



Substance Control

Comprehensive Drug Testing
Can Be a Critical Measure
in Jobsite Safety

By Peter Cholakis

Even under ideal conditions, construction is a dangerous job. Every year, the industry consistently posts the highest number of fatalities and struggles with high worker costs. And when you combine the inherent dangers of construction with drug abuse, the numbers have nowhere to go but up.

Today, approximately 10 percent of America's working population abuse illicit drugs, which can include anything from illegal drugs such as cocaine, heroin or methamphetamines, to non-medical use of prescription drugs and alcohol abuse. In the construction sector, that statistic jumps to as high as 30 percent.

The devastating impacts of drug abuse upon corporate safety, productivity and the financial bottom-line are well documented. Up to 65 percent of on-the-job construction accidents can be related to substance abuse, while insurers note that drug and alcohol use is linked to 40 percent

of construction fatalities. Drug abuse also negatively impacts employee turnover, absenteeism, workplace violence, inventory shrinkage/employee theft and medical insurance utilization rates.

Significantly improving safety and financial performance is already a big incentive for any firm to drug test, but U.S. companies are also required by law to provide a safe workplace for all employees. And without a compre-

Employees Reporting Drug Abuse Within Past Year by Industry

Construction	20-25%
Manufacturing	10-20%
Hospitality/Lodging	12-28%
Retail	13-28%
Finance/Real Estate	15%

hensive, drug-free workplace program in place, maintaining a safe jobsite in the United States has become virtually impossible.

So how can contractors, owners, employees, unions and insurers, significantly improve jobsite safety? The answer lies in deterrence and detection of on-the-job substance abuse. It is the first step to ensuring a safer, happier workplace environment — and one that just might just save a drug abuser's life or your own.

Implementing a Program

Many corporations and contractors believe that following “DOT Standards” is the most effective way to create a safer, drug free workplace. Unfortunately, this is a false, yet common belief. DOT and other federally mandated drug testing regulations are required in certain limited circumstances (truck drivers for specified classes of vehicles, vehicles carrying a certain number of passengers, etc.).

However, this traditional type of drug testing is more than 20 years old and doesn't test for many of today's newer designer drugs. Furthermore, it is cumbersome to say the least, as it relies exclusively upon laboratory-based urine drug testing.

Urine testing, without direct observation during specimen collection, is little more than an intelligence test for drug abusers. Beating a test by adding any of the hundreds of products readily available on the Internet or substituting one person's specimen with drug-free urine or synthetic urine is commonplace. The practice has become so ineffective that there are arguably more drug abuser's beating urine tests than there are drug positives from this outdated method.

A good place to start with any drug-free workplace program is to establish goals and objectives appropriate for your organization. These will help you create a foundation to write your workplace drug policy: a prerequisite to the implementation of any drug testing



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program. When it comes to implementing a drug free workplace program, the documentation and impartial application of policy are critical. Not only do ad hoc approaches not work, they can cause serious employee moral and legal issues.

Drug testing is a strategic corporate issue affecting everyone in the organization, as well as the corporate image. Therefore, company-wide involvement and “buy-in” are needed across all levels, including CEOs, CFOs, COOs, human resources, loss prevention, risk management, occupational health and safety and employees. When implementing any drug testing program, it is recommended that the following areas be considered:

- Legal ramifications or “What rules apply”
- Type of testing: pre-employment, random, post accident, or return-to-duty
- Reasonable suspicion or cause
- Ease of use and administration of testing methods
- Immediacy of results

New Technologies: A Mini Case Study

When one construction firm decided to institute a random drug testing program for all the company's employees, it began researching drug testing tools. It discovered that many companies relied on lab-based urine testing. But, by nature, urine testing wouldn't lend itself well to a construction environment.

Collecting the sample would be troublesome, as laborers would have to be observed during the entire process to ensure no adulteration would take place. Furthermore, workers would have to leave the job site, possibly for hours at a time, for specimen collection. Plus, each test would cost more than \$150 to \$200 including lost labor. Urine testing was determined to be cost-prohibitive.

After further research, the firm discovered that oral-based drug testing eliminated many of the

drawbacks of urine testing and offered more effective results. In fact oral-based testing was the only technology that would allow the company to implement a truly random drug testing program. By collecting just a swab of a person's saliva oral fluid-based tests can detect drugs almost immediately after ingestion. Urine tests can only detect drugs six to nine hours after a drug has been ingested; enough time for the drug to metabolize and show up in urine.

Current oral-based testing tools were easy to administer and would allow the director of safety to do all of the testing himself, with results ready in less than 15 minutes. The impacts on this construction firm were astounding. Its accident rate dropped to near zero, workers compensation premiums dropped 13 percent and overall savings were calculated in the millions.

The following components are typically included in a comprehensive drug-free workplace program:

- A written, signed drug testing policy
- Drug tests (onsite as well as laboratory-based) using appropriate specimen types including oral fluid, urine and hair
- GC/LS/MS laboratory confirmatory testing
- MRO (medical review officer) services
- Employee assistance programs
- Ongoing drug education and awareness programs

Pre-Employment Testing

While many companies have been practicing pre-employment testing for more than 20 years, it has been only marginally effective at reducing drugs in the workplace for two reasons. First, pre-employment testing, by definition, only addresses a small part of the workplace. Second, it ignores the fact that more than 77 percent of drug abusers are currently in the workforce. Not to mention that it can easily be circumvented by drug abusers.

Any type of testing with a previously scheduled date allows applicants or employees that abuse drugs to employ a wide variety of methods to avoid detection as previously noted. This is reflected in the fact that random testing of the full workforce — while currently practiced by a small subset of corporate innovators — has proven to be the most effective deterrent to illicit drugs in the workplace.

Post-accident testing has become the norm for larger businesses, and most states allow employers to deny workers compensation benefits to employees who test positive for drugs of abuse. Reasonable cause or “suspicion testing” is helpful if employees and supervisors are trained to recognize the signs and symptoms of drug abuse. Lastly, “return-to-duty testing” is a means of enabling employees to come back to work, after testing positive to drugs of abuse. These employees usually complete an employee assistance program and/or similar substance abuse recovery program and undergo random testing.

A Workplace Benefit

A carefully designed comprehensive drug-free workplace program is a clear benefit to everyone: employers, employees, unions, insurers and owners. Zero-tolerance relative to substance abuse is critical; however, programs can be non-punitive in nature. While the mere existence of a random drug testing program acts as a strong deterrent, there will still be instances where employees are detected abusing drugs.

When this occurs, it is recommended that the employee be offered an opportunity to participate in, and successfully complete an employee assistance program. While not being allowed to work in a position that could negatively affect workplace safety during an interim period is a benefit, firing an employee, vs. temporary suspension, might not best serve anyone’s best interests. The company may be losing an otherwise excellent worker based upon the specific circumstances involved and/or might prove to be one in the near future.

Also, fellow non-abusing employees are more likely to come forward and report incidents of drug abuse, if they know that fellow workers will be provided an opportunity to address the issue rather than being terminated. Training employees, supervisors, and even families of the signs or symptoms of drug abuse may also be of significant benefit. How effective will an employee be if a family member has reached advanced stages of drug abuse?



The Future

Many, if not most, senior “C-level” professionals aren’t even aware of the significant threats posed by workplace drug abuse.

A variety of excuses are given for not drug testing and simply demonstrate a cultural tendency to sweep the problem under the rug, in addition to a lack of education and awareness. Some of the more popular ones are: “We don’t have a drug abuse problem at our company,” or

“Implementing a comprehensive drug-free workplace problem — inclusive of drug testing — would be too hard for our corporation.”

Unfortunately, a catastrophic event is required to drive some corporation’s to effect change. Yet, more and more companies are beginning to take the advice of their safety and risk management teams and proactively address workplace drug abuse.

Drug-free workplace programs and innovative technologies such as oral fluid-based random testing offer contractors a means to protect themselves and their workers from this pervasive problem. With multiple avenues available to help solve the problem of workplace drug abuse, the final question remains, “Why don’t you test?”

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A comprehensive drug-free workplace program includes test of several different specimens.

These can include oral fluids (shown on top) and onsite urine tests (center and bottom).