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# Substance Abuse in the Workplace

All organisations are required by law to comply with the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA), which specifies a zero tolerance approach to intoxication in the workplace. This includes both alcohol and narcotic substances. Not only do intoxicated employees pose a danger to themselves and their co-workers, substance abuse can also result in decreased productivity, health problems, increased absenteeism, and a host of other "soft" issues.

Breath alcohol detectors and drug testing solutions are thus often included in the essential equipment of many organisations, particularly those operating in hazardous environments such as mining, construction and manufacturing. However, equipment alone is simply not sufficient, no matter how sophisticated. An effective substance abuse prevention programme should always include the development of clear and fair policies, ongoing education, and comprehensive product training.

South African courts have ruled that the prevention of substance abuse in the workplace is a management responsibility, which means the onus is on the employer to ensure that employees who are

intoxicated do not commence with work. The right equipment is necessary to detect substance abuse and enforce zero tolerance. However, the process does not begin and end there.

Before any testing can take place, organisations need to develop a substance abuse policy that clearly outlines all the procedures involved. This policy defines the parameters for the company and employees to adhere to in order to create a safe and secure environment for everyone. The policy should describe the reasons for conducting testing, including OHSA compliance, health and safety concerns, business risks, and so on. The policy also needs to fully outline the testing procedure, including where the test will be conducted, who will do the testing, and the nature of the screening; that is, whether testing is random or compulsory for every employee on entry to the workplace. The policy also needs to set out and explain in the disciplinary procedures that apply in the event of an employee testing positive for substance abuse.

Employees need to be made aware of the policy, of the possibility that they may be tested, of the testing procedures involved,

and of the consequences should they be found to be intoxicated. Employees need to agree to adhere to this policy as one of their conditions of employment. When developing the policy, it is advisable to consult a subject matter expert. Involving the unions is also advisable given the extremely sensitive nature of the issues involved, particularly the issue of alcohol- and drug-testing of employees. Getting the unions on board prevents all sorts of issues in the future, including allegations of unfair labour practice as well as lengthy and costly CCMA cases. ('CCMA' is the abbreviation used for the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration.)

Education should form an essential building block of any organisation's efforts to curb substance abuse. One of the most common challenges organisations face is that their employees simply are not aware of (or choose to ignore) the full extent of the harmful consequences of alcohol and drug abuse, both on their health and in their personal lives, not to mention at the workplace. If education (including why the testing is being done and how it will be conducted) does not form part of the process, a negative mindset may prevail



among employees, and they will become resistant to the process. Simple things such as explaining that a breathalyzer test in the morning does not mean that employees cannot have a drink or two the night before will go a long way towards improving attitudes towards the testing. In addition, emphasising that testing improves everyone's safety; and explaining that it is not just a way for the company to fire people, will be of enormous benefit. Helping people to understand the financial consequences of alcohol abuse, as well as the tendency of alcohol to drive physical abuse and aggression, can assist employees in understanding the benefits of abstaining from or reducing alcohol consumption. Educational talks to the distribution of

pamphlets and booklets. However, whichever format organisations choose, they should be aware that education is an on-going process. It is not sufficient to have a single session during the induction of new employees. It may also be a good idea to get a SHEQ (Safety, Health Environmental and Quality) representative or other expert to demonstrate to employees how the testing equipment works. During or at the end of the demonstration, employees should be given the opportunity to ask questions. Understanding the "science" of the testing procedure will help to put employees' minds at ease. Training the relevant staff members in the proper use of the testing equipment is essential. All staff members who are required to conduct tests need to be competent with the equipment to ensure a fair process is followed. They also need

to understand why it is important to conduct two tests with at least half an hour in between in the case of a positive first reading, and how substances such as breath freshener, mouthwash, cough mixture, and so on can affect results. Seeking expert advice on these matters is something to be considered. Substance abuse is a known problem in many industries, especially those that require employees to work with dangerous equipment. The implementation of a comprehensive substance abuse prevention programme is essential for the safety of employees and others, ensuring compliance with the OHSA, and maintaining a productive, harmonious working environment. For more information visit [www.alcosafe.co.za](http://www.alcosafe.co.za). ■