

# POSITIVE IMPACT OF WORKPLACE DRUG TESTING

Given that the United States represents five per cent of the world's population and consumes 60 per cent of the world's supply of illicit drugs, workplace drug testing can help to decrease employee turnover and absenteeism, and lower workers' compensation incidence rates,<sup>1</sup> writes Dr Scott Howell.

**A**n aging workforce often suffering with unhealthy lifestyles and the growing demand for enhanced worker productivity have ushered in an era of new workplace challenges for health and safety professionals.

The good news is that employment drug testing can serve as a powerful risk mitigation tool that provides far-reaching organisational and societal benefits.

In addition to promoting a safer, more productive workplace, it can help to decrease employee turnover and absenteeism, reduce employer risk, and lower workers' compensation incidence rates.<sup>1</sup>

Seventy per cent of the 14.8 million Americans who abuse drugs are employed.<sup>2</sup> When an employee abuses drugs, employers and payers take on the risk of workplace injuries, compromised productivity due to absenteeism and presenteeism, and liability.<sup>3</sup>

Drug abuse can cost US business owners more than \$140 billion dollars every year, which includes turnover rates for



By testing employees for drugs, employers are helping to protect their company from liability and potentially lowering workers' compensation costs and, in some states, premiums.

employees who abuse drugs.<sup>4</sup> The drugs at the root of this issue include cocaine, heroin, ecstasy, methamphetamine, and prescription drugs. While a standard five- or 10-panel urine drug screen typically costs between \$30 and \$60, it's important to consider the hidden, dramatically higher costs of not having a drug testing program at all.

## ACCIDENTS AND FATALITIES

Employees who abuse prescription drugs are two to five times more likely to take unexcused absences, be late for work, be



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injured or violent at work, file workers' compensation claims, and quit or be fired within one year of employment, according to the National Safety Council.<sup>5</sup>

The upside of this equation is that employees are more likely to undergo treatment when it is fostered by an employer, and individuals in recovery go on to become better workers—using less health care, taking less unscheduled leave, and involving slightly less turnover than their non-abusing colleagues. In fact, each employee who recovers from a substance abuse disorder saves a company more than \$3,200 a year.<sup>6</sup>

It is especially important in a company where employees drive, work directly with consumers, operate machinery, or perform manual labour. The construction and manufacturing industries in particular have an especially high rate of on-the-job drug use.

When an employee is struggling with drug misuse, the employer can help by putting him or her in a recovery program that's paid for by the business or health plan. After completing the recovery program, the employee then returns to work, saving the employer the expense of hiring and training a new employee.

### PRODUCTIVITY STATS

Workers who report having three or more jobs in the previous five years are about twice as likely to be current or past year

users of illegal drugs as those who have had two or fewer jobs.<sup>7</sup> Drug abuse leads to lost productivity due to:

- Absenteeism.
- After-effects of substance use (withdrawal).
- Preoccupation with obtaining and using substances while at work, interfering with attention and concentration.
- Illegal activities at work, including selling illegal drugs to other employees.
- Psychological or stress-related effects due to drug use by a family member, friend, or co-worker that affects another person's job performance.

All of these factors can lead to inconsistent work quality, poor concentration, lack of focus, and carelessness. Fortunately, the workplace can be an impactful arena to address drug abuse issues. By establishing a drug-free workplace, employers can help employees and their families by referring them to community resources and services.

Given that the United States represents five per cent of the world's population and consumes 60 per cent of the world's supply of illicit drugs, drug testing can be seen as an investment against the cost of low productivity.<sup>8</sup>

### LEGAL ADVANTAGES

Employees who are injured on the job or fired due to drug-related incidents are not entitled to compensation and are less

## WORKPLACE DRUG TESTING



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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that include reduced insurance costs and workers' comp discounts.<sup>11</sup>

Employers are concerned about safety as the primary reason for drug testing. Also, it's better to avoid the accident rather than determine what happened after the fact. Currently, only a few jobs have federally mandated drug testing: pilots, truck drivers, train operators, and occupations deemed 'safety sensitive'.

The National Safety Council<sup>12</sup> recommends employers be proactive and take the following steps to create a drug-free work environment:

- Partner with prescription drug and health plan providers to help gatekeep, monitor, and intervene on the use of prescription drugs.
- Review the company's drug-free workplace policy to protect employees and reduce liability.
- Ensure that any employee drug testing programme includes testing for the most commonly prescribed opioid painkiller drugs.
- Educate employees about confidential help available through an employee assistance programme.
- Remind employees about the drug-free workplace policy, testing policies, and confidential help available through an employee assistance programme.

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likely to file suit against their employer. By testing employees for drugs, employers are helping to protect their company from liability and potentially lowering workers' compensation costs and, in some states, premiums. Employers can use positive drug test results, for tests taken immediately after work injuries, as a method of denying or defending workers' comp claims.<sup>9</sup>

### SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Workplace drug testing can up the stakes of misusing drugs, encouraging employees to be less inclined to use them if they know it threatens their jobs. A random testing programme is critical for making drug testing truly effective.

According to OHS Health and Safety Services Inc., ongoing employee drug testing lowers the number of employees who test positive.<sup>10</sup> Drug testing today is highly accurate, with a number of methods to ensure validity, combined with incentives in some states

Medicaid, Medicare and major insurance companies face increased costs for drug test screening. These costs are not caused by a spike in the use of narcotics by subscribers, but from unnecessary testing and overbilling by doctors and drug screening companies.

Therefore, it's important to partner with a highly reputable drug testing facility that offers fast, accurate, high-quality laboratory and genomic testing, and serves as a collaborator with employers, payers, and clinicians by providing an extensive range of testing services, including specialized diagnosis, screening, and evaluation.

## BEST PRACTICES

Firstly, employers must ensure that they are complying with all state and federal laws that impact workplace drug testing. For example, the surge in state laws allowing patients to legally access marijuana for medicinal purposes has created some challenges for employers.

These federal guidelines do not allow regulated employees, such as those in safety-sensitive positions, to use marijuana even if it is pursuant to a valid prescription under state law. Employers subject to federal regulations that require testing for marijuana use should continue to follow those federal regulations and may do so without violating state law.<sup>13</sup>

Secondly, employers are prioritizing heroin as one of the critical drugs that must be screened. Many of these employers use a standard five-panel urine-based drug test that includes testing for opiates and often assume that this test will detect any heroin use, but this is not always true. Heroin, along with several other legal and illegal substances, falls under the 'opiate' drug classification.

The standard five-panel urine test will test for opiate use but cannot determine which specific drug is responsible for the positive result. This uncertainty could potentially allow applicants or employees to hide heroin use with other legally prescribed or obtained opiates.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, the recent growth in popularity of "designer" or synthetic drugs is causing some employers to question whether their traditional drug screening practices need to be expanded to include newly developed substances.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, given all of these challenges, it's important to partner with a highly reputable drug testing facility that offers fast, accurate, high-quality laboratory and genomic testing.

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