

TO TEST OR NOT TO TEST

White collar addiction is a problem that plagues professional business ranks and costs U.S. companies billions of dollars a year in lost productivity. It's an issue of growing concern for employers because addiction problems are mounting amidst the backdrop of a tumultuous economy and heightened workloads.

Addictions can ruin eminent careers, bring unwanted attention to employers and hurt businesses' bottom line. And no profession or company is immune! Large companies are particularly leery of alarming shareholders and generating unwelcome publicity if an executive is fired because of drug or alcohol abuse. But this doesn't have to be the scenario if a sound and consistent drug testing program is in place.

The Institute for a Drug-Free Workplace echoes this line. "Employers and employees have a large stake and legitimate role to play in the 'war on drugs' – it's about accountability." When did caring and consistent accountability ever fail us?

Mandatory drug and alcohol testing in "safety-sensitive" positions is necessary for obvious reasons, but work performance is the issue for white collar positions. Pre-employment drug testing can greatly reduce the number of employees hired with potential problems and set precedence for an expected standard within a company; but only with random drug and alcohol testing can a company secure that high standard. Substance abuse testing isn't just about detection, it's about prevention and resolve, and it starts with a corporate attitude.

The National Drug-Free Workplace Alliance provides some interesting statistics. Over 75% of all current illegal drug users, as well as heavy alcohol users are in the workforce; or 8.2% of all employees. This means that they are able to mask their problem from their employers.

Alcoholism and problem drinkers are absent from work 5 to 8 times more often than the norm. Drug users are absent from work an average of 5 days per month. Substance abusers are 33% less productive and cost their employers \$7,000 annually. Annual productivity losses from substance abuse count for \$640 for every American worker, regardless of whether they are the substance abuser.

Substance abusers are three times more likely to use medical benefits than other employees. 38 to 50% of all workers' compensation claims are related to substance abuse. That's not to mention the turn-over rate for such workers as reporting 1 – 3 new employers per year. As high as 80% of drug abusers steal from their workplaces to support their drug use. Drug and alcohol abuse costs U.S. employers \$81 billion dollars each year according to the Department of Labor. The overall cost of illicit drug abuse in the U.S. is estimated to have been

\$246 billion in 2000, and 69% of these costs are from productivity losses due to drug-related illnesses and deaths.

To sum it up, substance abuse lowers productivity, causes accidents and injuries, increases absenteeism and turn-over, raises an employer's medical costs, costs U.S. companies billions of dollars, and ultimately lowers employee morale.

White collar workers with drug or alcohol addictions are able to hide their problem easier than blue-collar or the unemployed. They usually are the high-profile achievers who believe they should be able to control their addiction. They also can afford expensive habits; they have the discretionary income to buy cocaine. Part of their job is taking clients for dinner and drinks, and they tend to believe they would never have a dependency issue.

Trends in "drugs of choice" are constantly changing with new drugs, both prescription and illicit, coming on the scene. However, marijuana remains the most commonly abused illegal drug by employees, followed by cocaine. Even though there has been a push for legalization of marijuana in areas of the U.S., (for example, particularly white collar professionals in Portland, Oregon) substance abuse counselors recognize that marijuana causes behavioral toxicity and detrimentally affects sound judgment. Addictions to opiate-based drugs, including prescription pain pills such as Oxycontin and Lortab are becoming more common, particularly among the 18-25 year old age group.

The statistics for alcohol abuse is even more compelling. About 43% of adults in the U.S. have been exposed to alcoholism in the family. An estimated 6.6 million children under the age of 18 live in households with at least one alcoholic parent. Nearly 14 million Americans, or 1 in every 13 adults abuse alcohol or are alcoholic. This means drinking can occur all hours of the day.

Whether alcohol is initially used to relieve stress and anxiety, or for relaxation and fun, addictions and abuse cross every socio-economic level. One important fact that we overlook is that **alcohol is a drug**; one that significantly impairs judgment and coordination.

Employers' responses to drug or alcohol use or addiction varies, but often if a company offers treatment as an option to their employees in order to keep their job, then everyone can win. Obviously using or selling drugs in the workplace may constitute a different outcome and require termination. But every boundary set should be done so through a sound drug and alcohol policy that is adhered to, to the letter; otherwise, the policy is worthless in application. Additionally, companies with a drug-free program in place make a reputation for themselves. Substance abusers will steer away.

A solid, basic drug testing policy should emphasize the need for safety in the workplace and adherence to job requirements and work quality. And it should also cite goals, such as improving productivity and morale. Such policy is the

foundation for a drug-free workplace program and must be very specific about: 1) how and when testing occurs, 2) what employees are covered, 3) what is considered a violation, 4) what disciplinary measures will result from those violations, and 5) whether the company will instigate or allow rehabilitation. Being specific, and consistently adhering to policy, will help protect the company from litigation and open the door to a drug-free environment.

A written policy cannot be effective **unless** it is **fully supported** by top management and understood by its employees. As in any newly implemented program, the “getting started” is the tough part as everyone adapts. Ignoring the issue does not make it go away – it will not change statistics or reality. A positive attitude among all personnel involved will insure a drug-free program’s success!

Substance abuse is a “slow fade.” Drug & alcohol testing can interrupt a destructive or even deadly process and save jobs, money, people and families.

~ by **Terri Heavener,**
CEO MedDirect, Inc.

Sources: U.S. Department of Labor website, Alcoholism – Statistics.com – Copyright 2004, Drugs In The Workplace internet article, Drug-Free Workplace Policy Builder Menu website, What Are The Signs of Abuse – internet article, and the National Drug-Free Workplace Alliance Drug-Free Workplace Statistics – internet article