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Many Happy Hours

Drinking on the Job Still a Problem, But Not As Prevalent

By [Eric Pera](#)

THE LEDGER

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There's plenty of evidence to suggest that drinking on the job, or at least while on the clock, hasn't disappeared entirely.



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But it has abated to the degree that many restaurants and bars are seeing fewer patrons knocking back martinis, or anything stronger than a Diet Coke for that matter, at lunch.

"It's just not a part of business culture anymore," said Bruce Dunbar, general manager of The Terrace Hotel in Lakeland. "We get people who are having a social lunch that might have a glass of wine, but business people entertaining clients? I can't remember the last time I saw it."

It can be jarring to view episodes of television's "Mad Men," depicting the denizens of Madison Avenue during the 1960s and their proclivity for high-octane fortification.

We're not exactly a nation of teetotalers, but the one, two or even three-martini power lunch has lost its luster in an age where corporate intolerance has given rise to strict alcohol policies, not to mention greater awareness of health and safety risks.

Still, alcohol use among American workers continues to plague the workforce, according to several studies conducted in recent years. The extent to which current economic pressures are impacting drinking on the job remains mostly speculative.

It could be that some people just aren't drinking openly as much. And, research suggests that hangovers are a big factor in worker performance.

In a 2000 survey of seven Fortune 500 companies, researchers at Harvard School of Public Health debunked a myth that work performance suffers only among employees who drink on the job. In fact, people who drink heavily the night before are just as likely to perform poorly at the office.

Many bartenders will tell you that lunch-time business isn't what it once was, but workers still sneak in a beer or two while on the job.

"We get people coming here and buying a sixpack and putting them in their briefcase, apparently they're taking it back to the office," said Todd MacDonald, who works the counter at the Cask & Barrel in downtown Lakeland, a wine and beer bar licensed for package sales. "Mostly it seems older people in their 50s and 60s come in and have a glass of wine and go back to work."

People do hit the bars more often during times of stress, some researchers say, but the pressure to drink while on company time is

more about the company you keep and the social norms of the workplace.

"Wall Street has a heavy drinking culture, which justifies drinking as a mechanism for managing stress," said Bill Sonnenstuhl, director of the Smithers Institute for Alcohol and Related Workplace Problems at Cornell University. "Other sectors, however, may encourage exercise as a more appropriate coping mechanism."

The severity of the stress triggers also play a role in the matter. In the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in New York City, for instance, many urban workers chose bars over Nautilus gyms to work out their anxieties.

"There are studies that people living 500 miles from downtown (New York following the attacks) were going to the bars," said Sonnenstuhl, author of the book, "Working Sober." "It's our legal drug and people use it in that way to relieve stress. But those few extra drinks aren't necessarily going to lead to problematic behavior."

A seminal study by the University at Buffalo's Research Institute on Addictions, found that workplace alcohol use and impairment affects more than 19 million workers, or roughly 15 percent of the workforce.

Released in 2006, the study, funded by the National Institute on

Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, found that men are more apt to drink on the job than women, and younger, single men more so than their older, married counterparts.

Among the occupations with the highest rates of workplace alcohol use cited in the university study: management, sales, arts/entertainment/sports/media, food preparation and serving and, for some odd reason, grounds maintenance.

But you can add construction workers to the mix.

A spate of construction-related deaths in New York City inspired an undercover investigation this past summer by the city's CBS television affiliate, Channel 2. The station's clandestine cameras showed workers from a high-rise condominium project on the city's West Side pounding beers at a local lunch counter.

The video, which can be viewed at www.wcbstv.com/investigates, is a revealing look at an age-old problem that not only affects public safety but takes a significant toll on worker productivity.

The cost to productivity was nearly \$185 billion in 1998, the most recent estimate by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse. But the number also factors in the potential cost to the entire economy given mortality rates for excessive drinkers, said Ann Bradley, spokeswoman for the Institute.

"It's more than a cost to companies, it's a cost to the economy because the potential for lost work is taken into consideration," she said.

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This story appeared in print on page B6

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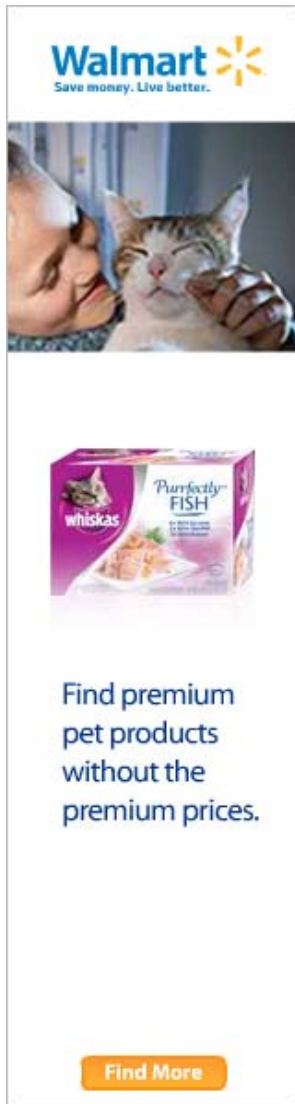
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