

EMPLOYMENT LAWSCENE ALERT: SHOULD YOU CHANGE YOUR WORKPLACE POLICIES TO ADDRESS E-CIGARETTES?

As “e-cigarettes” grow in popularity, employers must decide how to address the use of e-cigarettes in the workplace. Electronic cigarettes or “e-cigarettes” are battery-operated devices that deliver nicotine or other substances to its user in the form of a vapor that is then inhaled. Many e-cigarettes are manufactured to look just like everyday objects that can be found in the workplace, such as pens or USB sticks.

E-cigarettes are currently unregulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which means the FDA has not evaluated any e-cigarettes for safety or effectiveness. A number of recent independent studies on the effects of e-cigarettes and the emissions from those devices have yielded mixed results, with some indicating that the vapor emitted by e-cigarettes contains some of the same carcinogens that you find in traditional cigarette smoke. So, as an employer, how can you know whether you should be regulating the use of these devices in the workplace?

Currently, there is no federal law regulating the use of e-cigarettes and no state has completely banned their use. Twenty-four (24) states, including Wisconsin, and the District of Columbia currently have “smoke-free” laws that prohibit smoking of traditional tobacco cigarettes in the workplace. Because e-cigarettes are still fairly new, most of these “smoke-free” laws do not address whether the use of e-cigarettes is also prohibited in the workplace. Recently, a number of municipalities and some states have enacted new laws or amended their “smoke-free” laws to ban the use of e-cigarettes in the same way use of traditional tobacco cigarettes is prohibited in the workplace.

Wisconsin’s legislature has taken an approach quite different from the trend toward banning the use of e-cigarettes in the workplace and other public places. The Wisconsin legislature has introduced a bill that, if passed, would exclude e-cigarettes from the types of smoking devices that are prohibited under Wisconsin’s “smoke-free” law, which would mean that using e-cigarettes would be permitted in those places where smoking traditional cigarettes is now prohibited. It is not likely, however, that this bill would require private employers to allow employees to use e-cigarettes in the workplace.

With more employees bringing e-cigarettes into the workplace, employers are faced with the decision whether to permit or ban employees' use of e-cigarettes at work. Some employers find that permitting employees to use e-cigarettes cuts down on the number of smoking breaks employees take each day, thereby increasing some employees' productivity, while other employers find that e-cigarettes create a distraction for users and non-users alike. Absent legal restrictions regarding the use of e-cigarettes in most cities and states, employers in those jurisdictions are free to create their own reasonable policies addressing the use of e-cigarettes just as they would maintain policies addressing or restricting other activities and conduct that could interfere with employees' ability to do their jobs or otherwise disrupt the workplace.

Employers should stay up to date on state and municipal laws and ordinances that could affect how employers may be required to treat the use of e-cigarettes in the workplace.