

Opinion Piece: Why not all companies test for alcohol – and why they should.

By Rhys Evans, Director at ALCO-Safe

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Alcohol and substance testing forms part of the health and safety policies and procedures in many industries. Industries that have particularly rigorous and controlled safety standards - such as the petro-chemical, mining, construction and rail sectors - are especially strict when it comes to testing for alcohol. However, there are still a great number of organisations across a variety of verticals that do not employ the same cautionary practice, potentially resulting in significant loss to the business.

The Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Act General Safety Regulation 2A states that every employer is obligated to stop persons from entering or remaining at work if they appear to be under the influence of intoxicating liquor or drugs.

In some industries, such as those mentioned above, organisations are subjected to annual and spot audits on their health and safety practices. Non-compliance can land these businesses in extremely hot water, so they generally adhere to regulation and ensure that regular, if not daily, testing is done. As a rule, this testing should form a regular part of every business's health and safety policy.

Why are businesses so afraid to test?

Many organisations are fearful of implementing alcohol and drug testing for a number of reasons, albeit many of them misplaced. There is a general misconception that implementing an alcohol and drug policy in the workplace is difficult and costly. Some companies worry about the potential liability and legal ramifications should there be any positive testing on site, and for this reason prefer to avoid the process altogether.

This avoidance can be detrimental to the organisation, and the benefits of testing far outweigh any assumed risks or costs. Not having and enforcing an alcohol and drug policy exposes the business to serious risk. If a company is caught infringing the OHS Act they stand to face severe consequences and potentially even operational shut down. Over and above this, the safety of an organisation's employees is at risk due to alcohol and drug related accidents.

Why is it so important for businesses to test?

Although a company is not necessarily held liable if an intoxicated person injures themselves while on duty, it could be held accountable should a co-worker be injured and the proper alcohol testing was not conducted. Furthermore, if a company is aware of the presence of an intoxicated person on site and deliberately turns a blind eye, they could face debilitating legal action in the event of an accident or injury.

The impacts of allowing an intoxicated person on site, whether knowingly or not, are not only limited to injuries. People under the influence of drugs and alcohol are generally less productive than when sober.

Increased absenteeism is also a common issue linked to alcoholism, as alcohol not only impacts the immune system, but people also commonly take "sick days" to recover from hangovers. Repeatedly absent staff negatively impacts operational efficiency.

Lastly, intoxicated people are more prone to accidents, which could cause damage to company assets. Unnecessary repairs and replacements of damaged equipment can be expensive, and avoided if the right procedures and protocols are in place to prevent alcohol related incidents from

occurring.

How can businesses adopt an alcohol and drug testing policy?

Drafting a policy around substance abuse in the workplace, or adding one to an existing health and safety policy, is not a complex endeavour. In fact, reputable providers of drug and alcohol testing equipment usually offer services to assist organisations with this process, taking them through the regulations laid out in the OHS Act and working them into the company specific policy. Even without this assistance, the process is less complicated than many people think.

A typical Alcohol and Drug policy should state the related clauses from the OHS Act around alcohol and drugs at the workplace. It should also list the company's specific stance towards it, whether that be a zero-tolerance policy or a slightly more lenient one which allows alcohol up to the legal limit. Some companies may choose to allow alcohol under certain circumstances, such as at a work function, however should still ensure that the legal driving limit for alcohol is maintained should any staff be required to drive home afterwards.

The policy should also clearly state what testing measures will be put in place, and the frequency of testing - be it daily, at random or only under certain circumstances such as when an incident occurs. Testing can be done based on suspicion of alcohol consumption, on entry to the premises, following an incident or accident, or even only on entering high risk areas within the business.

The consequences of positive testing must also be included, outlining what is reasonably expected of both the employee and employer. Disciplinary action need not be specifically stated, however the procedure for disciplinary action should be advised. For example, if an employee tests positive for alcohol in their system, they may be sent home indefinitely and notified of their disciplinary hearing date with the expectation that they attend the hearing.

It is advised that businesses also include some educational information around the reason for their policy, and the potential risk of alcohol and substance abuse at the workplace. Employees who are aware of the risks to themselves and others are less inclined to infringe on policy.

As to the cost and initial capital outlay of purchasing testing equipment? Well, companies typically recover this within a few months of initiating testing. The reduction in absenteeism and alcohol related incidents almost immediately brings about a return on investment. It is our experience that very few organisations, and certainly none with more than a handful of employees, don't have someone within their workforce who functions under the influence of alcohol. Usually, these numbers reduce dramatically purely on implementation of a policy, and always on implementation of testing.