



# Work: Is it Working for You?

Returning to work after recovery?  
Here's what to consider before clocking in.

*by Jennifer Chesak*

**Some jobs come with a corner office,** others come with a uniform, others call for certain technical skills, while some demand travel. But all jobs have one thing in common: They trigger stress.

On the best day, work stress can be motivating. But if a person is at a point at which pressure is best kept to a minimum—such as immediately following treatment for addiction—stress at work can be a real stumbling block.

In addition to re-evaluating other areas of their lives, the newly recovering should take a good, hard look at their job situation before returning to the daily grind. Consider stress levels, the work environment and responsibilities.

Though you may enjoy your old job and it may pay well, it may not be the best fit if it jeopardizes your sobriety. And even if your job is worth getting back to, keep in mind that some employers are hesitant to re-invest in addicts, recovering

or otherwise. “You’re dealing with your addiction, but that doesn’t entitle you to anything,” says Robert J. Ackerman, a professor and director of the Mid-Atlantic Addiction Research & Training Institute at Indiana University and co-founder of the National Association for Children of Alcoholics. “Going back to your job creates a huge question for the people you worked with prior,” says Ackerman, author of 13 books on alcoholism.

## Water Cooler Chatter

Employees returning to work will be expected to perform despite their personal situations. Depending on the occupation and culture, confidentiality among peers may or may not be kept, and superiors may know the reason for leave. Colleagues could gossip and bosses could choose to oversee work more closely or assign work with less responsibility or visibility. This might make an already taxing situation

downright nerve-wracking.

And those responsible for working with the public face additional challenges. “They’ll own you,” says a Chicago-area pulmonologist, referring to the supervision a physician might face upon returning to work after treatment. He adds that each case will vary and depend on the circumstances of the leave.

Professors may find a similar scenario when ready to return to academia. At Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., professors must work directly with their department office and the provost to begin teaching again, says an employee in the university’s human resources department.

Although extra supervision from superiors is often temporary, and depending on the field, a precautionary measure, if an employee perceives it as unfair or too lengthy it could end up having a detrimental effect on her well-being or even sobriety.

“ I don’t think there is such a thing as ‘My job made me drink,’ says Ackerman. You drank. ”

Ackerman shares an example of military officers who go through treatment and return to duty only to be reinstated at lower rankings. “You go and get clean and sober and they want to lessen your responsibilities. You might begin to think, ‘The people around me think less of me.’”

### Good Work

There are some companies and professions with strong employee assistance programs (EAPs) in place. These are often safer workplace situations for people in recovery.

Although a police officer’s job is certainly high on the list of high-stress occupations, it does also have measures in place to help those in recovery. The Chicago Police Department, for example, has a drug and alcohol abuse program

“The police face the serious question when they go to work everyday of whether or not they’ll come home,” she says. “There really is a plague of alcoholism, and too often officers debrief by drinking.”

Government agencies have good EAPs, as do most union jobs. EAP details for these jobs can often be found on individual state and city websites.

Large businesses are also a great place to look for EAP-like employee support. Wells Fargo, for instance, uses LifeCare.com, an integrated EAP that offers counseling and referral services, help with child and elder care. Adventure gear co-op REI defines its work/life EAP as a “concierge for your life” and helps employees find a balance between work and home. EAPs vary from company to



made up of therapists and police officers that are recovering alcoholics themselves. A licensed social worker and former employee of the unit points out, “Only a police officer with an addiction would be able to understand another police officer with an addiction.”

Officers in the drug and alcohol abuse program assist others through treatment and even take new members to their first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, one for police officers only. The transition back into the field after an officer completes treatment runs a continuum, from a quick return to the field to screening and psychological testing.

company, so checking out any restrictions in addition to benefits on corporate websites is also important. Many EAPs offer extensive services to help improve health as well as alleviate stress and can be extremely useful when trying to keep pressures at bay.

### Is It the Job?

“If your job or anything else jeopardizes your recovery,” Ackerman says, “you need to back off. Nothing should get in the way of that.” That said, he says the perception that high-stress jobs can lead people to abuse alcohol or drugs or cause a relapse is misleading.

"I don't think there is such a thing as 'My job made me drink,'" he says. "You drank." He goes on to explain that people may not recognize the triggers that may surface as part of their duties or workplace environment. Doing so is incredibly important before returning to work after treatment.

Ackerman emphasizes the value of people working closely with their support systems to help identify and narrow down triggers and decide how to reduce them.

People in recovery don't necessarily have to avoid high-stress jobs, but Ackerman advocates for common sense. "You may not want to go back to being an air-traffic controller," he says, adding, "or a bartender."

Also reconsider careers in which you're expected to entertain clients or are in a company environment that treats happy hours as regularly scheduled meetings. The challenges of maintaining sobriety do not need to be coupled with constant temptations.

If you feel ready to go back to work but are unsure about returning to your old career, it might be time for a transitional job that will help you get used to a schedule and make a little money.

Plenty of part-time jobs with great companies offer exceptional benefits while providing the opportunity to test the waters of employment. In addition to other benefits, Whole Foods—listed as one of *Fortune* magazine's "100 Best Companies to Work For" 13 years in a row—offers employees a company-funded personal wellness account based on service time. Target, another part-time option, also provides benefits and unique health resources to its employees, and the company was listed in the top 50 of *Forbes* magazine's top 500 of "America's Most Reputable Companies."

A 10-year employee of Starbucks in downtown Chicago raves about the coffee giant's benefits—ones that go beyond health insurance for part-timers and free bags of beans. "It's the single best networking tool on the planet," says the artist and manager. That alone can be useful to a recovering person looking for new opportunities. He makes an important point about a part-time,



transitional job in service, however. "When I first started," he says, "it was incredibly stressful. I don't feel it at all anymore. But unless you come from an industry where you understand customer service and are used to people yelling at you, it can be difficult." Now he's worked plenty of hours in the same location and sees a lot of regulars. "When your customers get to know you and trust you, the stress starts to go away."

Whether serving espresso, wrangling organic produce or back at a familiar desk, establishing a routine can be beneficial to the recovery process, says Ackerman. "It can help get you out of your head."

### **Clockwatching: Is It Time?**

After treatment, many make the decision to change careers altogether and follow a newly unearthed passion. Ackerman advises examining exactly what answering a new calling will take. To follow any new dream, he says, "You have to get your act together before you take it on the road."

Although going back too soon can

cause problems, so can a long delay. "One always sides on the side of health—and health is to function fully," says the former employee of the Chicago-Area Police Department's drug and alcohol abuse program. Although she cautions against people jeopardizing their recovery, she also notes the benefits of getting back into a routine and earning an income as soon as possible—the bank account and the self-esteem get a needed boost.

No matter what a recovering person chooses to do regarding his or her career, Ackerman suggests staying involved with a recovery program and doing intensive outpatient work while getting back into work life and notes that wisely managing the transition from treatment to work is essential. "Timing has a lot to do with it." ■

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*Jennifer Chesak is a Chicago-based freelance writer specializing in lifestyle, adventure and health topics. She earned her Master of Science in Journalism from Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism. When she's not tethered to her notepad, she's off training for her next marathon.*