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FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

# Drinking in the Workplace

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## Description

Branch, Inc. has been losing ground to its competitors in recent years. Concerned that substance abuse may be responsible for much of Branch's decline, the company has just adopted a policy that imposes sanctions on those employees found to be working under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs.

## Abstract

This case is one of thirty-two cases which address a wide range of ethical issues that can arise in engineering practice provided by the Center For the Study of Ethics in Society, Western Michigan University.

## Body

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Branch, Inc. has been losing ground to its competitors in recent years. Concerned that substance abuse may be responsible for much of Branch's decline, the company has just adopted a policy that imposes sanctions on those employees found to be

working under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs.

John Crane and Andy Pullman have worked together in one of the engineering divisions of Branch for several years. Frequently John has detected alcohol on Andy's breath when they were beginning work in the morning and after work breaks during the day. But, until the new policy was announced it never occurred to John that he should say anything to Andy about it, let alone tell anyone else about it. Andy's work has always been first rate, and John is not the kind of person who feels comfortable discussing such matters with others.

Two days before the announcement of the new alcohol and drug policy, Andy tells John that he is being considered for the position of head of quality control. Although pleased at the prospect of Andy's promotion, John wonders if Andy's drinking will get in the way of meeting his responsibilities. John worries that, with additional job pressures, Andy's drinking problem will worsen. What should John do?

1. Talk with Andy about his drinking.
2. Keep quiet and mind his own business, leaving the problem up to Andy and those who have the responsibility to select someone for the job.
3. Other.



Harvey Hillman, Plant Manager at Branch, knows that Andy and John have worked together many years. He has narrowed his choice for Head of Quality Control to Andy and one other person. He invites John out for lunch to see if he can learn something more about Andy from John. Should John volunteer information about Andy's drinking? Suppose Harvey says, "This is a really important decision. We need a top person for the quality control job. We've had some real problems the last few years with shoddy production, probably because of alcohol and drug abuse in the workplace. I had to move Jack Curtis out of head of quality control because he was drunk on the job. We have to get this under control. The new policy might help. But quality control will still have to keep a really close eye on things." Should John say anything now?



Branch's policy on the use of alcohol and drugs has been in effect for a year. It does not seem to have made a significant difference. Absenteeism is still high. Shoddy workmanship continues. And Branch's profit margins are still declining. Management is now proposing mandatory random drug testing for its non-professional workforce, and mandatory drug testing for all new workers. The labor union protests that such a policy is undesirable in two respects. First, it is an unwarranted invasion of the privacy of workers. Second, exempting professionals from the testing is discriminatory and, therefore, unjust. Since John knows you have a longstanding, serious interest in ethics, he asks you what you think about the two concerns of the union.

## **Notes**

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