

Alcohol's cost to the workplace

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About us

Alcohol Action Ireland (AAI) was established in 2003 and is the national independent advocate for reducing alcohol harm. We campaign for the burden of alcohol harm to be lifted from the individual, community and State, and have a strong track record in campaigning, advocacy, research and information provision.

Our work involves providing information on alcohol-related issues, creating awareness of alcohol-related harm and offering policy solutions with the potential to reduce that harm, with a particular emphasis on the implementation of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018. Our overarching goal is to achieve a reduction in consumption of alcohol and the consequent health and social harms which alcohol causes in society.

Alcohol Action Ireland directors:

- Pat Cahill, former President ASTI (Company Secretary)
- Aidan Connaughton, Chartered accountant, former partner and head of risk, Grant Thornton
- Paddy Creedon, Recovery Advocate
- Dr Eoin Fogarty, Consultant in Emergency and Retrieval Medicine
- Michael Foy, Head of Finance, Commission for Communications Regulation
- Prof Jo-Hanna Ivers, Associate Professor, Addiction: Public Health & Primary Care, Trinity College Dublin
- Prof Frank Murray (Chair) Consultant in Hepatology & Gastroenterology. M.B., B.Ch. B.A.O., M.D., F.R.C.P.I., F.R.C.P. (Ed)
- Dr Mary T. O'Mahony, Consultant in Public Health Medicine & Medical Officer of Health, Department of Public Health, Public Health Area D (Cork & Kerry)
- Dr Catriona O'Toole, Associate Professor/Senior Lecturer Psychology of Education, Maynooth University
- Dr Bobby Smyth (Vice Chair), Consultant Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist
- Kathryn Walsh, Director of Policy and Advocacy at the National Youth Council of Ireland

Patron: Prof. Geoffrey Shannon

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Introduction

Alcohol is by far the most used psychoactive substance in the workforce, with people having harmful consumption patterns that increase their risk of social, legal, medical, occupational, domestic and economic problems. [1] Alcohol use is an important issue in the workplace since “it can lead to an increase in accidents, injuries, absenteeism, and inappropriate behaviour by reducing a worker’s psycho-physical integrity, and significantly affecting the health and safety of third parties”. [2]

Alcohol consumption in Ireland is still too high, with a modest government target for a reduction in consumption missed five years ago. In 2013 the government set a modest target for the year 2020 to reduce alcohol consumption to 9.1 litres of pure alcohol per capita, however, the target was missed, and consumption levels are still around 5% above that modest target. Resultantly, more than half of Irish drinkers are classified as hazardous drinkers. [3] Within that cohort of hazardous drinkers, there are 578,000 people with an alcohol use disorder (AUD), of which 90,000 are at a severe level. [4]

As has been well documented, this has a significant impact on public health and the health service, on crime and the criminal justice system, and on road traffic collisions. However, another area which is directly and indirectly affected by alcohol but which has received far too little attention is the workplace. It is important to highlight that the International Labour Organization (ILO) stated that alcohol can have a negative impact on performance in the workplace. [5] The impact of alcohol on the workplace is multifaceted, it affects the individual in terms of mortality and morbidity, productivity, presenteeism, and absenteeism, it affects colleagues in terms of workload, and it affects employers in terms of businesses losses and competitiveness.

This paper seeks to use national and international evidence to set out the impact of alcohol in the workplace in Ireland, the scale of its impact on workers, on employers, and on the economy. It will also outline the necessary solutions needed to reduce the societal and economic harms of alcohol.

Workplace stress and alcohol use

Employers and businesses can sometimes be a major contributor themselves to alcohol use amongst workforces. In their comprehensive paper, 'Alcohol, Work and Productivity', the Science Group of the European Alcohol and Health Forum outlined how "the workplace, itself, can lead to alcohol-related harm through structural factors, stress, high effort/low reward work, the ease of obtaining and using alcohol, the extent to which members of an individual's workplace social network use alcohol or work while impaired by alcohol at work, and, the extent to which members of an individual's workplace social network approve of using or working under the influence of alcohol at work".[6]

The Health Research Board (HRB) in Ireland similarly observed that the workplace environment can lead to increased alcohol use; stress, high-effort/ low-reward work, low levels of supervision and poor integration of staff may lead to increased alcohol use.[7] A review by Virtanen M. et al. shows that regardless of the sector, individuals whose working hours exceed standard recommendations are more likely to exhibit increased levels of alcohol consumption that pose a health risk.[8]

A systematic review and meta-analysis on long working hours and alcohol use analysed data from 333,693 participants from 14 countries found that long working hours were associated with higher levels of alcohol use.[9] Similarly, analysis of 76,136 employees in Canada reported that increased working hours, higher levels of physical demands, and job insecurity were associated with increased odds of high-risk alcohol consumption.[10]

A longitudinal study in New Zealand reported that longer working hours were associated with higher rates of alcohol-related problems, with rates tending to show a steady increase with increasing hours worked.[11] Hours worked was significantly associated with more frequent alcohol use, higher rates of alcohol abuse/dependence and a greater number of alcohol abuse/dependence symptoms.

However, recent research from Norway has indicated that shorter working hours may be related to higher alcohol consumption. Thorrisen et. al., hypothesised that this may be due to involuntary part-time and/or temporary contracts generating stress that is coped with by means of higher alcohol consumption.[12]

Nevertheless, the authors indicated they were unable to establish consistent knowledge regarding the relationship between working hours and alcohol outcomes among employees.[13]

Finally, workplace culture can be a contributing factor that can encourage, or indeed discourage, alcohol – for example if a company has a bar or alcohol readily available for employees to consume within its offices as a reward or perk to the job.[14] Research from Norway found that workplace drinking social norms were a dominant predictor of both consumption and alcohol-related problems.[15]

€8.5bn

Estimated
annual lost
economic
output due to
alcohol in Ireland



Absenteeism

Heavy drinking increases the risk of absenteeism. International research indicates that high-risk drinkers are 22 times more likely to be absent from work due to their alcohol use compared with lower-risk drinkers.[16] That same study showed that alcohol related absenteeism was not restricted to heavy drinkers, but included a large number of non-dependent drinkers who binge drink periodically.[17]

The impact of alcohol related absenteeism on Irish businesses is significant. It is over two decades since the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (Ibec) carried out a survey of 557 businesses in which 12% of firms cited alcohol and alcohol-related illnesses as a cause of short-term absences for men, and 4 percent of companies reported the same rate of absences for women.[18] The research from Ibec estimated that absence from work cost Irish businesses about €1.5 billion a year.[19] Indeed, this tallies with HSE research from 2004 which cited loss of output due to alcohol-related absences from work to be around €1 billion.[20]

This aligns with much international research in the area. In the Netherlands, for example, 8.1 percent of employees surveyed as part of a study on the economic costs of alcohol hangover reported one or more days of absenteeism.[21] An Australian survey among 13,000 Australians found that 3.5 percent of all respondents reported missing at least one day of work per year due to alcohol use,[22] while in America, research found that people with AUD contributed to 14.1 percent of total reported workplace absences, but only represented 9.3 percent of the full-time workforce.[23]

According to the National Alcohol Diary Survey 2013, 4.2 percent of employed respondents reported that they had missed days from work due to their alcohol use in the 12 months prior to the survey.[24] On average, each of these respondents missed 3.3 days. Based on Q1 2025 Labour Force Survey employment figures, we can extrapolate that of the 2,918,300 persons in employment,[25] around 122,500 missed work in the previous year due to alcohol.

Alcohol related absenteeism has a far greater impact beyond days lost – it can create difficulties for employers as well as additional work for those colleagues who cover for an absent worker. It can also cause reduced productivity or suboptimal quality which in turn can create further burdens for those who work with the absentee worker.

Presenteeism

Presenteeism is defined as being physically present at work, but due to a physical or emotional issue, being distracted to the point of reduced productivity. It includes time not spent on job tasks and decreased quality of work, and it is often a hidden cost for employers.[26] Alcohol is a significant cause of workplace presenteeism[27] and higher levels of alcohol consumption are associated with higher levels of impaired work performance.[28] Indeed, presenteeism is more important for lost productivity than is absenteeism.[29] International research found that presenteeism accounts for 77% of total lost productivity in the workplace, while absenteeism is responsible only for 23% of that loss.[30]

Hangovers and alcohol intoxication both contribute to presentism amongst workers. Hangover episodes are characterised by symptoms that can induce work impairments, such as headache, nausea, fatigue, and drowsiness, to name but a few, while alcohol intoxication can produce work impairments that increase linearly with task complexity.[31]

Research from America found that alcohol use can cause up to 3.5 unproductive days per worker per year, and an Australian study found that alcohol, and other, use disorders increased the risk of presenteeism 2.6-fold.[32] Indeed, a survey of Norwegian workers found that 11% reported workplace inefficiency due to drinking the previous day. Separate research from Norway also found that presenteeism for frequent drinkers was 1.81 times higher than for infrequent drinkers, while the odds of impaired daily activities for frequent drinkers was 2.32 times higher than for their infrequent counterparts.[33]

A study from the Netherlands surveyed workers and examined the number of days of absenteeism and presenteeism associated with having a hangover as well as the loss of productivity when going to work when hungover during the year 2019. It found that 33.4% of adults reported one or more days of presenteeism. The analyses revealed that alcohol hangover was associated 8.3 days of presenteeism and an associated productivity loss.[34] Such international evidence reinforces that alcohol causes economic and practical problems in the workplace.

Unemployment

Unemployment and alcohol use have often been found to correlate and to act as risk factors for each other.[35] Alcohol compromises labour productivity – and therefore the level of unemployment – through multiple channels.[36] In Ireland, according to the HRB, unemployment and use of alcohol appear to be linked. While the Science Group of the European Alcohol and Health Forum estimate that heavy drinking increases the risk of unemployment by as much as about five-fold, compared with light drinking.[37] Compounding matters is the association's bidirectional nature, as it is known that becoming unemployed worsens alcohol-related harm, and heavy drinking can lead to unemployment.[38]

Becoming unemployed can worsen alcohol use, which, in turn, can lead to a reduction in the productive workforce through premature mortality or morbidity. The World Health Organisation 'Technical Manual on Alcohol Tax Policy and Administration' notes that "since alcohol consumption damages health, it may also increase absenteeism, lead to poorer performance and shorten the career length of a person who consumes alcohol, with negative consequences for lifetime income".[39]

Furthermore, unemployment can also be due to injury and/or disease caused by alcohol use. Alcohol is linked to more than 200 diseases and injuries and is the fifth leading risk factor for disease, disability and death worldwide.[40] Research indicates that within the European Union, a more than 3% increase in unemployment is associated with a 28% increase in deaths from alcohol use disorders.[41] Indeed, individuals with chronic diseases, including those caused by alcohol consumption, are more likely to be unemployed and to miss days of work.[42] Whatever the case may be, there is general agreement in academic literature that alcohol reduces employment and increases unemployment, and thereby influences productivity.[43]

Mortality and morbidity

Alcohol is a leading risk factor for premature mortality, injuries and many non-communicable diseases such as cancer, liver cirrhosis and injuries.[44] These, in turn, have wider detrimental economic and societal consequences. Furthermore, unemployment can also be due to injury or disease caused by alcohol use. Alcohol is linked to more than 200 diseases and injuries and is the fifth leading risk factor for disease, disability and death worldwide.[45] As previously mentioned, EU research indicates that a more than 3% increase in unemployment in the bloc is associated with a 28% increase in deaths from alcohol use disorders.[46] Furthermore, those suffering with a chronic diseases, including those caused by alcohol consumption, are more likely to be unemployed and to miss days of work.[47]

Alcohol use is a major modifiable risk factor for many diseases and poses an economic burden on society and the economy.[48] A comprehensive Global Burden of Disease (GBD) Study on alcohol, published in the Lancet, examined the worldwide level of the alcohol attributable burden; it reported that alcohol was the number one risk factor for disability-adjusted life years and premature deaths among males aged 15–49 years.[49] The GBD researchers estimated that in 2019 there were 1,543 deaths in Ireland attributable to alcohol from all causes. This gives an estimate of four alcohol related deaths per day in Ireland, or 5% of all deaths. [50]

The peak age of alcohol-related death is in middle age and older middle age, a period that may be considered workers' peak performance years.[51] Analysis of Irish hospitalisation and mortality data indicates that people of working age accounted for the majority of alcohol-related discharges (74.0%) and alcohol related deaths (73.2%).[52] A 2014 cost analysis of the financial burdens of alcohol, commissioned by Department of Health, put the lost economic output due to alcohol at €614m.[53] Indeed, €65 million of the loss was attributed to premature mortality. There is no doubt that an updated analysis would return significantly increased figures compared to those from a decade ago.

Workplace accident and injury

The effects of alcohol can increase the likelihood of workplace accidents, injuries, and fatalities, not just for the worker consuming alcohol, but also for their co-workers, and due to the nature of certain jobs, the general population.[54] [55] Absenteeism due to alcohol may create additional work for those who cover for the absent worker, their reduced productivity or suboptimal quality of work may create a burden for those who work with them, or they can be a danger to others, especially in occupational activities which involve a high risk of injury at work.[56]

As previously mentioned, a 2014 cost analysis of the financial burdens of alcohol, commissioned by Department of Health, put the lost economic output due to alcohol at €614m. Of this, they estimated €185m was lost due to accidents at work.[57] In the 'Annual Review of Workplace Injuries, Illnesses and Fatalities', the Health and Safety Authority reported that in 2022 there were 28 work-related fatal incidents, 9,070 non-fatal incidents, and 432,000 days lost to work related injuries.[58] However, there is no mention of alcohol anywhere in the annual review. Given there are currently 578,000 people with an alcohol use disorder (AUD) in Ireland, with 90,000 people experiencing an acute level of dependency, [59] it is naive to assume that alcohol plays no part in workplace fatalities and injuries.[60]

432,000

The number of working days lost to work-related injuries in Ireland in 2022



Productivity

The costs of lost productivity directly attributable to alcohol are generally a result of the intersection of lower employment, absenteeism, presenteeism, and hours spent by employers dealing with alcohol-related issues.[61] There are, however, also indirect costs to businesses because of alcohol, such as the costs borne by the drinker's co-workers.

The substantial loss of productivity is understandable when considering the fact that alcohol hangover has been associated with cognitive impairments such as memory loss, impaired psychomotor functioning, and negative mood effects.[62] Several international studies have outlined how alcohol consumption can have adverse health-related effects and affect labour economics and productivity.[63]

A qualitative analysis of 'The hidden costs of employee drinking' in New Zealand found that alcohol use impacts workplace productivity in terms of absence and reduced performance by employees.[64] Similarly, research from The Netherlands revealed that alcohol hangover was associated with 0.2 days of absenteeism and 8.3 days of presenteeism and a productivity loss of 24.9% on days worked with a hangover.[65] Meanwhile research from Britain, which surveyed a nationally representative sample, found 42% of people had ever gone to work hungover or under the influence of alcohol, and that these workers rated their performance at work to be 39% less effective than usual.[66]

Moreover, such research aligns with a variety of other studies which found that presenteeism due to hangover was associated with poorer managerial skills, work-related problems such as conflicts with supervisors, lower productivity, and falling asleep, and an increased risk of work-related errors and accidents the day after alcohol consumption.[67] In analysing such data it is also important to remember that many of these workers may travel to work by car while hungover, or still under the influence of alcohol, and the associated impact this has on road collisions.

The costs to the State, to businesses, and to the economy of such productivity losses are extraordinary. The estimated associated costs for the Dutch economy in 2019 of absenteeism (€234,538,460) and presenteeism (€2,423,603,184) was €2,658,141,644.[68] Research from Britain found that people working whilst hungover, or under the influence of alcohol, costs the UK economy between £1.2 billion and £1.4 billion a year.[69] Meanwhile American research from close to a decade ago found that the economic costs resulting from lost productivity, health care costs, and legal and criminal consequences of excessive drinking was an estimated \$223.5 billion.

Furthermore, there is significant indirect impact on the workplace, productivity, and costs caused by the impact of a workers alcohol use on their co-workers. Most studies on alcohol and the workplace have neglected this. However, important research from Australia found that one in 12 reported being negatively affected in some way by their co-workers' drinking. The study estimated that the cost of extra hours worked by workers due to a co-worker's drinking (\$453 million) was greater than the cost of absenteeism due to one's own drinking (\$368 million).[70]

A similar study in Ireland found that 8.3% of people surveyed reported that their ability to do their job was negatively affected due to co-workers' drinking; 6.1% had to work extra hours, and 2.2% reported that they had had an accident or close call at work.[71] Overall, 10.4% of surveyed Irish workers reported experiencing at least one harm in the workplace as a result of co-workers' drinking.[72]

Recent research, 'What are the Economic Costs to Society Attributable to Alcohol Use?', by Manthey, et. al., found that the reported costs from alcohol consumption can amount to an equivalent of 1.5–2.6% of GDP in high-income settings, with the majority of costs due to productivity losses. Most worryingly for Ireland, OECD modelling found all alcohol-related diseases will cause Irish GDP to be 2 percent lower on average between 2020-2050.[73]

According to Manthey's research, the direct costs of alcohol harm are responsible for 38.8% of the total costs, while indirect costs make up 61.2%.[74] Among the direct costs, health-care costs make up almost half (46.2%), followed by costs of crime (28.9%), traffic crash-related costs (13.5%) and other costs (11.4%);[75] while the indirect costs relate to productivity losses, notably due to workplace absence and presenteeism or premature mortality. Therefore, applying the data uncovered from Manthey's research to the Irish case, we can calculate that alcohol causes a loss of workplace productivity in the region of 1.6% of GDP – an annual loss of €8.5bn to the Irish economy.[76]

Progressive approaches to alcohol and the workplace

Alcohol harm is a significant issue within society and therefore also workplaces, and while it poses a risk to workers, to businesses, and to productivity, evidence indicates that treating a workers alcohol use is achievable and benefits workplaces and society.[77] The workplace also represents a useful access point for health promotion, including for addressing alcohol-related harm. As indicated by the OECD, implementing workplace interventions to reduce hazardous drinking levels can have a positive economic impact by reducing absenteeism, presenteeism, accidents and lost earnings from premature mortality.[78]

Research has shown that employers can play an important role in reducing alcohol-related harm through the workplace by putting into place clear policies around alcohol in the workplace, as well as screening, education, and interventions aimed both at problem drinkers in the workforce and at changing the workplace culture. Brief interventions for harmful alcohol consumption in employee assistance programs have been shown to be effective in reducing drinking and increasing productivity.[79]

As the Institute of Alcohol Studies has outlined, many organisations now operate workplace alcohol policies designed to ensure workers are sober during working hours and identify and help employees that require support. Indeed, such measures are more important than ever given the increase in remote and hybrid working. However, some corporate environments are lagging in terms of policies and culture on alcohol consumption.

In addition, there is a further role for employers, and the trade union movement, in ensuring positive work conditions including fair treatment, recognition, meaningful work, skill variety, autonomy, acquisition and use of skills, fair rewards, promotion opportunities, friendship formation, and social support from co-workers and supervisors.[80] Such measures can reduce stressors while simultaneously ensuring supports are in place where a worker is using alcohol in a way that is harmful to themselves and to the workplace.

Conclusion and solutions

As has been outlined, alcohol poses a significant risk to workers, to businesses, to productivity, and to the economy. Workers under the influence of alcohol can be a danger to others, and therefore a risk factor, if they are working under the influence of alcohol, especially in occupational activities which involve a high risk of injury at work.[81] Working under the influence of alcohol, or with alcohol hangover, can increase the risk of tardiness at work and/or leaving work early, resulting in loss of productivity; the development of inappropriate behaviour, such as theft and other crimes; poor relations with colleagues; and low company morale.[82]

Alcohol can be costly to a workplace in a number of ways. It can lead to:

- tardiness, absenteeism, increased sick days
- poor decision making
- errors in production or service delivery
- unsafe work practices
- decreased productivity or increased need for overtime
- conflicts amongst staff
- low morale amongst staff
- high turnover of staff
- early retirement and loss of experience and knowledge
- an increase in grievance, arbitration, and disciplinary actions
- inappropriate or extended use of supervisor's time or attention
- preventable injuries on and off the job involving both workers and the general public
- theft, fraud or embezzlement
- damage to the organization's public image, and
- an increased vulnerability to legal action

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It is also clear that improved data collection and monitoring is necessary in relation to alcohol and the workplace and alcohol's involvement in workplace accidents. To this end, the government needs to introduce the relevant regulations regarding alcohol under Section 13 (1) (c) of the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act (2005), which ensures that, when necessary, there is

appropriate testing for alcohol to ensure both safety and employee welfare, while also aiding organisational efficiency and productivity.[84]

Furthermore, it is important that the key stakeholders – government, employers' representatives, and the trade union movement – work together to ensure the adoption of the progressive approaches, such as the Akan Kompetansesenter[85] in Norway, in dealing with alcohol the workplace in a manner which supports the employee and helps the workplace.

Finally, if there is a decrease in population-wide alcohol consumption using the World Health Organisation's 'best buys' – controls on pricing, marketing and availability – there will no doubt be comparable improvements for workers, for employers, for society, and for the economy.

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Alcohol Action Ireland,
Coleraine House,
Coleraine Street,
Dublin 7,
D07 E8XF

alcoholireland.ie
admin@alcoholactionireland.ie
[@AlcoholIreland](https://www.instagram.com/AlcoholIreland)