

## Research Article

# Drug and Alcohol Abuse in the Workplace; A Survey of Managers' Awareness of the Problem

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**Summary.** A questionnaire was sent to managers of several companies. The aim was to collect data on the use of alcohol and illicit drugs at work. Occasional or experimental drug use was considered unacceptable and harmful by the great majority (88% and 86%). A very small proportion of respondents took drugs or drank alcohol heavily at work (1.1% and 1.5%). A significant number of managers (21.4%) were aware of workers who drank alcohol at work, and to a lesser extent, of workers taking drugs at work (4%). A considerable proportion of respondents reported that alcohol consumption was allowed at work (18.4%) and this was related to the type of employing industry. Measures must be taken to educate employers and workers about the possible harmful consequences of alcohol and drug use at work.

**Keywords:** drugs, alcohol, Malta, work, workplace, managers, employees

The negative effects which alcohol and drug abuse have on workers' health and on their efficiency in the workplace are well documented. In Malta, whilst anecdotal evidence exists that persons under the influence of drugs or alcohol have caused a number of accidents and near-misses in workplaces, data regarding their prevalence in industry is conspicuous by its absence.

This paper presents the results obtained from part of a survey by questionnaire which dealt with attitudes toward occasional drug use, prevalence of current and past drug use amongst responders, knowledge of any workers in the company taking drugs at and off work, the level of alcohol consumed by managers, knowledge of any workers drinking alcohol at work or drinking alcohol heavily off work and sale of alcohol at work.

### Method

A survey by questionnaire was conducted in April and May 1996 to investigate managerial attitudes towards drug and alcohol use in the Maltese workplace. 250 companies were randomly chosen from the 666 companies included in the METCO publication "Made in Malta - 1996 - Manufacturers and Exporters". The activities of these companies were various and included the manufacture of textiles, furniture, metal, machinery, as well as printing, paper, rubber, chemical, transport, construction, food and beverage industries and business services. The persons occupying managerial grades in the companies whose general manager showed interest in taking part were sent the questionnaire. In view of the fact that some of the information being requested was personal and involved an admission of indulging in an illegal activity, the questionnaire was designed so as to guarantee the respondents' anonymity. An attempt was made to minimise the number of non-responders by

sending a second letter addressed to all participants urging them to return any unsent questionnaires.

Heavy alcohol drinking was defined as the consumption of more than an average of 3 units of alcohol per day, whilst drug use was limited to the use of substances of abuse. Table 1 shows the format of 2 of the questions in the survey.

	Yes	No	Uncertain
Do you know of any workers in your company who take drugs at work?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you know of any workers in your company who take drugs when off work?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
What is your average daily unit* intake of alcohol?	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>
* 1 unit of alcohol is equivalent to 1 bottle of beer, or 1 glass of wine or 1 tot of spirits.	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	>3 <input type="checkbox"/>	

Table 1 Format of questionnaire

Results were analysed using BMDP statistical software. Significance was accepted at  $p < 0.05$ .

### Results

Of the 250 general managers invited to participate in this survey, 190 (76%) agreed to take part and sent details of their managerial staff to be included in this study. A total of 764 managers were sent a copy of the questionnaire, and responses were obtained from 457 of them giving a final response rate of 59.8%.

The majority of participants consisted of male managers

(89.5%). The age of the respondents was normally distributed, with about 15% and 17% in the younger and older age groups, respectively, and about 34% in each of the two middle age groups. The distribution of participants by company size appears in Fig. 1.

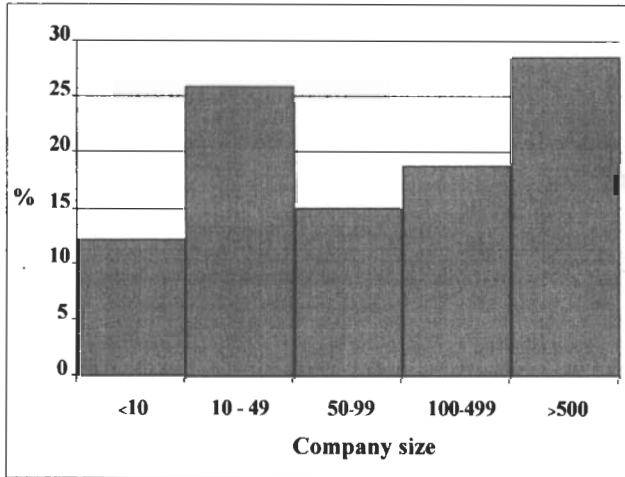


Fig 1. Distribution of managers and size of employing company (n=457)

The majority of managers surveyed considered occasional/experimental drug use to be unacceptable (88%) and harmful (86%).

There was a positive association between the perception that occasional drug use is unacceptable and that it has lasting effects ( $p < 0.01$ ) and also with it being harmful ( $p < 0.001$ ). Acceptability of drug use was related to the age of responders, the largest proportion of those considering it acceptable being in the youngest age group with the proportion decreasing progressively with age ( $p < 0.001$ ) (Fig. 2).

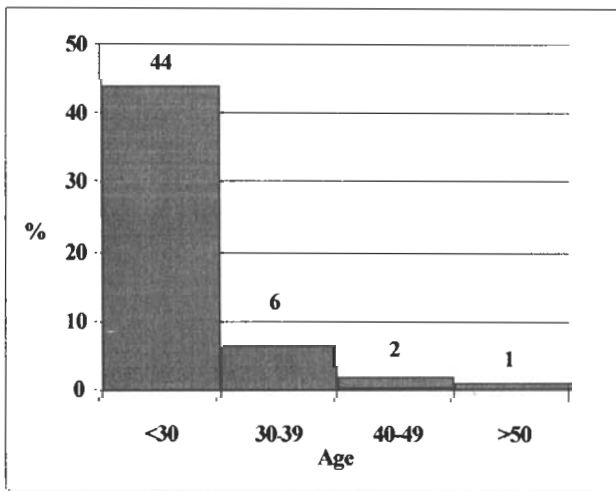


Fig 2. Acceptability of occasional or experimental drug use

Whilst there was a positive association between managers having a past history of drug use and the perception that occasional or experimental drug use is acceptable ( $p < 0.001$ ), a past history was negatively correlated with the perception of it being harmful ( $p < 0.01$ ).

8.5% of managers returning the questionnaire claimed

that they had taken drugs in the past, whilst 1% stated that they were currently taking drugs.

There was a significant difference in the age groups of respondents claiming past drug use ( $p < 0.001$ ) (Fig. 3), with the largest proportion being under 40 years of age. A past history of drug use was significantly associated with an increased knowledge of other persons taking drugs at work ( $p < 0.02$ ) and also with an increased knowledge of persons using drugs off work ( $p < 0.001$ ).

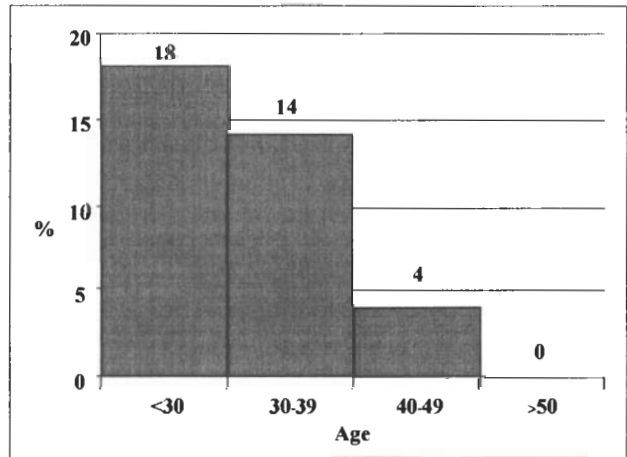


Fig 3. Past drug users and age group

About 5% of managers claimed that they were aware of workers within their company who took drugs at work, whilst this figure rose to 13.6% for workers who took drugs away from work (Fig 4).

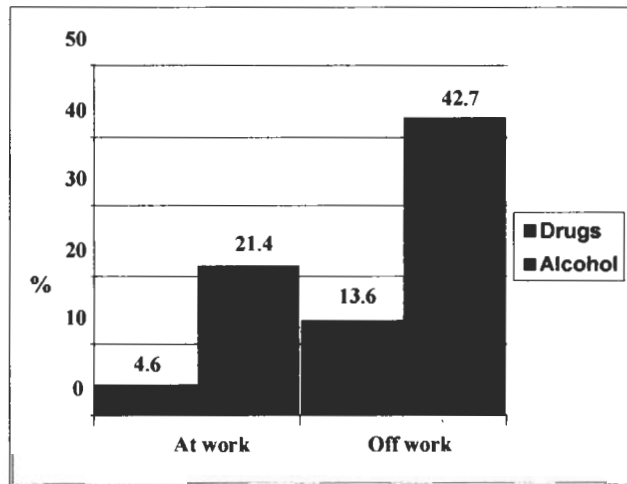


Fig 4. Knowledge of workers taking drugs and alcohol (n=457)

It could not be ascertained whether workers known to use drugs or drink alcohol at work also figured in the proportion of those known to use drugs or drink alcohol heavily off work. Managers aware of workers taking alcohol at work were more likely to be aware of workers drinking alcohol heavily off work, ( $p < 0.001$ ), as well as workers who took drugs at work ( $p < 0.01$ ).

The proportion of managers aware of workers taking drugs at work was significantly associated with an increased awareness of drug-taking off work

( $p < 0.001$ ), and with company size ( $p < 0.001$ ), with managers of companies employing over 100 workers reporting an increased awareness of such workers (Fig 5). The amount of alcohol consumed by the respondents is shown in Fig 6.

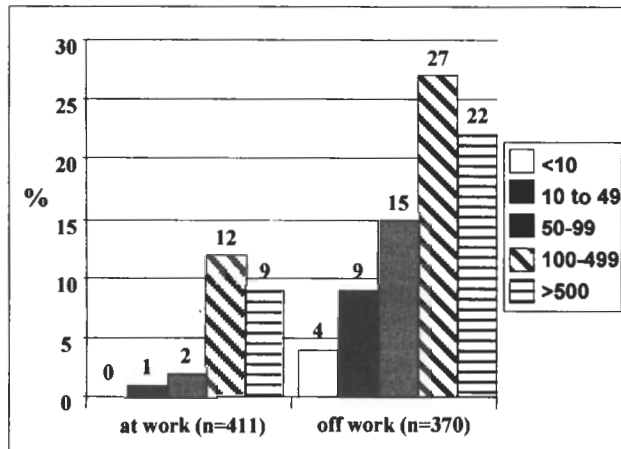


Fig. 5. Managers' awareness of workers taking alcohol. (Categories represent size of establishment in manpower)

Managers' awareness of workers taking alcohol both at and off work was significantly related to the company size ( $p < 0.001$  in both cases) (Fig 7), and with type of industry ( $p < 0.001$  and  $p < 0.01$  respectively) (Table 2).

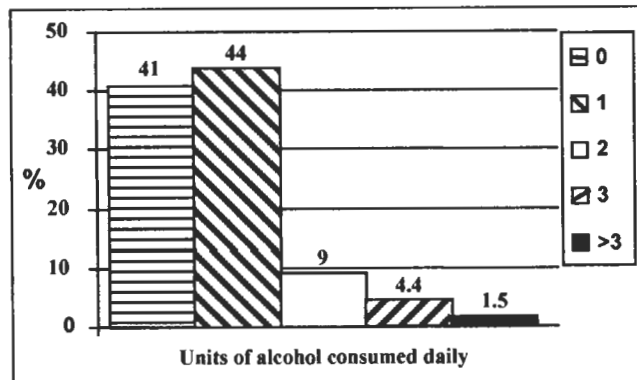


Fig 6. Alcohol consumption by respondents (n=457)

9.2% (42) of the managers who said that they had a canteen facility at their workplace admitted that alcoholic beverages were sold from these facilities. However, a total of 64 respondents (18.4%) said that alcohol consumption was permitted at their workplace.

Sale of alcohol at work was associated with an increased likelihood of allowing alcohol to be consumed at work ( $p < 0.001$ ), and with company size ( $p < 0.05$ ). Company size was also significantly correlated with the practice of allowing alcohol consumption at work ( $p < 0.05$ ), medium sized and large companies being twice more likely to allow this to occur (Fig 8). The type of respondents' employing industry was significantly related to the presence of a canteen facility, the sale of alcoholic beverages, and the practice of allowing alcohol consumption at the place of work ( $p < 0.001$  in all cases) (Table 3).

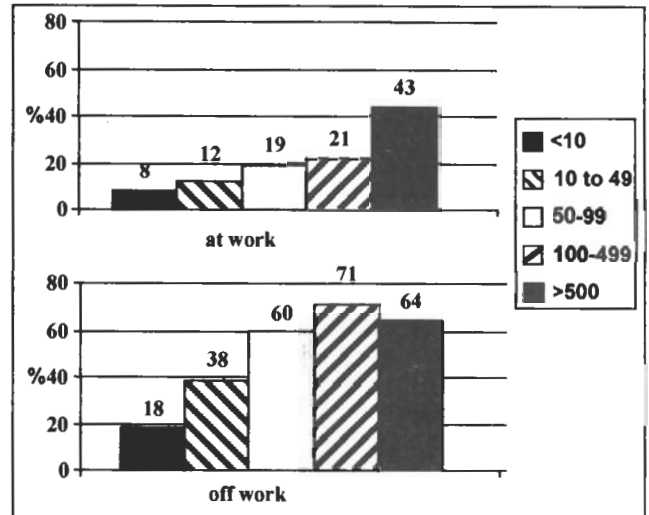


Fig 7. Knowledge of workers taking alcohol at and off work in different sized companies

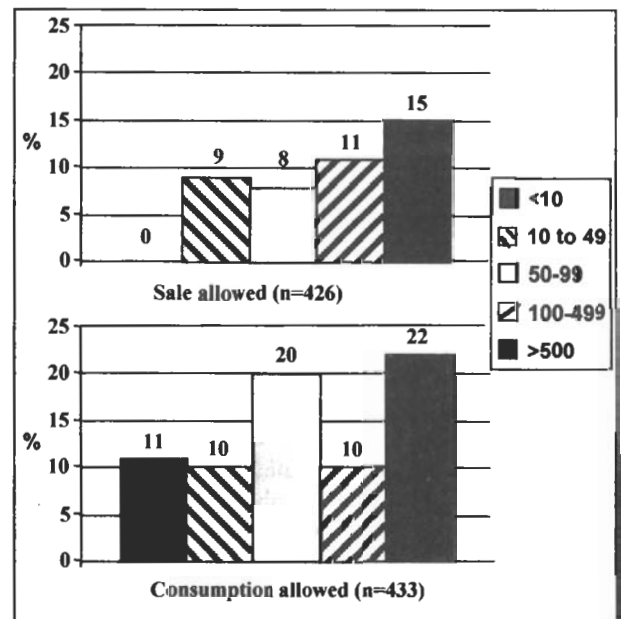


Fig 8. Sale of alcohol and alcohol consumption at work in different sized companies

Type of employing industry	Knowledge of workers	
	taking alcohol at work	drinking alcohol heavily off work
Rubber & Plastics	53	56
Transport equipment	55	65
Beverage	66	62
Metal products	30	48
Community & Business services	14	5

Table 2. Managers' awareness of workers taking alcohol at and off work in different industries (% of managers in each industry).

**Discussion**

Malta, like any other country, may have a problem of increasing magnitude caused by drugs and alcohol use. Whilst media attention focuses on the problems caused by illicit drug use, particularly since there are indications that

Type of employing industry	Canteen facility	Sale of alcoholic beverages	Alcohol consumption allowed
Rubber & Plastics	90	0	0
Transport equipment	56	19	5
Beverage	59	34	60
Metal products	39	12	3
Community & Business services	11	0	37

Table 3. Proportion of managers (% in type of industry) reporting the presence of a canteen facility, sale of alcoholic beverages, and permitted alcohol consumption at the place of work.

this is on the increase in Malta, (as evidenced by the number of drug related arraignments in Court, persons referred to detoxification and rehabilitation centres and drug related fatalities), problems related to alcohol are not given as much prominence.

The effects of both alcohol and drug use on the work and the worker have been extensively researched. These include poor job performance, absenteeism, increased absence due to sickness (Atwell, 1995; Bertera, 1991), increased probability of having an occupational accident and injury (Gutierrez-Fisac, 1992), reduced productivity, wasted training, problems arising from disciplinary issues, late arrival at and early departures from work, long breaks, aggression (Bassett P, 1988), irregular patterns of work and difficulty in concentration and deteriorating appearance (Terrell, 1988), unexplained disappearances, personality changes, disinterest in work, and loss of time for medical treatment, damage to equipment and materials, higher insurance rates, sharp increase in crime especially theft on the premises (Baldwin, 1975). In fact, alcohol consumption on its own is also considered to be a safety hazard (Moll-Van-Charante, 1990; Smith, 1988). Harig, (1989) reported that alcoholics often encounter difficulty in facing their problems due to denial, a situation which is often compounded by co-workers or supervisors who ignore or excuse certain behavioural patterns, thus unwittingly enabling such workers to continue these activities which may constitute a risk both to themselves and to others.

This study showed that whilst the observed prevalence of current drug use amongst respondents was low (1.1%), the number of managers admitting to a past history of drug use (8.5%) was rather high. As was to be expected, the prevalence of managers who stated that they consumed alcohol was much higher than that for drug use but the proportion of heavy alcohol users was low and very similar to those admitting to drug use (1.1% vs. 1.5%). Managers knew of more workers taking alcohol rather than drugs at work (21.4% vs. 4.6%). This could be due either to the fact that alcohol use is carried out in a more overt manner, particularly since its use is not illegal and is culturally acceptable, or because alcohol use is more common than drug use at work, or for both reasons. The fact that a significant number of managers are aware of workers who use either drugs or alcohol at work is a cause for concern since no initiatives are being taken to curb these highly dangerous practices at the workplace.

The problem of alcohol consumption at work will obviously be much more difficult to solve in those workplaces where the sale of alcohol is allowed, and 14% of participants claimed that alcohol consumption at work was allowed. This is indeed worrying in view of the potential dangers associated with alcohol consumption.

Another finding which is a cause for concern is that a high proportion of managers are aware of workers drinking heavily or taking drugs away from work (43.6% vs. 21.4%). The substance taken may still be present in sufficient amounts by the time a worker returns to work, to cause undesired effects (Wolkenberg, 1975). Various studies have shown that between 9% and 16% of fatalities at work have detectable blood alcohol levels (Alleyne, 1991; Sniezek, 1989). Whilst acute alcohol intoxication is responsible for only a small proportion of fatalities and serious injuries at the workplace, it does account for a large proportion of minor and damage-only accidents (Ide, 1995).

It is of interest to note that managers from small companies do not perceive drug use to be as significant a problem as their colleagues from larger companies. The latter were also more aware of drug and alcohol use at and off work. Although there may be a certain degree of overconfidence in these perceptions, particularly as regards the identification of the occasional user, it is highly unlikely that a person showing overt manifestations of dependence will not be noted by a manager in a very small enterprise.

This study had some limitations in that information about the type, amount, and duration of previous drug use, was not surveyed in order to keep the questionnaire as concise as possible. Drugs prescribed as medication may also have undesirable effects which also influence performance at work, irrespective of whether they are taken as prescribed or misused. This aspect was not looked into. Another limitation is that larger companies may have a larger complement of managers, which could have resulted in overrepresentation of a particular sector.

It is to be noted that the majority of past drug users amongst respondents was in the lower age groups (<40 years), which can be partly attributed to the increasing availability of drugs in Malta over the last 20 years. Younger managers were also more tolerant towards occasional drug use although, in general, respondents showed a low tolerance towards occasional or experimental drug use.

Not surprisingly, past exposure to drugs affected the individual manager's outlook on drug use. Individuals in this subgroup were found to be more tolerant to occasional drug use and less likely to consider drug use as having deleterious effects. Whilst various factors may affect an individual's decision to stop taking drugs, the data obtained suggests that there is a strong need to actively counter any misconceptions that these individuals have about drug use. These findings might also indicate a certain readiness to resume drug use under the right

conditions.

A number of differences were noted in the responses obtained from managers coming from different types of industry. However, in view of the fact that certain types of industry remained underrepresented in this survey, and due to problems with regards to statistical analysis, it was decided to limit analysis to those companies represented by more than 20 managers. A tolerant outlook towards alcohol use at work was particularly evident in the attitudes shown by managers employed in the beverages industry and they were also the most likely to be aware of workers actually taking alcohol at work. It is also interesting to note that managers from the transport equipment industry were most likely to know of workers who consumed alcohol at and off work, and also of workers taking drugs off work. This correlates with the fact that this industry had the second largest proportion of managers reporting the sale of alcohol at work. The results obtained show that in several instances there is an association between the type of industry and managerial attitudes/perceptions with regard to drug and alcohol use. Whilst these attitudes may be the result of an actual difference in prevalence of these problems in workplaces, or of different conditions of work in different types of industry, (such as high temperatures, monotonous or repetitive work), they may also reflect reduced awareness of the effects of drug and alcohol use.

This study indicates that a substantial number of those surveyed drink alcohol at work or know of workers who do so. Alcohol consumption at work is a relatively common phenomenon in the Maltese workplace and is also more widespread than drug use. Certain types of employment were shown to be associated with increased tolerance to alcohol use at work, and this will obviously indirectly encourage such a practice. Whilst legislation banning the sale and use of alcohol in the workplace is needed, this will not have the desired effect unless efforts are made to educate more extensively, from an early age, our society as a whole, and persons at work in particular, about the personal and sociological effects of drug and alcohol consumption in general. Industry and workers' representatives, possibly helped by government, need to increase efforts to adopt and commit themselves to policies aimed at introducing and implementing measures to designate workplaces as alcohol- and drug-free areas. Adequate resources need to be channelled in ongoing education campaigns and preventive programmes for managers and workers about the effects of substance abuse, particularly in companies which have a higher prevalence of this problem and in designing and introducing appropriate initiatives to attempt to control this practice. Such initiatives should attempt to offer not only rehabilitation services but also other forms of support to the affected individual and his family, such as assurances regarding job security whilst undergoing rehabilitation. These measures will serve to

heighten managers' and workers' awareness of the problem thereby facilitating prevention. They will also help to identify workers already suffering from these problems and offer them counselling or rehabilitation, thus facilitating self-referral of the substance abuser to supportive services.

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