

Cannabis Legalization: What we've learned

Preparing for legalization has been a real challenge for HR professionals and leaders. It's a big deal. As only the second country in the world, and the first G7 country, to federally legalize marijuana for recreational use Canada really is blazing new trails. Over the last six months, People First HR has done dozens of presentations and workshops and webinars. To mark hitting the legalization 'milestone' we wanted to share some of the things we've learned on this journey to 'Be Ready' for legal cannabis that we think are going to be important moving forward.

Being legalization-ready matters

The vast majority of the organizations we've worked with don't have a drug and alcohol policy in place (unless they are in a safety-sensitive industry) because there is no legal requirement to do so. There are components, such as ensuring employee safety, that are required within other legislation but there is no employment standard requiring a drug and alcohol policy. In our experience, most organizations have operated with a sort of "as it happens" approach....however there's risk in continuing to manage without policy. Having policy ensures that people are aware of the relationship between safety and impairment, and it provides a framework for managing it.

However, when we think about the workplace impact of cannabis legalization- it's not simply about safety and impairment. **Legalization is a massive shift in social policy - and people's personal opinions (pro or con) about using cannabis often factor into the conversations we have.**

Launching (or re-launching) a drug and alcohol policy starts a conversation in an organization, and provides opportunity to educate managers and staff. By starting this conversation we can also help ensure that people within our organizations are not discriminating against, or making judgements about, colleagues (or future colleagues) who may use cannabis legally.

Educate! (Even when it's uncomfortable...)

One of the things we've tried to do in our work around cannabis is to begin sessions with lots of information about the forms and effects of cannabis and provide a forum for people to ask all those 'silly' questions. As it's been illegal, there are a lot of common-sense type things that people simply don't know yet, as many people have no personal experience with using it. Among other things, employers should know:

- The forms cannabis comes in so they can recognize them in the workplace
- The difference between THC and CBD products, and which causes impairment
- Their responsibilities in managing accommodation for medical cannabis users.

Education is vital for increasing the confidence level of managers (including HR folks) in preparing to have conversations with employees about impairment, and for recognizing impairment. Organizations need to make sure that the people that are going to be advising others know what they're talking about, and that the information they're providing is factual.

A funny thing happens when you talk to people about cannabis. People often preface their sentence when talking about cannabis by saying "Not that I would know...." or "I don't use but..." and we're here to recommend that there's no shame in knowing the answers (even if you don't use cannabis). We visited a cannabis retailer in Winnipeg recently in order to understand the process of selecting product and see if they could answer a question we kept hearing in our sessions: *If they're going to use, how do people use cannabis wisely to ensure they're not impaired the next morning?* We already know that there are a lot of variables to cannabis impairment, and consuming in moderation is no guarantee that you won't be impaired the next day. However, there are steps that people can take to help ensure they're managing impairment including:

- Selecting product with lower THC levels, and product that has a balance of THC and CBD (as CBD is understood to balance some of the effects of THC)
- Choosing the method of ingestion to control quantity - much like choosing a cocktail with 1oz of alcohol vs. one with 3oz, people can choose a 'single-serving' (for example via a cannabis 'one-hitter')

This should not be taken as 'how-to-not-be-messed-up-at-work-advice'- rather it's an example of the kind of information we could only get by stepping out of our comfort zone to get more information. Visiting the retailer was a great experience, because we discovered that even after all our research, there was still a lot we didn't know (and now, if we see a 'one-hitter' in the workplace we'll know what it is!)

Medical Cannabis - the next frontier?

If you don't have employees who are using medical cannabis already, it's likely they soon will be (or that they're not telling you yet). Managing chronic pain is something that many of us will face, especially as we age. For workers with a disability, cannabis can provide a hopeful alternative to suffering or opiate use. As stigma is reduced around cannabis usage, and as the research into, and availability of, medical products increases so will medical cannabis prescriptions. Several of the largest benefits providers are already covering medical cannabis and more plans and providers are looking at inclusion. Some of the positives to inclusion in benefits plans include:

- Coordination of prescriptions and patient treatments
- Cost-effective treatment for some conditions
- Possible reduction in opioid prescriptions, and accordingly, opioid abuse

However for employers, this brings a new challenge. For example, some CBD products which may be prescribed for pain-management are non-impairing as CBD is not psychoactive, however some primarily CBD products will also contain THC, and would cause impairment. Employers need to be ready to manage these kinds of questions and know what they can, and can't ask employees, when accommodating the disability. And, more than ever, they'll need that drug & alcohol policy to help communicate expectations.

In closing, it's been a fascinating journey preparing for legalization with our clients. These are just a few of the questions we're still exploring and we anticipate that many more will emerge. Thanks to everyone who has come on this journey with us by attending our sessions, and we look forward to hearing from you about your own experiences as we shift from preparing for, to managing, legalization.

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