

Tobacco Use High in Construction, Employers Can Help

By Sam Pearson
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More than 35 percent of construction workers use tobacco products, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.
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- *Laborers' tobacco use is well above U.S. average*
- *Temporary jobs, stress can contribute to habit*

Laborers digging trenches, pouring concrete, or laying brick atop a scaffold must grapple with a higher risk of injury, not to mention often precarious employment arrangements. That's one reason they're more likely to light up than workers in other industries, a trend construction employers often do little to address.

The high tobacco use comes as the industry is experiencing an employment boom. Battered during the Great Recession, construction is now expected to see more than 790,000 new jobs by 2024, the Bureau of Labor Statistics projects.

More than 35 percent of workers in the industry use tobacco products, one of the highest rates among industries studied by researchers at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. That compares with 18.1 percent of U.S. working adults in 2012.

When companies do turn their attention to helping employees get off cigarettes, their efforts can pay off. One company that feeds the construction industry, cement producer CEMEX USA, banned smoking at work three years ago and also saw its employees' tobacco use in general drop, CEMEX USA said. The company has 9,000 employees.

Workers' smoking comes at a cost to their employers. Employers may face more than \$5,800 in added costs to employ a smoker compared with a worker who has never smoked, according to a 2013 study by researchers at Ohio State University. The higher costs stem from excess absenteeism, reduced productivity, smoke breaks, and higher health-care costs, they said.

Bans, offering counseling to employees to help them quit, covering smoking cessation medications, and providing comprehensive health insurance coverage so employees can access medical services all help, studies have found.

CEMEX USA's employee smoking rate declined from over 14 percent to less than 10 percent since implementing its smoke-free policy, Susie Mejia, vice president for human resources, compensation, and benefits at the Houston-based company, told Bloomberg Law. The policy augmented a wellness program in place for about 10 years, she said.

Under the smoke-free policy, workers at the company's 11 cement plants and dozens of terminals, quarries, and ready-mix plants are banned from smoking on the property, including in their personal vehicles. While the policy at first prompted some skepticism, management promoted the changes by providing examples and testimonials of how it could benefit employees, Mejia said.

“For us, it’s important that they are healthy and that they’re safe at the work location,” she said.

Health promotion messages work best when delivered in multiple forms, Shelley MacAllister, a senior product manager at the American Cancer Society in Austin, Texas, told Bloomberg Law. The group worked with a construction company to send tailored messages in employees’ native languages to their homes encouraging tobacco cessation. This proved more effective because it gave workers’ families a chance to get involved, MacAllister said.

Factors That Boost Tobacco Use

Smoking rates reflect more than just personal choices. Rather, who is more likely to smoke is a function of social class and status, including in the workplace, Knut Ringen, a Seattle-based consultant and former executive director of the Laborers’ Health and Safety Fund, told Bloomberg Law.

Construction jobs’ temporary nature and the associated employment instability contribute to the health challenges, Girija Syamlal, an epidemiologist in NIOSH’s respiratory health division in Morgantown, W.Va., told Bloomberg Law.

Temporary workers; employees at companies with fewer than 50 workers; and those reporting work-life imbalance, job insecurity, unsafe workplaces, demanding conditions, and a lack of support from bosses were more likely to smoke, Syamlal and other researchers found in a study published last month in the American Journal of Industrial Medicine.

These types of employers may not value promoting healthy behaviors for their employees, Chris Trahan Cain, executive director of the Center for Construction Research and Training in Silver Spring, Md., told Bloomberg Law in an email.

Helping Workers Who Need It

Upwards of 76 percent of construction workers said their workplace offered no health promotion activities, NIOSH researchers found. And many

construction workers lack health insurance benefits at all, preventing them from accessing services that could help them quit smoking.

In terms of Americans as a whole, decades of work by public health researchers and government agencies to encourage Americans not to smoke paid off.

“We’ve made considerable progress in terms of reducing cigarette smoking in this country,” Brian King, deputy director for research translation at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Office on Smoking and Health in Atlanta, told Bloomberg Law. “It’s been a comprehensive public health accomplishment over many decades, but disparities persist, and if we want to get down to zero it’s going to be critically important to address the populations with the greatest burdens of exposure.”

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