimated that its alcoholism program, now 11 years old, was saving the company some \$80,000 yearly just in reduced absenteeism. Among workers treated there, the absentee rate has been cut from 8 to 3 percent and the firing rate has been slashed from 95 to 8 percent.

An Allis-Chalmers worker with a drinking problem may be referred to the company's full-time alcoholism counselor (an A.A. member) by a friend, his foreman, a court or the plant hospital.

During the rehabilitation program the employee is helped by members of the company's industrial relations department, which includes a psychologist, a psychiatrist, an attorney, welfare workers and a "problem counselor."

In 1952 New York's Consolidated Edison spent \$25,000 to help set up a consultation clinic for alcoholism at New York University's Bellevue Medical Center - the first clinic devoted solely to the alcoholic in industry. Impressed by its value, 18 other concerns have referred alcoholic workers to this clinic.

About 85 percent of the problem drinkers discovered by Con Edison supervisors are willing to

go to the clinic. Others join A.A. or place themselves under care of their own physicians. Visits to the clinic cost the patient \$2 each, and active treatment usually runs from six months to a year. Treatment consists mainly of individual psychiatric therapy, group psychotherapy in which about 12 patients may discuss their problems, treatment with such drugs as disulfiram (Antabuse), referral to A.A. in some instances, and hospitalization for acute cases.

As Andrew B. Holmstrom, vice-president at Norton, says, "Our rehabilitation programs have decreased lost time, improved morale and, most important, we know we have helped out many a home."

Source: Reader's Digest, August 1958