

Tonic or toxin on the job

There's a fine balance between drinking to gain an edge at work, and problem drinking, Sharon Kirkey reports in the third of a five- part series on Canadians' drinking habits

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Beneath the twinkling white bar lights at a downtown Ottawa lounge, where luscious cabernets and crisp whites are poured into generous glasses, a woman wearing a short tweed skirt and black opaque hose sips an apple martini and kvetches about how not to dress for the office.

"Skinny jeans aren't appropriate, they're not professional," she tells her two female colleagues. "Someone needs to say something to her."

Here, the after-work crowd descends soon after 4:30 p.m. Politicians, lawyers, journalists, federal public servants and professionals who gather to gossip and to gripe, to add more contacts to their BlackBerry or just to be seen.

Whether the martini bar in the office tower or the pub by the plant, having a drink after work can help lubricate the day's stress and nourish office bonding. For many, going for beers after work feels "easy and collegial", a way of "letting the tension of the day ease out of our bones," Caroline Knapp describes in *Drinking: A Love Story*.

But drinking in the workplace can be a tonic or toxin: Some evidence suggests sharing drinks after work increases earnings.

Others have found that people are less likely to be heavy and frequent drinkers if social drinking at work is frowned upon.

According to the International Labour Organization, three to five per cent of the average workforce are alcohol dependent, and up to 25 per cent drink heavily enough to be at risk of dependence.

While the days of liquid lunches may be over, drinking can still be very much the norm in the workplace.

"We really thought the myth that people aren't drinking at work is true," says Benjamin Amick, scientific director of the Institute for Work and Health in Toronto.

"Everybody feels drinking in the workplace was a problem that was solved in the late '80s and early '90s. But it was genuinely not based on any scientific evidence, but on public perception."

Toby Levinson, of Bellwood Health Services, an addiction treatment centre in Toronto, helps employers recognize and document signs and symptoms of a problem: a drop in performance and "a great deal of absenteeism"; employees who

call in sick on Monday, leave work early Friday or don't come back after lunch; mood changes; more mistakes; and missed meetings.

"It becomes even more problematic when one of the executives has the problem and his (or her) colleagues don't know how to handle it," says Mr. Levinson, who does intervention training.

Mr. Amick co-authored a study based on surveys of more than 5,000 employers in 16 Fortune 500 companies.

Around one in five was classified as a heavy drinker, meaning five or more drinks in one day in the past month for men; for women the cutoff point is four or more.

Eleven per cent of workers were considered to have been drinking at work -- meaning, at some point in the past 30 days, they had consumed booze two hours before going to work, during lunch or a work break, while working or at social events at work.

Overall, 80 per cent of Canadians drink alcohol. "And I think that a lot of the drinking that goes on is different forms of social drinking," says Edward Stringham, associate professor of economics at San Jose State University.

"That drinking can take place among family and friends. And it can also take place among co-workers."

The Old Testament says wine leads to poverty, yet Mr. Stringham and co-author Bethany Peters, relying on data from 8,000 people, concluded drinking can enhance a person's social capital.

Their "No Booze? You Lose" study, funded by the U.S. libertarian research organization, Reason Foundation, found both men and women who drink gain an earning bonus of 10 to 14 per cent over abstainers. Men who go to bars at least once per month earn an extra seven per cent on top of the 10 per cent drinkers' premium.

The authors hypothesize that drinking builds social networks, and that people who have bigger social networks "are going to be more likely to do well at work," reports Mr. Stringham, an adjunct scholar with the Reason Foundation.

They're more likely to hear of a better job, and "they're more likely to interact better in jobs where knowing lots of people matters."

But there also exists what's known as an "inverse U", meaning that while you earn more money if you drink, drink too much and earnings go down.

Mr. Stringham's co-author is about to publish a study of military officers that found that cutoff point is 21 to 38 drinks per week.

"If you drink more than that, you're going to earn less than a non-drinker," Stringham says.

Mr. Amick, of the Institute for Work and Health, and his co-authors found that employees at companies that most discouraged social drinking were 45 per cent less likely to be heavy drinkers than those in workplaces with more liberal attitudes to drinking.

And, there was no seasonal effect on workplace drinking culture. Whether

Christmas, Thanksgiving, the Fourth of July, or Labour Day, "we didn't find that it mattered," Amick says. "It tells us that norms are very powerful and they affect drinking behaviours throughout the year."

And people who don't adhere to the norm can suffer the consequences. "You get taken out of the loop, people don't see you as part of the team, they don't see you as a team player," Mr. Amick says.

"My advice: If you don't want to drink, don't drink. Order a non-alcoholic beverage. You can still hang out. But at some point you shouldn't be pressured."

"There are lots of good reasons why people don't drink."

How to Get Help

If you need emergency help, go to your local emergency department or call 911.

Distress or crisis phone lines are open 24 hours a day if you need to talk to someone.

For a list of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in Canada, go to www.aacanada.com

For a list of Al-Anon/Alateen meetings for anyone whose life has been affected by someone else's drinking, go to www.al-anon.alateen.org. You can also call 1-888-4AL-ANON (1-888-425-2666) Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. eastern standard time. To find local meetings, check the white pages of your phone book under Al-Anon.

Blind Drunk: Our Bond With Booze

A five-day special report on Canadians' growing affair with alcohol.

Monday: People are drinking more frequently, and more heavily. And as our bond with booze grows, so too will hospital stays for alcohol-related violence, road trauma, and drinking-related illnesses.

Yesterday: Women and alcohol -- Experts say more women appear to be drinking more, and drinking heavily.

Today: Drinking on the job -- The workplace can invite a lot of drinking, and for a growing number of Canadians, going for a drink after work means just warming up.

Tomorrow: Addiction treatment -- Scientists have begun to study why Alcoholics Anonymous works, why it doesn't and whether all problem drinkers need to accept that they can never drink again.

Friday: Have the health benefits of drinking been oversold?