Hiring and Managing Smokers in the Modern Workplace
A Cultural and Ethics Issue
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ABSTRACT

Smoking in the workplace is a hot topic and one of modern human resource consideration for practical and fiscal reasons. When it comes to an employing body, questions arise to what approach a company should take towards smoking. Should they decide to avoid hiring individuals who smoke, or create a ‘no smoking’ environment? Or should organizations take an approach where employees are permitted to take ‘smoking breaks’ where they let employees take smoking breaks during work-hours, whenever those employees see necessary. Should employers actively and aggressively encourage current employees to quit smoking outside of work and use positive inducements and negative reinforcements up to and including increased vacation time and sanctioning non-compliant employees to persuade employees to kick the habit, or should employers treat every employee the same as long as personal habits are not affecting performance?

The paper discusses certain benefits claimed for smoking such as an improved networking and memory impacts — benefits that are often overlooked when discussing this issue. It will then talk about drawbacks of smoking, such as a decrease in job satisfaction and productivity as well as workplace hygiene. The final part of the paper will address which approach organizations should take towards smoking in the workplace.

Questions also arise as to whether it is advisable for the employer to take a particular attitude to smoking in the workplace. This is not only in the interest of the health of employees, customers and clients but also on the basis of a concern that it may otherwise expose itself over-time to lawsuits where employees may, on the basis of illness contracted due to a smoking environment supported by an employer, sue for the costs of care and income.

Keywords: Human Resources; Ethical Hiring Practices; Culture

INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY

This paper is part of a joint and serial project looking at ethical considerations and best practices of Human Resource professionals. Specifically an opening commentary about the presence of and employability of smokers in the workplace is considered. From a starting legal standpoint, smokers are not a protected class nor is there any existence of special accommodations present for smokers under the color of law. The growing trend in the work place is going the opposite direction with workplaces and public spaces going smoke-free. Keeping this mind the project has begun to ask Human Resource professionals through surveys and focus groups about their practices of hiring “known” smokers either at the beginning of the process and/or how they might be dealt with during their time of employment. Additionally, a pro-con analysis on hiring smokers or attempting to see what advantages maybe present in

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the employment of smokers sets the stage for an ethics and best practices discussion under a case study format.

PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF SMOKING AND SMOKERS IN THE WORKPLACE

Networking, as a Result of Smoking

In our daily life, taking a break during the working day is an essential way of take necessary rest. It can help us to refresh our minds and start with a boost once we start working again. However, one of the ways some employees choose to spend their allocated break is to smoke. During such a break in offices, colleagues often assemble at a point where they can smoke and enjoy a discussion with each other that is impossible within their working environment. This procedure builds up friendship and can also serve to ‘break the ice’ between new and existing employees or employees (including management) who have not simply had the opportunity to otherwise meet.

In the business world, taking advantage of such opportunities can be considered a form of communication that fosters the development of business and workplace relationships and lie under the category of ‘networking’. By definition,

‘…networking is a socioeconomic business activity by which businesspeople and entrepreneurs meet to form business relationships and to recognize, create, or act upon business opportunities, share information and seek potential partners for ventures…’ (Networking and the Entrepreneurs Mindset)

When individuals take smoking breaks, they usually meet individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds and cultures, from a range of different companies when more than one company is housed in the same building. This interaction can benefit workers in numerous ways. For example, an employer who is looking for an accountant takes a smoking break in his workplace building. During this break, he meets an accountant from a different company, who is looking to leave. As a result, the employer has found a new accountant. Although this example may be basic, it displays how the interaction and networking between different individuals during their smoking break can be fundamental. It can aid in employers meeting potential employees, potential business partners and creative entrepreneurs from a range of different companies. Furthermore, during smoking breaks, employers and employees can build their social skills, as they learn to communicate with people from a variety of backgrounds.

Weight Control and Improved Memory Due to Smoking

A number if benefits have been claimed for smoking. Common perceived benefits are that smoking is ‘good for weight control’ (and even thereby a reduction in the risk of obesity) and also that it helps increased workers’ concentration on their tasks. While smokers may on average weigh less than non-smokers, there is the increased risk of deleterious health effects from smoking that must be taken into account (e.g., significantly increased cancer and cardiovascular disease risks) (GBD 2015 Tobacco Collaborators, 2017, 1885–1906 at 1896).2

When persons cease smoking, the subsequent average weight gain around 2–3 kgs (Penman); however, as Penman herself points out as she discusses ‘smoking myths’, ‘the risks of continuing to smoke far outweigh those from minor weight gain’. Research has demonstrated that while some workers

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2 GBD 2015 Tobacco Collaborators (which include many prominent academics from across the world): ‘In 2015, 6·4 million deaths (95% UI 5·7–7·0) were attributable to smoking worldwide, representing a 4·7% (1·2–8·5) increase in smoking-attributable deaths since 2005. More than 75% of these deaths were in men, and 52·2% took place in four countries (China, India, the USA, and Russia).’
(16%) actually lose weight after ceasing smoking, others (37%) gain a little (0–5kg), 34% gain moderate amount (5–10kg) and smaller percentage (13%) gain a substantial amount (>10kg) in the first 12 months after quitting smoking (Aubin 2012). Causes include substituting food for smoking and the withdrawal of nicotine which had previously increased the rate of burning calories in the body. Smoking (due largely to the effect of nicotine on the body’s metabolism) may also, therefore, contribute to a decrease in the likelihood of obesity. Obesity can impinge on a worker’s ability to carry out numerous tasks in their workplace. In some instances, it can even result in dismissal. Again, however, the suggested benefit must be weighed against the drawbacks of continuing smoking. Here the evidence is clear (GBD 2015 Tobacco Collaborators, 2017): Both obesity and smoking are harmful to people’s health and both should then be discouraged when we are looking at the matter from a health perspective. It should also be noted that tobacco companies long knew that nicotine was a highly addictive substance (rather than one offering a perceived health benefit) and that cancer was strongly associated with the use of tobacco products, yet, while aware of the health risks being run by users, these companies did not voluntarily withdraw the product but instead chose to prefer profit and fought regulators (and those users seeking to sue them for damage done) ‘every inch of the way’ or used their ‘deep pockets’ to finance costly defense actions and appeals that exhausted complainants’ finances (and so existing legal action was halted or contemplated action deterred). But increasingly, lawsuits are successful and appropriate legislation facilitating a state’s ability to sue has been introduced in different jurisdictions (e.g, Canada: Moulton 2014).

In some instances, tobacco companies added appetite suppressants to their products (Gonseth et al, 2012, 234–237 at 234), again in an effort to make a ‘more attractive’ product. Research into role of nicotine as an appetite suppressant has revealed that it is this characteristic that makes the product particularly attractive to adolescents (Gonseth et al). It should be noted that the adoption of smoking in adolescence is strongly related to difficulty in later ceasing smoking, despite knowledge of the attendant risks of continuing to smoke (Surgeon General’s Report, 2012).3

In this regard, it should also be noted that nicotine is just one substance in cigarettes, there are many other harmful chemicals present. There are over 400 chemicals are present in cigarettes ‘over 50 of which are known to be toxic in nature: carbon monoxide … butane… arsenic, ammonia, and methanol…’ (Heffernan & Marshall, 2017). These contribute to the negative health impacts of active and passive smoking.

Another popular perceived advantage is that nicotine plays a role in improving the memory (and often alertness) of a worker. Such an advantage, if genuine, would help employees in numerous aspects of the workplace, helping them carry out tasks such as recalling stock, stocktaking. However, we will take each claim in turn. First, in regard to memory function, research has shown that — in contrast to earlier claims of preventing or delaying the onset of Alzheimer’s — cigarette smoking is associated with not only deleterious physical impacts such as cancer and heart disease but also ‘cognitive decline and dementia’ (Karama et al, 2015). Karama et al’s 2015 study found accelerated cortical thinning (a biomarker of adult cognitive decline) among smokers, and also observed that reversal with smoking cessation appears slow. Memory function also is affected in passive smokers (Heffernan & Marshall, 2017).

Secondly, in regard to alertness. Initially nicotine provides a slight adrenaline ‘rush’, causing the heart rate to accelerate and blood pressure to rise (American Cancer Society, 2015) (it can also enhance

3 According to the 2012 Surgeon General’s Report:
Of every 3 young smokers, only 1 will quit, and 1 of those remaining smokers will die from tobacco-related causes. Most of these young people never considered the long-term health consequences associated with tobacco use when they started smoking; and nicotine, a highly addictive drug, causes many to continue smoking well into adulthood, often with deadly consequences.
mood). However, the effects are transitory and need to be repeated to keep the ‘alert’ feeling. Unfortunately, smokers habituate and require increasing doses for the same effect, and nicotine addiction is rapidly achieved and more difficult that heroin to ‘break’ (American Cancer Society, 2015), probably due to the powerful combination of social and physical elements (American Addiction Centers). It also has pronounced withdrawal symptoms that hinder ceasing to smoke.4

As consumption reduces in the developed world in response to various strategies adopted by governments (see, e.g., Canada: Canadian Medical Association, 2008, 1–2), marketing efforts have increased in a number of developing countries where controls tend to be less onerous in regard to advertising and marketing and where companies are perhaps more likely to be able to exert influence on legislators as they once so confidently did in the developed world.

Targeted groups include younger males and women (the latter group traditionally non-smokers). The success of Australia’s anti-smoking advertising (10 Steps.SG), the country’s tighter bounds on advertising (prohibited on television, and limited locations, no sponsorship of sports/children’s teams etc.) and imposition of higher excise in cigarettes (Carroll, Cotter & Purcell, 2017; elsewhere: CMA, 2008, 3) as well as its success in defeating tobacco companies’ attempts to overcome or impede such limits in legal action have emboldened attempts in other developed countries to do likewise; however, it is sad that so often advertising, marketing and product placement in many developing countries goes unhindered. This will leave developing countries with an easily anticipated legacy of pain, illness, loss of income and productivity, and ultimately premature death.5

DRAWBACKS OF SMOKING AND SMOKERS IN THE WORKPLACE

Decrease in Job Satisfaction as well as a Negative Working Environment Due to Smoking

People who do not smoke are generally happier (Lui et al, 2015, 874–881 at 879), and thus it could be reasonably anticipated that they are pleasant, and overall contribute to a more satisfied workforce. They are not ‘hanging out for’ their next cigarette and thus distracted, or becoming irritable as the hours since their last cigarette mount.

It should be noted that when workers are content (and not distracted or irritable as described above), they are able to concentrate better, and as a result produce a greater quality of work. Furthermore, happy and satisfied employees raise the morale of the business, producing a friendly working environment that benefits employees, clients and ultimately shareholders.

Many people claim that smoking plays a fundamental role in reducing stress; however, smoking actually increases the overall stress of employees, making it hard for them to enjoy or even properly do their job. Whilst the initial physiological impact may be to ease cravings produced by addition, it also raises blood pressure, normally a sign of stress.

In certain difficult situations such as limited income or difficulty in finding a job, individuals may indeed feel stressed, and as a result adopt or revert to smoking to relieve their stress. However, this can

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4 See American Cancer Society, 2015:
In 2012, researchers reviewed 28 different studies of people who were trying to quit using the substance they were addicted to. They found that about 18% were able to quit drinking, and more than 40% were able to quit opiates or cocaine, but only 8% were able to quit smoking.’ (Citation omitted).

5 In the US, it is the number one causer of preventable death: The US National Institute on Drug Abuse reports that ‘[O]ver 35 million smokers wish to quit annually, however, only about 15% are successful. Nicotine can alter blood chemistry within 10 seconds of inhaling…, creating an enhanced mood that wears off within a few hours …prompting [users] to want another. Nicotine withdrawal can cause irritability, …cravings, depression, difficulties sleeping, anxiety, heightened appetite, and trouble concentrating or remembering things.’
actual make their situation worse, exacerbating stress. Smoking is frequently associated with physiological problems such as asthma, bronchitis and — over time — conditions such as emphysema and cancer, all of which involve additional medical and pharmaceutical bills. If workers are already experiencing financial difficulty, smoking will only worsen their financial situation worsens, not only due to increased need for health-related expenditure for them (or family members affected by passive smoking) but because they spend a substantial part (or even the majority) of their income on cigarettes. Those out of work, on the other hand, who are finding it difficult to find a new job may resort to smoking. Again, smoking causes certain illnesses, which may make them physically unfit for a number of jobs. From these examples of limited income and difficulty finding another job, one can see that smoking can actually make difficult situations even more difficult, further increasing their stress. In essence, using smoking to ‘self-medicate’ stress during difficult situations actually makes the situation harder, increasing rather than reducing stress. A reciprocal relationship can be observed to exist in regards to both social disadvantage and financial stress, and smoking (Cancer Council, 2008).

In addition, when workers are ‘stressed out’, it often reduces the overall morale of the business, as the stress is preventing workers from being happy and enjoying coming to work. Lower morale creates a less friendly business environment, reducing the productivity of the organization (see more on productivity further below). Overall, workers who do not smoke are happier, more relaxed and as a result are satisfied when carrying out their work, as they are able to concentrate fully on the task in hand. Furthermore, their happy and relaxed mood contributes to a positive working environment.

Decrease in Workplace Hygiene Due to Smokers

Hygiene is one of the most important aspects of our day to life. Furthermore, it is also a crucial aspect in a workplace. Hygiene consists of the conditions or practices helpful for maintaining wellbeing and preventing infection, particularly through cleanliness. One personal benefit of good hygiene is having better health. Keeping your body clean helps prevent illness and infection from bacteria or viruses. One of the disadvantages of smoking is its unhygienic nature. Bringing the hand to the mouth with the cigarette shifts germs/bacteria from other parts of the environment to one’s mouth, thus spreading disease and illness.

It is also very unhygienic when it comes to the scent of the smoke that sticks to the smokers clothing and also the scent in their breath. Both of which tend to be repulsive to non-smokers. Part of maintaining hygiene in a workplace is to ensure that the environment has clean scent. This ensures fewer complaints from staff and fewer headaches for them.

Smoking is not only extremely harmful for humans but also tremendously messy. When tobacco in cigarettes is burnt there are ashes that are dropped and the remains of filter-tips. This can affect the cleanliness of the work place. Appearance is very important in a work environment, and in some instances it is intertwined with hygiene. For example, due to smoking, employees may have stained teeth, which may appear somewhat unhygienic.

In essence, smoking may cause certain unhygienic circumstances in a business environment, affecting areas such as cleanliness and appearance for individual smokers but also detract from the appearance of the workplace itself if ‘fag-ends’ and ash are allowed to accumulate at places where smokers gather during their breaks, such as at entrances to buildings in the approaches to the business. The provision of suitable receptacle for what is left after smoking the cigarettes is necessary or educating workers to use this rather than drop butts on the street or to provide their own mini-ashtrays, the contents of which are disposed of appropriately in a larger dedicated lidded receptacle. No paper is permitted to be
placed in this bin for obvious reasons which brings to mind yet another risk posed by cigarette smoking — fire in or near workplace.

However ever there is another, very serious impact of smoking that goes beyond mere appearance and odor — passive smoking.

FINDINGS ON HUMAN RESOURCES SURVEY ON EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES

Across the globe, more and more organizational policies are put into effect to prevent individuals from smoking in the workplace. The topic has become a strategic HRM issue. In the US alone, there are approximately 6,000 companies who follow a ban on hiring smokers including: Turner Broadcasting System, Union Pacific, Alaska Airlines, and Schweitzer Engineering Laboratories (Rives, 2006).

Regarding the question, which approach organizations should take towards smoking in the workplace, we conducted a Human Resources Survey on Employment Practices with a focus group of Human Resources Managers in the GCC. In three simple questions we asked HR experts:

a) Before hiring, do you ask if someone is a smoker?
b) Have you ever decided not to hire because someone is a smoker?
c) In your organization, are you providing designated smoking areas?

As for the first question - Before hiring, do you ask if someone is a smoker? – the results look as follows for the GCC:

Before hiring, do you ask if someone is a smoker?

Answered: 21   Skipped: 1

Only the minority of our small focus group of HR managers (10%) ask this question before hiring. This is in line with a Society for Human Resource Management 2004 survey, where 2% of the respondents admitted during a job interview that they asked applicants if they smoked (Workplace Smoking, 2005).

As for the second question - have you ever decided not to hire because someone is a smoker? – the results look as follow for the GCC:
The majority of HR managers denies this question, but 10% of our sample has decided not to hire because someone is a smoker. Ironically, in a Business and Legal Incorporated survey, more than 20 years ago, 2% of the respondents in this 2,000 employer survey refused to hire smokers (McShulskis, 1996).

As for the third question - in your organization, are you providing designated smoking areas? – 77% of the HR experts in the GCC confirm that they are providing designated smoking areas.

Based on these numbers it seems that companies are trying to arrange themselves with the smokers. This is in line with a survey by the Society for Human Resource Management. In that survey it was revealed that 19% had a policy against employees smoking anywhere in or around the workplace (In 2010, 26 U.S. enacted laws prohibiting smoking in indoor workplaces and the nation’s health initiative, Healthy People 2020, is seeking laws in all 50 states by the year 2020 (Tynan et al. 2010)). Having said that, over 70% said their firms did have designated smoking areas (Workplace Smoking, 2005).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Millennials are shaking up organizational cultures (Bogosian and Rousseau, 2017), shifting to flexible and remote working. Despite the technological advancement, still most jobs provided are not 100% remote, so the dilemma of hiring smokers remains. Defending and advocating for smokers is no
easy task. The political correct crowd of the day insists that smoking is bad for one’s health. It is endemic in relations to the health of others and as such has a profound impact upon the health care cost of our systems. Having said all of this, people that smoke, still do so and as such exist in society. The point of the forgoing discussion was to sort out a pro-con starting point for this reality and then discuss how these realities may impact the decision making of Human Resource decision makers that are charged with the decisions that impact both the organization and potential and actual employees. It is important to note that this is only a preliminary review. Further data and review of that data is necessary for an analysis of HR employment trends in the GCC region and globally to materialize. But at this point, clear ethical and good practices considerations can reviewed. HR personal and/or those charged with employment practices have an important factor to consider with regards to potential and actual employees personal practices. If we have two equally qualified candidates, but one is a smoker, is it ethical to choose the non-smoker? If so is there a need to justify this decision? Certainly, all people as candidates for employment should be treated equally on the merits of their candidacy. But smokers, and other personal habits that people indulge in, do not in and of themselves create a protected class of peoples that necessitate legal protection. Thus, all that is left is ethical considerations for the development of best practices.

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