

Working with employee representatives

 By [Rhys Evans](#)

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Effective, comprehensive health-and-safety procedures are not only essential for compliance with the Occupational Health and Safety Act, they are also important for ensuring productive working environments. However, when it comes to sensitive aspects, such as drug and alcohol policies and testing, the implementation of policies and procedures may not be altogether straightforward.



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Organisations cannot simply dictate that they will be conducting such testing, nor can they instantaneously implement it where it did not previously exist. In order to ensure maximum buy-in and minimum friction, enterprises should follow a step-by-step approach and, importantly, work with unions and employee representatives to ensure inclusive, fair and effective safety programmes are introduced.

According to the OHS Act, employees may not be under the influence of alcohol or drugs while in the workplace. This is particularly important in industries such as mining, manufacturing, construction and transportation, where the safety hazards are numerous. In light of this, it is essential to implement policies and procedures around these substances. The most effective way to identify the use of drugs or alcohol is to conduct testing using specialised equipment. However, organisations cannot simply implement such testing without warning, and without consulting employee representatives. This approach will, without a doubt, cause misunderstanding and other issues around testing and related policies.

In order to minimise these issues, organisations should involve the unions and employee representatives from the outset. Policies and procedures need to be clearly outlined, along with any testing component, how the tests will be done, how frequently they will be conducted, the process for testing and more. The selected testing methods should be thoroughly explained, along with the reasoning for their selection, and this should be explained to the representatives.

Education

In addition, education needs to form a large component of any drug and alcohol policy. Organisations need to ensure that employees and representatives understand the rationale behind testing policies and procedures - that this is not a practice aimed at firing people, but rather one that will help to create a safe and productive working environment for all.

In addition, education around the dangers of drug and alcohol use, both in terms of their negative impact on workplace safety as well as the financial and long-term health implications, should form part of the education drive.

An effective education mechanism is to use real examples of incidents where people have been injured or involved in accidents. Using examples that employees can relate to, particularly if they involve people they may have known or worked with, makes the dangers of alcohol and drug use in the workplace more real. Organisations should also focus on the positive aspects, such as the improvements to health and financial situation once substance abuse problems can be brought under control.

Organisations also need to provide forewarning and notice before testing can begin. The exact date need not be specified, but organisations should warn employees that testing will begin in, for example, three months, giving them time to come forward with problems or get clean on their own. This, once again, needs to be implemented by working with representatives to ensure minimal misunderstanding. Furthermore, safety officers must be trained in the procedures that have been developed along with the equipment that has been selected for testing.

One of the biggest challenges to implementing any policy around alcohol and drug testing is a lack of understanding on the part of employees. Without education and buy-in from the unions, employees may feel they are being persecuted, restricted or victimised. Involving all parties from the outset, and focussing strongly on education for both employees and representatives, is the only way to overcome this obstacle effectively. In this way, organisations can resolve any issues up front, ensuring that the process of implementing new health-and-safety practices and policies is as smooth and well accepted as possible.

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