

Drugs in the Workplace What Some Employers are Doing

By Cornelius Frolik, Dayton Daily News

According to survey data and experts, substance abuse problems among Ohio workers can result in:

- Workplace injuries;
- Higher medical costs for their employers;
- More frequent absenteeism; and
- Reduced productivity.

Employers pay on average **\$7,000** per employee annually to deal with unaddressed substance abuse problems among workers, according to some estimates.

In the hopes of avoiding these and other troubles, many employers in Ohio screen job candidates for drugs and alcohol, and some randomly or routinely test their employees for intoxicating substances.

Employers that drug test job applicants and current workers are less likely to have drug users on their payrolls, experts said. Companies across the region that conduct drug tests have seen a decline in results that come back positive for drugs.

But some experts warn that drug testing is not always effective to identify substance abuse, and simply taking punitive action against people who test positive can be counterproductive.

“Employers can say to applicants, ‘I am going to give you a chance to come and work for me, but I am also going to be doing random drug testing, and if you come back with dirty urine, then I’ll either refer you or terminate you,’” said Helen Jones-Kelley, executive director of the Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services Board of Montgomery County.

Many otherwise qualified and competent workers struggle with drug abuse and addiction, and they could be model employees if they receive treatment.

It’s All about Safety

In 2011, about 9.8 million full-time U.S. workers — 18 and older — either abused or were addicted to drugs or alcohol in the previous 12 months, according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, which is conducted by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

About 8.4% of adult full-time workers, and 9.8% of part-time workers (or 3.2 million employees) had a drug or alcohol problem within the last year, the administration said. The number and share of Americans with substance abuse problems has declined for years.

About 70% of people who struggle with alcohol or drug abuse or addiction have jobs, the survey said.

People with substance abuse problems often are unreliable employees, and their use of intoxicants may be hazardous to their health and the health of their co-workers.

“It’s a safety issue,” said Tony Seegers, director of labor and human resources policy with the Ohio Chamber of Commerce. “We don’t want to have injured workers, and we don’t want to see companies’ workers’ compensation rates go up.”

Workers who get high on drugs or drink heavily often cannot think clearly, and they may make poor decisions or serious mistakes, according to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Their work quality is often inconsistent, and they may have trouble concentrating or focusing. Their productivity may suffer, and they may miss work more often than sober employees. Personal appearance and hygiene may deteriorate, and they often have a lot of health problems.

“Sober people have better psychomotor skills and judgment, and accordingly, the risk of them getting injured is smaller than

people who are under the influence,” said Abe Al-Tarawneh, superintendent of the division of safety and hygiene at the Ohio Bureau of Workers’ Compensation. “Abuse of these substances affects judgment and psychomotor skills and it affects their reaction time.”

The Case of ‘Kate’

Kate (whose asked her last name not be used to protect her current job), a local resident in her late 40s, said she was an alcoholic and abused cocaine and marijuana when she worked for a local auto manufacturer in the 1980s and 1990s.

She said what started off as a drink at lunch escalated to the point where she operated vehicles and machinery drunk. She wrecked company property. She started leaving for lunch and not returning. Her work attendance was terrible, and her job performance suffered.

“I was so incapacitated at work that I couldn’t do the job,” she said. “It cost the company money, and it cost my co-workers their time, and I didn’t care because I was chasing a high.”

She said the company only tested employees for drugs and alcohol after an accident occurred.

Many employers voluntarily conduct drug tests in the hopes to identify drug abuse. Some employers, such as certain transportation companies, must drug test workers under federal law.

A 2011 poll released in September 2011 by the Society for Human Resource Management said about 57% of employers conduct drug tests on all job candidates, while only 29% do not perform any drug tests on candidates.

Promoting Drug-free Workplaces

Last year, another survey of about 169 businesses in Ohio found that roughly 79% of respondents said they drug test job candidates.

Companies that implement drug testing and promote drug-free workplace policies are less likely to have drug users apply for their job openings, experts said.

That helps explain why only about 3.5% of pre-employment drug tests in Ohio come back positive, according to information from Working Partners, a Reynoldsburg-based firm that provides training nationwide to businesses that want to operate drug-free workplace programs.

“Employers who operate drug-free workplace programs report diminishing rates of positive test results, as the area from which they draw applicants becomes aware of the employer’s program,” said Dee Mason, president of Working Partners (www.workingpartners.com).

“People sometimes make bad decisions, but if they have the right skill sets and work ethic, they could be an asset to a business if they get professional help.”

- Helen Jones-Kelley, executive director of the Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services Board of Montgomery County

Last year, 6,300 employers in Ohio participated in the state’s Drug-Free Safety Program, which requires employers to conduct pre-employment or post-employment drug screenings to receive a discount on workers’ compensation premiums, according to the Ohio Bureau of Workers’ Compensation. Many companies have drug-free policies and test workers but do not currently participate in the program.

Promoting drug-free policies also provide an incentive to current workers to abstain from abusing drugs, because they know their companies value a sober workforce and drug use could put their jobs at risk, experts said.

National studies have shown that there is much higher prevalence of self-reported illicit drug use among workers who are employed by



companies that do *not* test for drugs than among those that do, according to Dr. Barry Sample, director of science and technology for the Employer Solutions business of Quest Diagnostics, a New Jersey-based drug-testing company.

“Clearly, drug testing itself serves as a deterrent for keeping drug users out of an employer’s workforce,” he said.

Still, it does not guarantee a completely drug-free workforce. Some employers in the state have rejected qualified applicants because of a failed drug test. In addition, many employers have discovered their *current* employees were using or abusing drugs after performing a random or selective test.

In 2011, about 2.74% of work-related urine tests in the Dayton and Springfield region tested positive for drugs, according to laboratory data from Quest Diagnostics. The rate of positive tests was down from 3.01% in 2010 and 3.12% in 2009. Marijuana was the most common drug detected.

But a positive drug test should not necessarily lead to a job termination, stated Orman Hall, director of the Ohio Department of Alcohol And Drug Addiction Services. He said some highly skilled and highly competent employees struggle with addiction or substance abuse, and they might be able to overcome their destructive habits by getting help.

“Employers may be motivated to help those workers in their workforce who are struggling with addiction problems,” he said.

Jones-Kelley said people sometimes make bad decisions, but if they have the right skill sets and work ethic, they could be an asset to a business if they get professional help.

She said the Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services Board of Montgomery County has initiated a pilot program to assist workers with risky behaviors in getting the help they need so they can get the jobs they want. The board will work with local businesses to implement screenings, interventions and referrals to treat workers who are at a moderate or high risk of substance abuse, but otherwise have the right qualifications. Under the program, job applicants

who were not hired only because they failed a drug test will be given a second chance.

What Happens after a ‘Clean’ Test?

Some groups claim that drug testing is simply too ineffective at identifying and stopping substance abuse.

Some very addictive and harmful drugs, such as cocaine and alcohol, leave the body very quickly and will not show up in a urine test days later, while arguably less severe drugs, such as marijuana, often can be detected weeks later, said Gary Daniels, associate director with the ACLU of Ohio. Many companies do not test for alcohol, even though some studies suggest that marijuana is not as addictive or harmful as booze and spirits.

He said most substances can only be detected in the urine several days after use. Also, most employers only test employees before hiring them, and that proves nothing except the employees were substance-free when they took the test, according to Daniels.

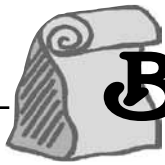
“If you pass a pre-employment drug test, all that reveals is that you have none of the selected list of drugs in your system at that time,” Daniels said. “That may change tomorrow.”

Kate, the former addict who has been sober for nearly 15 years, said companies should support employees who want to get help for substance abuse. *But she also said companies can help crackdown on the activity by enforcing their own policies.*

*She eventually sought help from her company’s **employee assistance program**, which helps workers with drug abuse and other personal problems.* She feared her behavior would lead to her firing or worse. She was able to overcome her addiction through Alcoholics Anonymous and other support programs.

Kate said she was never disciplined at work for her absences, and managers never took corrective measures to improve her work output.

“It’s not that my company didn’t have good policies, they just didn’t enforce them,” she said. “The biggest thing that helps somebody like me, who is an alcoholic, is consequences.” ■



Strategies for Community Change

1. **Providing information** – Educational presentations, workshops or seminars or other presentations of data (e.g. public service announcements, brochures, community meetings, web-based communication, etc.)

2. **Enhancing skills** – Workshops, seminars or other activities designed to increase the knowledge level and skills of participants, members, and staff, as needed to achieve population outcomes.

3. **Providing support** – Creating opportunities to assist people in participating in activities that reduce risk or enhance protection (e.g. providing alternate activities to drinking, mentoring, referrals, support groups or clubs.)

4. **Enhancing access / reducing barriers** – Improving systems and processes to increase the ease, ability, and opportunity to utilize those systems and services (e.g. assuring transportation, safety, special needs, cultural and language sensitivity, and others.)

5. **Changing consequences** – Decreasing the probability of a specific behavior in order to reduce risk by altering the consequences for performing that behavior (e.g. citations, fines, revocations, and other loss of privileges.)

6. **Addressing physical design** – Changing the design or structure of the physical environment to reduce risk or enhance protection (e.g. parks, landscapes, signage, lighting, etc.)

7. **Modifying / changing policies** – Formal change in written procedures, by-laws, proclamations, rules or laws with written documentation and/or voting procedures (e.g. workplace initiatives, law enforcement procedures and practices, public policy actions, systems change within government, communities and organizations.) ■

Sources: "Defining the Seven Strategies for Community Change" by the Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA); Marathon County AOD Partnership Council (<http://healthymarathoncounty.org/alcohol-other-drugs/>).

