

Why not drug testing at work?

A consultative, health-based approach to alcohol and drugs in the workplace is the way to go, argues **ROSS BELL**.

The conventional wisdom goes something like this. People who take drugs and come to work impaired are a safety hazard in the workplace and really should know better. Random drug tests will help send the message that my company does not tolerate this sort of behaviour – and if drug users fail those tests and get fired they have no one to blame but themselves.

Sound familiar? Actually, there are a fair few errors and false assumptions in that line of thinking that I hope to clear up.

First, let me say I totally agree that employers are right to be concerned about drug impaired people in their workplace. In fact it's their legal obligation to protect the safety of their workers and the public. And I don't have to waste words here explaining how workplace accidents and low morale caused by impaired employees can hurt people, performance and profitability.

If you are going to use random drug testing, make sure it's part of your overall health strategy.

According to ACC, more than half of New Zealanders are binge drinkers, one in seven smokes cannabis, and eight percent have used three or more illegal drugs in the last year. That makes it inevitable that, within most businesses, someone is going to come into work impaired and some will be doing so regularly.

But is randomly getting your employees to pee in a cup the answer, as those glossy brochures from the drug testing companies suggest? I'd say maybe, if your employees are flying aeroplanes or operating heavy sawmill machinery. But in the vast majority of workplaces drug tests are not the promised simple silver bullet. In fact they may well do more harm than good.

The problem is that people's dignity and civil liberties are involved. It's pretty personal to be handing your urine over to a stranger or having them listen at the door while you pee to make sure you're providing the real thing. So if drug testing is done in an atmosphere of suspicion, or if employees feel unjustified assumptions have been made, they're going to get a little negative about the boss's management style. You know where that can lead.

Principles of natural justice are also involved. Tests may tell you someone has taken something but not whether they're actually impaired. So someone who smoked a joint three days ago may fail even though they're not impaired. Another person may be really hung-over and definitely impaired, but he or she will pass. Urine-based tests can detect cannabis for up to a week. Methamphetamine can be clear of the system in 24 hours.

There will be false positives, too. Employees could fail because of prescription medication, and positive drug tests caused by poppy seeds are not an urban myth. If you're going to use workplace drug testing you will need to find that right balance between protecting your workplace and not intruding on the rights of your employees beyond what is reasonable and necessary.

The best way to do this is to develop an alcohol and drug policy, ideally as part of your overall health and safety strategy. Develop this in consultation with your employees, and most will want to come and work in a place where they feel valued and respected.

Such a policy would cover matters like drinking and drug use at work (eg moderate drinking okay at work functions, illicit drugs not okay); what will happen if intoxication on the job occurs; alcohol and drug education; and support for those who admit they have a problem.

Involving employees as you develop such a policy is important. Firstly, they're more likely to embrace and support something they feel they've been part of creating. Secondly, employees can help identify workplace factors that may be contributing to problem drinking and drug use, such as long hours, tight deadlines or workplace issues like discrimination and harassment. Studies show this approach is far more likely to engender a positive and drug-free workplace than imposing drug tests on employees at random.

There's a lot of good evidence for the effectiveness of including alcohol and drug use in a wider health and safety strategy that includes other general issues such as smoking, nutrition, exercise, stress and so on. The National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (Australia), for example, found employees are much more receptive to drug prevention messages when they are part of an overall programme that is aimed at their good health, rather than at intimidating them into line.

So if you are going to use random drug testing, make sure it's part of your overall health strategy so employees can see the motivation for it is your concern for their wellbeing.

Lastly, one of the best tools for fostering a drug-free workplace is to let employees know you are open to helping them if they have a problem – and make this clear in your health and safety strategy. It's true, you're not responsible for what they do in their private lives; nor do you have to tolerate repeated bad employee behaviour forever. However, helping an employee who really wants to change into rehabilitation may be better for your workplace environment than firing them. There's a significant chance the person you replace them with will also be a drug or heavy alcohol user.

Modern, evidence-based thinking is that a supportive health-based approach is more effective in dealing with problematic drug use than a punitive approach. Reflect this in your workplace health and safety strategy and you may find there's no need for random drug tests at all.

Useful resource: ACC's employer guide to alcohol and other drugs (PDF only) Visit acc.co.nz and search for ACC4460



Ross Bell is director of the New Zealand Drug Foundation.