

- A strict chain of custody is followed.
- Verified positive applicants are disqualified.
- Disqualified applicants cannot reapply for two years.

The Other Drugs: Smoking and Alcohol

Increasingly, employers are banning smokers from hiring consideration. World-renowned Cleveland Clinic, for example, now bans hiring of smokers. (About half of US states prohibit rejecting applicants on the basis of smoking.) Union Pacific, a railroad that operates in 23 states, screens job candidates for smoking not by a nicotine test but by another method. "We will not process applications of people who indicate they are smokers," commented Kathryn Blackwell, a Union Pacific manager. Because smoking has been linked to higher health care costs, increased accident claims, and absenteeism, such policies may be justified. On the other hand, employers need to have arguments and evidence to support such policies: you have to "make the business case," as one expert noted. Thus, regardless of how smokers are screened out, employers that do so need to ensure that their policies comply with federal, state, and local regulations.¹³⁸

As for alcohol, few employers test applicants for alcohol use for two reasons. First, because alcohol use is legal, and far more socially accepted than use of other mood-altering drugs, most employers have no desire to test applicants for alcohol; doing so would exclude large numbers of applicants. A second reason alcohol testing is infrequently used is because alcohol remains in the system for only a day. Some organizations that do test for alcohol use a test called EtG. The advantage of this test is that rather than scanning for the presence of alcohol, EtG scans for a by-product of the metabolism of alcohol, ethyl glucuronide, which remains in the system for about 80 hours. To date, the only organizations using the EtG test are those that prohibit or restrict alcohol use in certain jobs (e.g., some health care positions, transportation jobs), and those that have applicants who have had former alcohol problems but now claim to be sober.¹³⁹

Evaluation

It is commonly believed that drug testing results in a large number of false positives. Nevertheless, if the proper procedures are followed, drug-test results are extremely accurate and error rates are very low. Accuracy of the test, however, is not the same as its validity in predicting important job criteria. The most accurate drug test in the world will be a poor investment if it cannot be established that substance abuse is related to employee behaviors such as accidents, absenteeism, tardiness, impaired job performance, and so on.

Although more research on the validity of drug-testing programs is needed, some organizations are conducting research on the deleterious effects of substance abuse. The US Postal Service conducted an evaluation of its drug-testing program using applicants who applied for positions in 21 sites over a six-month period.¹⁴⁰ A