



DrugFree@WorkPlace

When addicted workers use drugs of abuse, they put their coworkers, customers, and clients at risk. While many job applicants have to pass an initial drug test as part of the hiring process, they are often not required to be randomly screened for drugs after being hired.

Mandatory random employee drug testing is usually reserved for employees in “safety sensitive” positions. However, in many companies employees in non-safety sensitive positions are responsible for making critical decisions and taking actions that directly affect the safety of coworkers and the financial well-being of the company. Shouldn’t these positions be considered safety sensitive?

History of Random Drug Testing

The United States first implemented mandatory random drug testing of safety sensitive employees during the 1980s. Since that time, not only has drug testing technology greatly improved, but there is also abundant experience with random testing that demonstrates its effectiveness in identifying drug users and deterring drug use.

What makes random testing so effective is the element of surprise. While employees know they will be tested, they are never quite sure of *when*, so random selections and testing should be performed at least quarterly. Some employers are selecting and testing more frequently.

The United States military has used random testing since the early 1980s with little controversy and great success. The trend for positive drug tests among sailors, for example, has shown a steady decrease since

random testing began. Last year only 2,120 samples tested positive out of 1.19 million tested, according to the Navy’s Alcohol and Drug Management Information Tracking System. Those numbers are impressive, considering the drug problem in the Navy was described as “epidemic” by the Department of Defense following the 1981 nighttime crash of an EA-6B Prowler, a plane designed to jam enemy communications and radar.

The Prowler crashed into the flight deck of the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz, killing 14 people, injuring 48, and destroying several fully fueled jets. Damage estimates just on the equipment was in the \$150 million range. Of the 14 sailors killed, the post-accident report pointed to 6 flight deck crewmembers who had drugs in their systems as a contributing factor, according to the Navy. The incident was one of the catalysts for the military’s “zero tolerance” policy for drug use instituted by President Ronald Reagan.

Also subject to random testing are the 12 million Americans with a commercial driver’s license under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Transportation. Similar programs have been developed for the nuclear power industry.

There has always been a close relationship between safety concerns and workplace drug screening programs. When one considers the fact that vehicle accidents account for a large portion of accidents and fatalities on the job every year, the importance of random drug testing at work becomes evident. Waiting until after an accident to implement drug testing doesn’t protect either the employee or an innocent

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victim, who could be seriously injured or killed in a car or truck accident. Random testing, however, can serve as a deterrent.

When the State of Ohio introduced random drug testing they found that absenteeism dropped 91%, there were 88% fewer problems with supervisors, and there was a 97% decrease in on-the-job injuries. Random testing for drugs of abuse has long been used in areas of employment evaluations, healthcare (screening patients), and the criminal justice system.

Value of Random Testing

Random drug testing at work makes the working environment a much safer place to be. Employees will be less worried about their welfare and will increase in productivity. Drug related incidents will be reduced and the well-being of employees will be increased.

Most companies in the U.S. are already applying pre-employment testing and post-accident testing to their employees, but by adding random drug testing a drug free workplace program is more likely to save lives, protect citizens, and ensure the financial stability of the company.

It is common to view random drug testing as intrusive and negative. However, while it may be unfamiliar to some people and therefore can be frightening, random testing not only reinforces the laws against drug use, it also identifies recent drug use,

quickly creating a strong deterrent against illegal drug use.

In fact, random drug testing may be the best tool employers have for deterring drug and alcohol use in the workplace. Here are just a few of the reasons why: random testing saves lives and prevents injuries, it helps employers identify workers with substance abuse issues and facilitate their treatment, it allows employees to easily say no to illegal drug use (“No, thanks, they drug test at work”), it reduces employer liability, and it is a fair way of testing.

However, while random testing has great value as a part of any drug free workplace program, it must always be introduced sensitively as part of a comprehensive package of education and access to confidential treatment. The primary aim should not be to fire an employee, but to discourage abuse, offer help, and treat.

Random testing can save careers and families as well as protect coworkers and customers. It is a proven, low cost strategy which identifies those needing help, reduces demand, cuts accidents and sick leave, improves attendance, and increases productivity. Random drug testing is a benefit to those tested—and not a threat.

Editor’s Note: Employers should check the law in their state before implementing a random testing program.

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