

Drug Testing: Is It Worth the Cost?

Since drug testing was first implemented in the 1980s, it has become an accepted part of the hiring process. According to The American Management Association's 2001 Medical Testing survey, nearly 67% of the nation's major companies require job applicants to submit to drug testing.

There are a few obvious reasons. For one thing, illicit drug use is exploding. An estimated 14.8 million Americans use illicit drugs. Of those, almost 77%, or 10.2 million are employed either full- or part-time¹. That's topped by an even more unsettling fact revealed in a 1999 survey conducted by the Hazeldon Foundation: more than 60% of adults know someone who has reported for work under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. Now, we're talking about legal liability on the part of the company should an accident occur. Add to that evidence that alcohol and drug users are less productive², use three times as many sick days³, are more likely to injure themselves or someone else⁴, and are five times more likely to file workers' compensation claims⁵, and you've made a good case for drug testing.

But what about the cost? While some debate its affordability, government statistics say, like it or not, companies are already paying dearly. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that drug use in the workplace costs employers \$100 billion dollars annually in lost time, accidents, and health care and workers' compensation costs. A 1991 survey of heavy drinkers and illicit drug users found that 10% of drug users had missed work during the previous year because of a hangover, 15% had gone to work high or drunk during that same period, and 18% had skipped work in the past month⁶.

A National Institute on Drug Abuse study conducted in 1992 found that drug-using employees were 2.2 times more likely to request early dismissal or time off, 2.5 times more likely to have absences of eight days or more, 3 times more likely to be late for work, 3.6 times more likely to be involved in a workplace accident, 5 times more likely to be injured in an off-the-job accident (that affected attendance or job performance) and 5 times more likely to file a worker's compensation claim. Another factor that favors testing is that employees with drug or alcohol problems often contribute to increases in employee theft and fraud, legal expenses, insurance claims and turnover.

A typical drug test costs anywhere from \$25 to \$50, depending on which test you choose, who conducts it, and where it is conducted. Most testing facilities use a standard five-panel urine test that screens for cannabinoids (marijuana and hash), cocaine (including crack and benzoylecognine), amphetamines (including methamphetamines), Phencyclidine or PCP, a/k/a Angel Dust, and opiates such as codeine, heroin, opium and morphine.

In most cases, an employer will instruct a job applicant or employee to submit a urine sample within a specific period of time (usually 24 to 48 hours), before drugs can exit the system. Testing labs have procedures to re-confirm a positive test result prior to reporting it, and most use a Medical Review Officer (MRO), an independent physician, to review those results. Testing facilities must provide an arbitration process to determine if any extenuating circumstances could have distorted the test results, but laboratory false positives are rare.

Drug tests normally detect marijuana or PCP a week or more after use, depending on the person being tested, the amount consumed and other factors. They detect metabolites or the residue of hardcore drug use for up to 72 hours after use. Although people are different, most drugs stay in a person's system from 1 to 30 days after they have been ingested, but can remain longer. More accurate hair tests, drug labs claim, can trace drug use back three months, but the accuracy and reliability of hair testing is still being debated.

Prior to testing, businesses should take time to establish a substance abuse policy with clear guidelines explaining the company's position. This should include procedures for dealing with both positive and negative test results. In addition, employees should be educated about substance abuse, and supervisors should be trained in how to recognize the signs and symptoms of substance abuse.

In the meantime, remember, whatever testing methods you select, having a drug-free work environment is one way to protect your corporate assets and improve the health, safety and well-being of your workforce.

¹ The 2001 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, September 5, 2002.

² What Works: Workplaces Without Drugs, U.S. Department of Labor, 1991.

³ NCADD Fact Sheet: Alcohol and Other Drugs in the Workplace, National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, Inc., May 1992.

⁴ The 2001 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, September 5, 2002.

⁵ NCADD Fact Sheet: Alcohol and Other Drugs in the Workplace, National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, Inc., May 1992.

⁶ Institute for Health Policy, Brandeis University, Substance Abuse: The Nation's Number One Health Problem, Key Indicators for Policy, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, October 1993.

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