



The Perils of drinking when working from home

The scope of the issue

I would like to highlight a particular outcome of the pandemic with individual and national consequences, which is increased alcohol consumption and problem drinking, specifically that due to increased home working.

At a national level, 167,000 working years were lost per year to drinking before the increased home working due to the virus. 21% extra people drank more when in lockdown and subsequently. The working population are included in this and so there has been an associated drop in national productivity in direct proportion to the number of hours lost and it should therefore be a concern for all of us.

Dangers of WFH

Why is WFH so dangerous for some? Compared to actually being in the office people have greater freedom to choose when they interact with colleagues, managers and customers. They can fit drinking around these interactions. I'm afraid this is the realpolitik of the situation. As a problem drinker, I took the chance when it was offered. It's true that the increased use of web conferencing sets limits on the state you can be in when taking part, but you can spend unseen time 'freshening up' with copious black coffee for example before the meeting starts. The problem drinker is usually expert in the art of damage limitation. False meetings can be put in the online diary so you're shown as being busy. The office communicator allows the setting of personal status to 'away' or 'do not disturb' to avoid being caught out.

The gaps in time when working at the office can be filled by chatting to colleagues while making a cup of tea for example. The necessary and natural disciplines in time management that the office environment imparts are missing during home working. Time can weigh heavily – a factor that often leads to drinking. Triggers that would lead a person to have a drink are more likely to be pulled. For many, work is work and home is sacrosanct home. For them it's difficult to reconcile doing the traditional activity of the former in the comfort

of the latter. Even for those who would never drink during actual working hours the lack of the commute home means the 'allowed' period in which to drink is brought forward to 17:01.

Drinking while working from home causes guilt fuelled anxiety meaning productivity inevitably reduces in a remorselessly downward spiral as physical health also suffers. There were times during the brooding wee hours in bed where I could barely raise myself from the swirling depths as the thoughts of work piling up consumed me. The extra drinking can be during working hours or in the evening - in the knowledge that you have extra time in the morning, sans commute, to deal with the hangover. There will obviously be less calling in sick – because there are measures a person can take to paper over the cracks of a working from home day in which drink is taken, stopping the need of a thrown sickie showing on their record. So the national rates of S&A have actually markedly reduced.

It goes without saying that drinking while home working vastly increases the risk of a misconduct rap. With Teams, Zoom and other systems people can see what's behind you – I was caught out more than once with glasses, cans and bottles in the camera eye's peripheral vision. There's also a real danger stemming from what might be called *booze induced courage*, for example trying to be funny on e-mails or calls as inhibitions wane and inadvertently causing offence of one kind or another. My faux pas (or should I say faux pack pas) of this kind were legion. Once when I had forgotten to turn off the laptop's camera on a Zoom call with the international team, a huge quaff was visible in four continents! Taking large alternate amounts of the diuretics lager and black coffee also made me urinate like a drayhorse and colleagues would often wonder why I had to keep excusing myself during teleconferences!

Managers and colleagues will pick up signs that something's not quite right with you such as:

- Your office communicator is set to busy or away a lot – even when your diary is showing clear on the Scheduling Assistant.
- You have a lot of problems with reception or your laptop's camera causing it to have to be switched off very often during meetings.
- Huge swathes of time blocked out as 'my time' or 'thinking time'. This is legitimised in many companies and applications even automatically fill in free time with this.
- Repeatedly cancelling meetings at short notice.

- Declining ad hoc meetings scheduled on the same the day.
- Bringing meetings forward in the day.
- Numerous occurrences of personal, family or pet illness at short notice.
- In meetings uncharacteristic bravado, also known as *flapping gob syndrome*.
- Quietness in meetings when a person really should be answering.
- Searching for a phrase and incoherent arguments semi articulated which close off with 'so .. erm..you know..yeah!' or some such.
- God forbid – forgotten about evidence picked up by Teams or Zoom etc. I was caught out more than once with glasses, cans and bottles in the camera eye's peripheral vision. Once when I had forgotten to turn off the laptop's camera on a Zoom call with the international team, a huge quaff from my pint pot was visible in four continents! I explained the Boddingtons away as Dr Pepper for its brownness (although the head was still there). Taking large alternate amounts of the diuretics beer and black coffee also made me urinate like a drayhorse and colleagues would often wonder why I had to keep excusing myself during teleconferences.

Increased drinking due to working from home must be faced head on because WFH will be more prevalent even after Covid, not least because the quality of web conferencing has been much improved during it.

What can you do if you're a manager?

It's your job to bring out your team members' motivation for work. It's very difficult, however, for individual supervisors and managers to identify and deal with colleagues who almost definitely have a problem with stress and/or drinking while WFH whose performance is being demonstrably compromised. Even if they suspect there's a problem it will most often be sidestepped completely or identified as a 'performance issue' come review time. HR depts must recognise this. A process of steps to support managers must be made available so they can sensitively work with colleagues affected and suggest options that recognise people are different in what they respond to. For example, with problem drinking group therapy works well with some but others absolutely don't want this and need advice on how to fix their problem themselves. The colleague who drinks so wants to be the best they can be in their role, and we must be true to those who are suffering because of the increased WFH we've created.