

February 15, 2000

## Latest Statistics Offer Clues in War on Substance Abuse

**Drug testing and education are powerful weapons against workplace drug and alcohol use**

*Drug abuse in the United States has declined significantly from the peak levels of the late 1970s, but it continues to exact an enormous economic toll. According to one expert, drug consumers spend \$60 billion a year on drugs, draining money from the economy that would otherwise support legitimate spending or savings. When including indirect costs—such as workers' compensation claims, decreased productivity and higher liability insurance premiums—drug and alcohol addiction in the United States amounts to a staggering number: more than \$277 billion in the most recent year for which economic data are available.*

*Widespread knowledge and concern over the dangers of drugs have made pre-employment drug testing common practice. The full-employment economy of recent years, however, has tested many companies' commitment to their workplace drug programs. Some organizations forego initial drug testing for fear of losing an attractive prospect in today's ultra-competitive labor market, while others delay the tests to give employees an opportunity to clean up. Industry experts, on the other hand, consider these practices very dangerous: the depleted labor pool holds a greater percentage of applicants with undesirable backgrounds. Companies that are dedicated to a drug-free workplace recognize the need for testing is greater than ever and have recommitted to or expanded their drug-screening programs.*

*Organizations cannot win the fight against substance abuse by selectively enforcing their anti-drug policies according to convenience. Companies need to view such programs not as profit drains, but as sources of pride. A drug-free workplace creates an environment that fosters maximum productivity. Evidence shows that drug and alcohol abusers gravitate to firms with less restrictive programs. To avoid becoming the employer of choice for these at-risk workers, companies should develop and enforce a tough workplace drug initiative, one that includes employee education and specific consequences for violations. An understanding of the factors that generated the current drug crisis can also help organizations prevent future epidemics by learning from the mistakes of the past.*

### Drugs in the United States

The nation's current drug epidemic represents the second in U.S. history. The first epidemic took place during the latter portion of the 19th century

and the beginning of the 20th century, when narcotics were available in an open market. A leading pharmaceutical company introduced heroin as a cough suppressant in 1898, a period during which many deaths resulted from coughing-related illnesses like tuberculosis. Another manufacturer marketed cocaine as an all-around beneficial stimulant. Available in 14 different forms, cocaine was put into hay fever powders and beverages, and peddlers even sold it door-to-door. Drug use became widespread in the absence of legislation, but the American population grew disenchanted with the dangerous effects of narcotics, which ultimately led to legislation and the end of the epidemic.

According to Dr. David Musto, a professor of the history of medicine at Yale University, the nation's acquired distaste for drugs evolved into what he terms the "parental quandary." The American people responded first with punishment, enacting anti-drug legislation for the first time in the nation's history. The Harrison Narcotics Act of 1914 banned over-the-counter sales of narcotics and was later interpreted by the U.S. Supreme Court to prohibit physicians and pharmacists from prescribing narcotics to maintain simple addiction. One of the forces that drove the successful passage of anti-drug legislation was the use of exaggeration by opponents of drug use. Wild claims about the potency of narcotics helped to gain support for anti-drug legislation, but these exaggerations lost credibility for their source—in some cases, the federal government—when experimentation proved them to be false. Finally, the nation responded with silence. Once the epidemic ended, Americans decided to stop drug education efforts, believing ignorance a safer option than raising awareness of these harmful substances that no longer threatened society. "It's very human and natural to either want to avoid discussion or—if you have to discuss it—to exaggerate," said Dr. Musto. "These two approaches, which are very human and

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understandable from a parental point of view, are not, in the long run, the best policies.”

The loss of credibility and the societal amnesia that resulted from this quandary set the stage for the nation’s current epidemic, which started in the 1960s and has only recently begun a slow decline.

### **Drugs in the Workforce**

Society’s drug problems do not end at the office door. In fact, recent studies indicate that 73 percent of adult drug abusers are employed. Up to eight percent of the full-time working population between ages 18 and 49 have used illegal drugs in the last 30 days, according to the latest research published by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the federal government’s lead agency for all areas of substance abuse prevention. Nearly eight percent of this demographic also report current heavy alcohol use—consuming five or more alcoholic beverages on one occasion at least five times during the previous month. The consequences of this substance abuse include decreased productivity and lost income for the abuser and the employer, as well as higher costs in the form of increased accidents, absenteeism, turnover and medical costs. Drug users also bring a host of other potential problems to the workplace, such as domestic violence and illegal drug sales to support their habit. During a recent investigation, for instance, undercover agents at a manufacturing facility made drug purchases totaling \$13,000 in a single week.

The comparatively small percentage of substance abusers in the workplace produces substantial losses for the national economy and for their employers’ bottom lines. The latest study by SAMHSA on worker drug use shows that employees who reported current illegal drug use were more than twice as likely as their sober counterparts to have worked for three or more employers in the past year, 9.3 percent versus 4.3 percent. These same employees were two-and-a-half times

as likely to have skipped at least one day of work in the previous month, 12.9 percent compared to 5.0 percent, and a significantly higher proportion had voluntarily left an employer in the prior year, 24.8 percent versus 15.4 percent. The study reveals similar findings among employees who reported current heavy alcohol use. In a recent survey released by the U.S. Department of Labor, a prominent manufacturer disclosed that employees who use illicit drugs average 40 days of sick leave each year, while non-users only use 4.5 days. Replacing these less-productive workers further taxes their employers’ resources.

At the same time, companies can do much to protect their assets from the ravages of substance abuse. Extensive evidence shows the success of workplace initiatives in reducing drug and alcohol abuse. Workplace drug programs yield a significant investment return through increased productivity and decreased employee turnover. An East Coast-based research organization found that the costs of prevention and treatment programs average only \$21 to \$27 per employee, which compares favorably to the expense of recruiting and training replacements for personnel terminated as a result of substance abuse problems—as much as \$50,000 per employee for members of the Fortune 500. The distribution of substance abusers in the workforce also reveals the effectiveness of employer initiatives. Among people who regularly abuse drugs, alcohol or both, 44 percent work for companies with fewer than 25 employees; 43 percent are employed with mid-size organizations, those with 25 to 499 employees; and 13 percent work for large companies, employing 500 or more people. These percentages reflect the fact that workplace drug initiatives, found primarily in large corporations, convince substance abusers to seek work in less-regulated environments.

### **Building a Drug-Free Workplace**

Unlike the drug epidemic at the turn of the century, the current crisis confronts businesses during a more structured period. The U.S. federal

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government has passed extensive legislation to govern substance abuse. The development of effective drug testing has made the procedure affordable and available on a widespread basis. An entire industry has developed around the premise of eliminating substance abuse in the workplace. Companies now have a host of resources to help them develop a comprehensive anti-drug initiative.

**Seek professional assistance.** Many sources in the public and private sectors can help companies develop an effective drug-free workplace program. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), for instance, publishes a sample drug and alcohol abuse policy on its web site at [www.usdoj.gov/dea](http://www.usdoj.gov/dea). The site also offers a wealth of educational publications and up-to-date statistics on drug use and law enforcement. A service of SAMHSA, the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention's Workplace Helpline at 1-800-843-4971 or 1-800-WORKPLACE (967-5752) offers yet another valuable source for guidance in establishing a drug-free workplace initiative. Trained specialists are available Monday through Friday, from 9 a.m. until 8 p.m. Eastern time, to assist in developing and evaluating programs and policies to control workplace substance abuse. This free service, also available at [helpline@samhsa.gov](mailto:helpline@samhsa.gov), provides consultation in such areas as policy development, employee education and drug testing. In addition, companies may enlist the services of private consultants or seek the advice of organizations that have already implemented successful drug-free initiatives.

**Establish a zero-tolerance policy.** Next, companies must establish a written policy that clearly explains the organization's stance on substance abuse. This document needs to outline the goals and objectives of the company's drug and alcohol testing program, while providing guidance to supervisors and employees regarding their responsibilities in upholding the program. The policy should also address employee education initiatives, testing policies and procedures, and conse-

quences for policy infractions. To be effective, the policy must apply to every member of the organization, from the chief executive officer to the newest employee, and the company must enforce the policy uniformly. Selective enforcement will only weaken the toughest anti-drug policy, and public knowledge of favoritism could bring negative repercussions. One Northeastern transit company learned this fact when news reports revealed inconsistent enforcement of its strict drug and alcohol policy. The press cited numerous examples of the organization's historic patronage and favoritism, which dated back several years.

**Develop a testing program.** Experts recommend that organizations start their testing programs with pre-employment drug screening for all positions. At an average cost of \$35 per drug test, the American Management Association estimates annual drug-screening expenses of approximately \$8,000 for employers with fewer than 500 workers and approximately \$281,000 for companies with more than 10,000 employees—nominal figures given the relative size of the organizations. Where permitted by state law, companies should also use universal random testing to ensure that employees remain drug-free. Of those employers who test for drugs, most require only pre-employment and for-cause testing—a weakness in the eyes of industry experts. Many companies have limited random testing to employees occupying safety and security positions. A national drug expert recommends that organizations expand their testing programs to include random testing for all employees, an enhancement that will benefit all members of the organization. “The point of drug testing is to prevent problems—not to catch bad guys,” he said. “It's a reason not to use.” Many experts consider pre-employment screening more of an intelligence test than a true measure of drug usage.

Hard-core substance abusers know many ways to beat drug tests. A current popular film shows a scene where a man requests a urine sample from

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his recently rehabilitated son. The teenager takes a specimen from his refrigerator, warms it to the appropriate temperature and gives it to his father. The scene makes light of a very serious situation, while showing drug users an effective way to beat a test. The Internet also offers volumes of information on defeating screening measures. To ensure the integrity of their testing programs, companies should insist upon sending applicants and employees to a collection site associated with an accredited laboratory certified by SAMHSA. Such an agency can provide proper collection, administration, chain of custody and testing procedures, virtually eliminating the opportunity for cheating. Many masking efforts, for example, involve dilution of the urine. A competent facility will flag diluted urine as suspect. One expert in drug testing believes that any deliberate attempt to mask or dilute a drug should automatically disqualify a candidate for a job.

Opponents of drug testing have expressed concern over the potential harm of inaccurate test results or privacy violation. Others claim that drug screening decreases productivity by conveying distrust of employees. Such mindsets serve as one of the biggest challenges that employers face in establishing an effective drug-free workplace initiative. "There's a hurdle to get over in thinking about drug testing as punitive and mean-spirited," said the national expert cited above. "The most important thing is to realize that it's a caring way to approach your workforce." Drug-free workplace programs benefit employees who do not abuse substances by helping to ensure their co-workers also remain sober. These initiatives also benefit substance abusers by providing an incentive not to abuse drugs, while often offering treatment programs for those who do.

*The most recent studies indicate that substance abuse in the United States has, for the most part, leveled off and may even show signs of decline. Even*

*so, current abuse levels remain unacceptably high, draining extraordinary sums of money from American corporations and the U.S. economy at large. To fight this threat, more companies need to develop and enforce anti-drug programs, following the example of the U.S. Department of Justice. These programs should include workplace drug testing, employee education initiatives, and strict consequences for policy violations.*

*Drug education efforts should include the history of drug abuse. By teaching future generations the mistakes of the past, society may avoid the collective amnesia that led to the current drug crisis. The example of cocaine offers a poignant lesson. Introduced in an open market, cocaine quickly gained widespread popularity in 1884 as an "all-American drug," but its devastating effect on consumers rapidly led to public horror and revulsion. In a 1910 message to Congress, U.S. President William Howard Taft described cocaine as "the most threatening of the drug habits that has ever appeared in this country." Such history lessons can play an important role in helping the United States move forward in the fight against substance abuse.*

*Ideally, companies need to regard their anti-drug initiatives as a badge of honor—not as a necessary evil. By emphasizing a commitment to a drug-free workplace, an organization sends a clear message. Employees recognize that the company has taken significant measures to provide a safe work environment. Business partners feel more secure working with a drug-free organization. Substance abusers know to seek employment elsewhere. Those employers who feel they cannot afford a substance abuse program invite disaster; indeed, the risks are so great that they cannot afford to lack one.*



The Lipman Report Editors