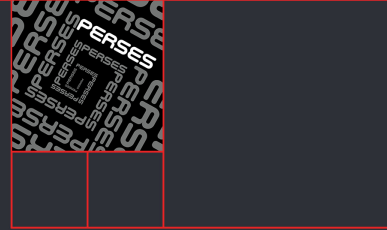


ADVISORY PAPER

Drugs and Alcohol in the workplace





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DRUGS AND ALCOHOL AS A MATTER OF HEALTH AND SAFETY AT WORK

Introduction

Managing the risks associated with the effects of the use of alcohol and drugs is an important element within broader concerns over health and safety at work, and concern for the pursuit of efficient productivity. However, it is crucial for effective management that a distinction is made between perceived risks and evidence based risk assessments, and crucially, that a sensible approach to drug and alcohol testing delivers a solution to those concerns that is positive and constructive, not damaging.

Research shows that the impact of drug and alcohol use on health and safety, and on productivity is minor compared to problems emerging from fatigue, stress and poor management. Many studies have found any relationship to be inconclusive, yet what remains is a sense of anxiety within management levels that something needs to be done about the problem. The clear answer to addressing both perceived and real problems is to go directly to the core of the concerns; performance impairment.

Testing for the presence of drugs and alcohol in the body does not provide good evidence, if any evidence at all, for performance impairment; all it does is detect trace elements within extremely diverse environments, from which simplistic judgments are drawn. It is a profoundly invasive procedure that has been shown to be damaging to worker/management relations, while at the same time it has been shown that workers as well as managers are concerned with the need for performance assessment at work as a risk reduction measure.

Perses advocates a combined system of Regular Impairment Testing (R.I.T.) and Reasonable Suspicion Testing (R.S.T). There are now various systems and technologies available for reliable assessment of alertness and psychomotor competence that can be modified to suit different task demands and that auto-modify to relate to specific users. Drug and Alcohol testing that is only introduced in circumstances commonly referred to as 'for cause' have proven to be the most efficient and most acceptable form of linking and unlinking substance impact.

Impairment Testing

Testing for alertness, cognitive capacity and motor response is by far a much more useful technique for monitoring and managing performance at work than drug and alcohol testing. It is also a non-invasive procedure that readily gains acceptance by both the workforce and management as a viable and constructive measure of fitness for work. Simple tests that take about one minute to perform assess predetermined capabilities and measure those as they relate to historical records shaped to an individual's baseline performance.

Units for presenting the tests can be made available as multiuser units placed on site, or as app-based single user units maintained by the employee on their smartphone or tablet.

The benefit of such a system is that it embraces all the potential reasons for performance impairment by measuring the impairment itself. The system has no care for whether the cause is drugs, alcohol, stress, fatigue, depression, illness, or lack of sleep, for instance, but allows for a conversation to start, opening up a dialogue of care for the welfare of the employee.

An extremely positive side-effect from a performance test is that it encourages users to improve their baseline performance, enhancing their lives beyond the workplace. The tests also reveal stresses and pressure that may be going unnoticed or are not being given the attention they deserve. It is remarkable how easy it is for us to tell ourselves we are fine and fit and capable when in fact we are tired, suffering from fatigue and badly needing some rest and nutrition.

Reasonable Suspicion

Taking on board a system of R.I.T. does not mean ignoring completely the issue of drug and alcohol testing. When there is good cause to conduct a drug and alcohol test it should be carried out with the consent of the employee and in circumstances that do not cause distress or embarrassment. It is very important to proceed on the basis of open discovery; that the results can suggest an impact, or that the results can rule-out the use of drug or alcohol consumption as a factor. The analysis of an extensive set of results from drug and alcohol testing over the last thirty years has shown that only a very small percentage present a positive result; thus, the tests become an important indicator that problems exist elsewhere, rather than being a mechanism for punishment and discipline. This combined process of R.I.T. and R.S.T. dramatically reduces the cost of drug and alcohol testing; financially and socially.

Of course, reasonable suspicion does not need to emerge directly from the performance impairment tests, or as some prefer to call them, alertness tests, it can and should emerge from good managerial observation and an interest in the welfare of one's employees. The need to proceed with a test on the basis of care and welfare for the employee is broadly agreed and has come from even the most surprising of sources; the Chair of the Federation of Police Superintendents.

Positive results should activate a process of discovery, support and plans for resolution before disciplinary measures are considered. If a drug or alcohol problem has emerged from stress or mental illness it is going to be extremely unhelpful to plunge directly into disciplinary measures, exacerbating the anxiety of someone who is likely to be a valued employee. Employees who are not valued often soon become non-employees, so the likelihood is that the person with whom you are dealing deserves and needs your care.

Performance Management

Collected data that is immediately available to management and that produces a track record of performance is an extremely valuable tool for enhancing the productivity of your team. The greater quantity and quality of knowledge about your workforce a manager has available to them, the greater they are able to direct, support and control their activity. Of course, the management team and company executives should engage with the system also. It is a relatively risk free and stigma free process that helps to promote a sense of unity. It should not go unnoticed that white collar workers are about three times as likely to fail a drugs and alcohol test than blue collar workers. Scientifically derived, regular performance assessment works to the advantage of a corporation's management structure in a way that is extremely difficult to see emerging from the imposition of random drug and alcohol tests. It becomes a resource for development rather than a tool for deconstruction. Keep in mind that data protections regulations will apply to any system of employee monitoring.

Some words of warning

There are distinct and specific problems associated with random drug testing that are worth being aware of besides it increasingly being regarded as expensive and ineffective.

Drug and Alcohol tests of all types are extremely vulnerable to deception and an active knowledge base in the ether of the internet is replete with numerous forms and methods of dodging. Because they are inherently an invasion of someone's body, the processes that must be employed to satisfy increasingly rigorous legal standards are both demanding and vulnerable to litigation. When implemented, it has been demonstrated that there is a dramatic decrease in the reporting of minor accidents so that a potentially harmful drug and alcohol test can be avoided; this is not good health and safety management. Due to changes in the laws surrounding data protection and the protection of individual's rights it is very likely indeed that legal challenges will start to be raised against the notion of consent, where consent is deemed to have been given under circumstances of a distinct imbalance of power; that is, consent or you will not be employed. Employees with a drug or alcohol problem should be afforded the same rights of confidentiality and support as those suffering from other medical and psychological conditions; a zero tolerance policy does not allow for this. Since the collected results of the last 30 years show a very small percentage of positive markers it has been suggested by legal voices on the matter that random testing actually imposes an unfair suspicion of guilt on a very large percentage of the workforce; so in short, if you prefer to follow a line of random testing and zero tolerance the advice is: Brace Brace.

Conclusions

There are strong and clear indications that by far the best method of dealing with drugs and alcohol as a health and safety issue is to adopt a combined process of Regular Impairment Testing (R.I.T.) and Reasonable Suspicion Testing (R.S.T.). Not only is it economically more sensible, but it is practically much more effective in that it embraces far more than just the elements of drug and alcohol in the way that it deals with performance impairment. It is a set of processes that is readily accepted by both employees and employees that is scientifically sturdy and actually has positive benefits to health beyond the workplace.

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Cognitive Impairment

Defining Impairment

Generally, impairment means a weakening or hindrance of functionality. When referring to people, impairment describes a cognitive hindrance characterised by an inability to pay attention, think and speak clearly, make decisions, and so on. Impairment can also be physical, which can include balance and mobility problems.

A definition of impairment must also include that in order for functionality to be weakened or hindered, there must be a standard, a norm, of functionality. Impairment is a reduction from one's individual optimal functionality and therefore is usually a temporary state.

Why Manage Impairment in the Workplace?

Workplace safety is enforced and assured in many ways: regulatory compliance, training, practice, supervision, personal accountability and awareness, risk management, equipment maintenance, signage, safety gear, and so on

.... but the value in each of these measures is reliant on, and limited by, the judgment and behaviour of people. For example, proper fall protection equipment will protect from a fall only if used, and choosing to use the equipment is a matter of behaviour and judgment. So too is enforcing and ensuring that others use the equipment as required.

But matters of behaviour and judgment are not always matters of choice. Behaviour and judgment are susceptible to impairment, which can result from unfortunate circumstances, like illness, as much as personal choices, like alcohol intoxication. What does this mean for the work environment? In the same way that machinery needs monitoring and maintenance to keep optimal functionality and prevent interruptions in productivity, people also need attention and care to ensure they are operating optimally.

But machinery and people are quite different. Machinery has no thoughts, no will, no ability to convince itself that it does not need rest or repair. Machinery does not use judgment to determine when it is safe to use. Machinery does not believe it cannot miss a day's work despite performing poorly or unsafely, and machinery does not think it will be punished as much for a safety-related mistake as it would be for stopping work because of a safety concern. People, on the other hand, can and often do these things.

In fact, our society tends to consider working through fatigue as an inevitability of modern life, and we may even celebrate it as a sign of resilience and strong work ethic, even where safety risks are present. This characteristic of our culture endures in spite of well-established research showing how commonly that cognitive impairment is a factor in workplace accidents and lost productivity. Impaired workers, such as those who are suffering from fatigue, pose safety risks not only because of the reduction in their physical functionality but also because of the reduction in their cognition, which includes judgment and self-awareness.

For example, the impaired worker may be more likely to forgo the fall protection equipment and downplay the regulation requiring its use.

An impaired worker may not actually recognise her own impairment; she may believe she is functioning at a high level, but in fact is just not cognisant of the deficiency in her performance. And because the nature of impairment and the dangers of fatigue are not as widely understood as they should be in workplaces, a dangerously fatigued worker may be too embarrassed to tell a supervisor that he feels unable to safely operate heavy equipment. Or he may convince himself that he is not impaired and that he can "pull it together." For these reasons, it is often only until after an incident has occurred that any impairment is discovered.

Causes of Cognitive Impairment

Because the brain controls both the mind and the body, cognitive impairment and physical impairment can often exist together. For example, acute drowsiness, a symptom of fatigue, can lead to heavy eyes and nodding off, and alcohol intoxication is known to affect motor skills and balance. Though not all forms or degrees of cognitive impairment have visible characteristics, behaviour will likely be affected through involuntary actions like yawning and other forms of diminished physical self-control.

Cognitive impairment can have a number of causes, and not all of them are visibly apparent. And because impairment affects judgment too, an impaired person may not recognise or agree that his or her performance is diminished. Because many conditions and circumstances can lead to impairment, employees and employers alike can mitigate its impact on workplace safety and productivity by learning more about it and its many causes.



Worker fatigue is one of the most common contributing factors to workplace accidents and near-misses. Fatigue can manifest from a number of reasons, both work-related and not. Most fatigue and its symptoms accompany sleep debt, an accumulation of insufficient restorative sleep, but it can also arise from mental or physical exertion, personal health factors, and psychosocial factors. Regardless of its cause, fatigue is more than just being tired; it can impair mentally as well as physically.

Shift workers, especially those who work rotating shifts, are especially susceptible to fatigue due to the disruption of their circadian rhythm, or sleep/wake cycle. The human biological system operates on an internal clock in which different functions run on different cycle lengths. The circadian rhythm lasts approximately 24 hours, with various functions rising or falling at

various times throughout. These rising and falling functions—heart rate, body temperature, and others—create a powerful physiological tendency to sleep at night and be awake during the day. Difficulties occur when work-time arrangements cause individuals to work against this tendency, which affects both the ability to remain alert and the ability to sleep.

Employees who work rotating shift schedules, in which they alternate between day and night shifts, are especially susceptible to sleep debt and associated fatigue symptoms because it takes time for a person to become better adjusted to a new schedule. In fact, at the beginning of every new shift cycle, workers are much more likely to experience what is commonly called “jet lag,” because they are working against two things: their natural circadian rhythms, which expect them to be awake during the day and asleep at night, and having become adjusted to their previous shift cycle and now must readjust.

Other forms of fatigue are not directly related to insufficient sleep but can arise from stress and would still be alleviated through rest. A workload too difficult or big to handle can lead to stress and fatigue, and so too can personal life crises and the stress they bring. Personal problems may also lead to cognitive impairment from distraction or preoccupation, which is discussed below.

Being sick or coming down with an illness can compromise one's alertness, as the body is working to fight the bug. The mind can be cloudy, and it can be hard to focus when dealing with a cold, the flu, a stomach bug, or other issues.

In the same way that people often feel obligated to work despite being fatigued, many often feel similarly when fighting illness, believing that working while sick is necessary, virtuous, or both. In reality, compromised alertness can cause serious performance detriments that may go unnoticed by the impaired employee.

In addition, presenteeism can cause illness to spread, creating a domino effect of sickness and lost productivity among an entire workforce.



Some employees may use over-the-counter or even prescription medications to combat their symptoms and be more effective at work. But although the medications may help how the employees feel, they may have side-effects that don't make up for the loss in alertness that the illness caused, instead causing a mild intoxicating effect. Even medications that claim to be "non-drowsy" formulas may still bear warnings about operating machinery or driving a car while using them.

Drugs

Pre-employment and random drug testing has been a regular fixture in workplaces since the 1980s, and some might think of drug use as the most common or most concerning cause of impairment among employees. Although it is relatively uncommon, especially when compared to other causes of impairment in the workplace, drug use is known to have been a contributing factor in incidents and deserves attention in workplace safety.



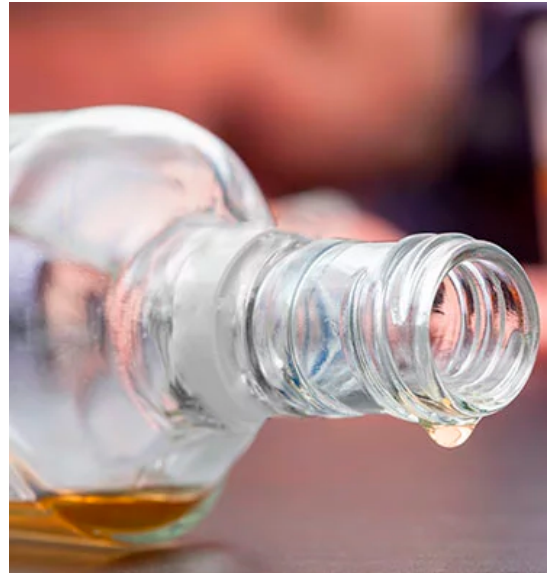
Although illicit and prescription drugs tend to impair in one way or another, they come in myriad types, forms, and usages, and the degree to which they impair differs from drug to drug and from person to person. Many workplace drug tests do not account for all possible intoxicating and impairing substances, including prescription and over-the-counter medicines, nor can they keep up with all new "designer" and "club" drugs that occasionally surface in our society. As a result, identifying intoxication and impairment from drugs can be tricky. It may even be true that someone could test as intoxicated but exhibit no impairment, and vice versa, as can be the case with marijuana.

Drugs also present another quandary: withdrawal. A person can have symptoms of withdrawal after stopping use of a drug to which he or she had become dependent. These symptoms can be mild or severe, and they can affect alertness and cognition. The dangers of withdrawal symptoms can exist whether the ceased substance was an illegal drug, prescription medication, or alcohol.

Alcohol

Alcohol intoxication is a bit more common than drug use as a factor in workplace incidents. Plus it is easier to identify through personal observation and body fluid testing. Impairment from alcohol intoxication is characterised by compromised balance and speech, diminished mobility and dexterity, and lessened focus, judgment, and decision-making. In fact, the symptoms of moderate alcohol intoxication and advanced fatigue are comparable if not indistinguishable from each other.

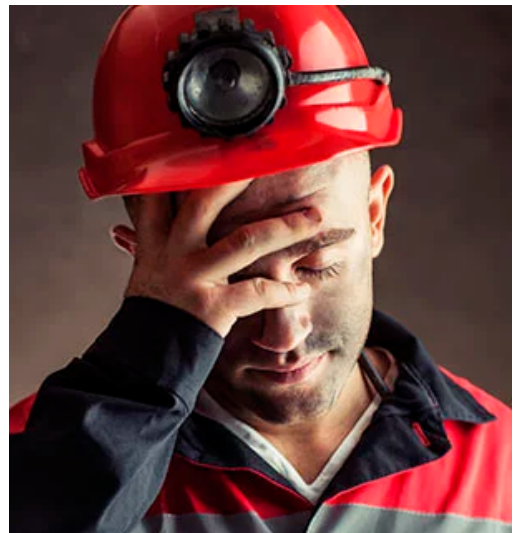
But the safety risk that alcohol intoxication can present a workplace is probably more often unrelated to drinking alcohol while on the clock or during a lunch break, as the issues that heavy drinking can cause can linger into the next day in the form of a hangover. The symptoms of a hangover might not be visible to supervisors or co-workers, but they can be severe, leading to painful headaches and sensitivity to noise and light, nausea and vomiting, and not to mention cognitive impairment, foggy-headedness, reduced reaction time, diminished mobility, and so on.



Emotional Distress and Preoccupation

Everyone can be affected by life's ups and downs, and these can cause us to focus on those things, whether they're bad or good, or even in between, as many things in life can at least cause our minds to wander. Our brains are very good at turning on "auto pilot," especially when doing repetitive or monotonous tasks, and a preoccupied mind may be unable to react as quickly to sudden problems as a focused mind.

Emotional distress caused by bad news or personal crises, like relationship or marital problems, the loss of a loved one, financial woes, or even animosity among co-workers may contribute to diminished attention to the work environment, potentially leading to diminished productivity and lapses in safety.



Where Impairment, or Non-Alertness, Fits into Safety Management

Being "fit for duty" means an individual is physically, mentally, and emotionally capable of performing his or her work without posing a danger. Yet many workplaces rely on measuring "lagging indicators"—things like the number of days since the last recordable incident, the results of safety audits and employee drug tests—to assume their present safety performance, and "fitness for duty" is often conflated with clean urine tests rather than the capability to perform work.

As a result, the word “impairment” has become associated with intoxication, and all the other causes of impairment tend to be overlooked. But the oversight may have persisted also due to a lack of methods to approach the wider problem, especially since the notion of “fitness for duty” gained understanding in the safety and human resources arenas. However, the advent of the Internet, cellular communications, mobile smart devices, and data analytics present new ways of tackling the issue of impairment in the workplace, and in a way that changes how we think about impairment.

A different approach to impairment within established workplaces represents a shift in culture, but cultural shifts are difficult to force. An issue with the term “impairment” is that it implies the presence of something rather than a reduction of something, and therefore it remains easy to synonymise it with intoxication, the presence of intoxicants. Using different terms that do not carry the stigma of impairment might help bring about the cultural shift more easily, for example, reduced alertness or non-alertness. The word alertness better implies a norm or standard, and people may more readily understand that one’s alertness can vary for many reasons rather than realise that impairment is also a matter of degrees and many causes, when only the language used is different.

Addressing fatigue and non-alertness creates a cultural shift where supervisors and managers better understand the human element of their workforce. This can lead to more intelligent shift and break scheduling by optimising crews or job tasks according to time of day, even potentially reducing the need for overtime because shift performance is improved. Plus, employees become more attentive to their own states of mind and fatigue levels. When non-alertness is considered (instead of problematic impairment), it can improve mindfulness and self-accountability among the workforce, and it can reduce the number of occasions in which poor performance or unsafe behaviour would lead to a punitive response if not also cause a safety incident.

The shift in culture that managing alertness and fatigue can inspire is both cause and consequence of an absence of regulatory guidance in many industries. Where scant regulations do exist, they focus on limiting the number of hours worked over particular numbers of days. Although such limitations are important to help reduce the impact of work-related fatigue, they do not—and cannot—address all possible sources of fatigue or impairment generally. Because impairment can result from innocuous and common circumstances, regulatory agencies cannot regulate affect life outside the workplace nor things unrelated to the occupational arena.

As a result, it remains the responsibility of businesses and organisations to proactively manage employee alertness if not also monitor their fatigue. Even in companies where non-alertness or fatigue risk may be thought to have minimal safety impact, alertness monitoring and fatigue management can benefit performance and improve productivity because managers know when employees are operating at their best and can manage them appropriately in the case they’re having an off day.

AlertMeter[®] is a simple graphic cognitive impairment test that takes 60 to 90 seconds to complete at the start of a shift, before undertaking complex or safety-sensitive tasks, when returning from lunch, or other times as appropriate for your work environment. It is sensitive to any deviation in an employee’s normal alertness levels, whether because of fatigue, alcohol, illness, or other causes, which allows a designated supervisor to assess the employee’s fitness for work before he or she can pose a risk.

More about AlertMeter[®] from Predictive Safety in the next newsletter or contact Perses Ltd for more information.