

HR in the stoned age: prescription pills in the workplace

Thought leaders share their views on the HR profession and its direction for the future

Martin Murtland

The 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health reported 18.9 million Americans misuse prescription medication – second only to marijuana. Drug addiction is no longer limited to the big cities; it has become a growing concern throughout the entire country. Every community from rural to urban is affected by the increase of opioid usage in the USA. It is a stunning fact: over two million Americans are estimated to have a problem with opioids, and according to the CDC, the opioid crisis claimed 64,000 American lives last year and more than 140 Americans die every day from an opioid overdose. The non-medical use of prescription psychotherapeutic drugs – and of pain relievers in particular – is now second only to marijuana use among the nation's most prevalent drugs of choice.

Widespread opioid abuse costs employers nearly US\$12bn annually (Douglas, 2017) with 12 per cent and higher (depending on the industry) of the workforce under the influence of drugs at work. Dependence on opioids could decrease employee productivity, increase absenteeism and increase workplace accidents causing the employees to be a safety hazard to themselves and their coworkers.

Drug abuse's impact on productivity

There have been many startling statistics about the impact of drug use on the workplace. The US Department of Labor[1] found:

- drug users are absent from work an average of five days a month due to drug use;
- drug and alcohol abuse in the workspace cause 65 per cent of on-the-job accidents;
- substance abusers use three times the normal level of employee health benefits and incur 300 per cent higher medical costs; and
- substance abusers are 10 times more likely to steal from the company or other employees.

Employee drug testing[2] is a single data point in – but an integral part of – the assessment of an employee or candidate. Most employee drug screening has previously included testing for marijuana, cocaine and natural opiates, including opium and codeine derivatives, amphetamines and methamphetamines and phencyclidine – PCP. However, the Department of Health and Human Services recently issued the “Mandatory Guidelines for Federal Workplace Drug Testing Program-Final

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Rule” ([Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2017](#)) which recommends drug screening requirements to include synthetic opioid drugs. This does not, however, include fentanyl which is 50 to 100 times stronger than morphine and up to 50 times more potent than heroin.

Considerations for a drug testing policy

According to a 2017 survey by the National Safety Council, only 57 per cent of employers drug test all employees, and 41 per cent fail to screen for synthetic opioids. Yet, testing can increase the stability in worker productivity, decrease absenteeism, reduce employee turnover and help a company avoid liability for negligent hiring penalties.

Some key considerations for creating a well-defined prescription drug testing policy include:

- **Transparency:** In the policy, be sure to state the prohibited behaviors and explain the company drug testing policy, including how it is done, when and how often. Explain the consequences of policy violations and take measures based on actions rather than drug test results.
- **Employee education:** Train employers of the company’s drug policy and procedures. Employees should know the consequences of use, refusal to take the drug test and what a positive drug test reflects on their hiring.

- **Supervisor training:** Supervisors should be trained on the workplace policy for illicit and prescription drug use and any procedures that pertain to the drug policy. Managers should know the signs and symptoms of prescription drug misuse.
- **Employee assistance program:** If an employee is using prescribed medication, provide the employee with the job description and a standard form for the employee’s treating physician to assess the ability of the employee to perform the essential job duties while taking the prescribed medication. This can confirm the ability or inability of the employee to perform the essential job functions.

Creating and implementing a drug-free workplace program

Prescription drug use can undoubtedly have a massive impact on your workplace. With the new year, companies should take the time to have their drug testing policies reviewed and updated to include opioids. The policy must clearly define prohibited behaviors, how drug testing is done, consequences for policy violations and the definition of “under the influence”. Importantly, the policy must recognize prescribed substances.

Of course, a company’s drug testing policies are designed to promote the health and safety of all workers and to protect the organization but also must

follow federal regulations. Companies promoting a drug-free environment should review their policy with legal counsel and consistently apply drug testing policies across all candidates and employees. Strong communication is key, so be sure to train supervisors and employees on the policy and how to spot signs of misuse.

Notes

1. www.dol.gov/
2. www.sterlingtalentsolutions.com/solutions/drug-and-health-screening/

References

Douglas, G. (2017), “Opioid addiction at work major challenge for employers”, available at: www.bna.com/opioid-addiction-work-n57982085155/ (accessed January 2018).

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2017), “Mandatory guidelines for federal workplace drug testing programs”, available at: www.federalregister.gov/d/2017-00979 (accessed January 2018).

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