

Pre-employment Drug Testing with Rapid Oral Fluid

By Bill Current

The late-Stephen R. Covey was famous for his best-selling book “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People.” One of the key principles of Covey’s approach to success was Habit #2, “Begin with the end in mind.” In an attempt to be faithful to that principle, the following is where this paper is headed:

1. Pre-employment drug testing is an indispensable tool in maintaining a safe and productive workplace.
2. Rapid-result oral fluid drug testing makes pre-employment drug testing easier, faster and more cost-effective.
3. In a tight, highly competitive hiring market, the value of a same-day result makes it possible for employers to hire the best job candidate immediately without waiting days for a drug test result and, in all likelihood, losing out on hiring that person.

Pre-employment drug testing has never been more important. Drug abuse levels are on the rise and that means more substance-abusing job applicants. Yet, a nationwide labor shortage is causing some employers to question the value of pre-employment testing for fear of being unable to fill vacant positions.

It is a complicated issue with, for many employers, a rather simple solution. Rapid-result oral fluid testing makes it possible for employers to screen applicants on-site and, when the result is negative, make a same-day job offer and put people to work immediately. All of this without having to sacrifice the extraordinary benefits of pre-employment drug testing.

According to a compilation of studies:

- Compared to employed individuals, unemployed people are 87% more likely to report heavy alcohol use and 29% are more likely to develop alcohol dependence.
- Unemployed people are 65% more likely to be illicit drug users and 57% are more likely to develop a dependency on drugs.ⁱ

However, not all job seekers are unemployed. According to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD), more than 70% of those abusing illicit drugs in the U.S. are employed.ⁱⁱ

For employers who may be tempted to discontinue pre-employment drug testing, these statistics are at least cause for concern if not downright alarming.

Intelligence Being Tested

In the early days of drug testing some people referred to a pre-employment test as somewhat of an IQ test for the applicant. However, whose intelligence is really being tested, the drug users who can't abstain from drug usage long enough to pass a drug test or employers who know that millions of employed and unemployed adults are current drug users and still fail to require them to pass a drug test before giving them a job?

The sad truth is some drug users have a good excuse for failing their drug test—they're drug addicts. Many people who use drugs have a very serious problem with addiction. Even though they may know in advance that an employer will conduct a pre-employment drug screen, they can't even abstain from drug use for 2 or 3 days to increase their chances of obtaining employment. But what excuse do employers have for not conducting pre-employment testing?

Impact of Drug Use on the Workplace

Workplace drug abuse is not cheap. Lest we forget, let's examine what impact drug use has on the workplace. This will help put in place a firm foundation for the argument in favor of pre-employment drug testing.

Absenteeism— One survey found that 9 percent of heavy drinkers and 10 percent of drug users had missed work because of a hangover, 6 percent had gone to work high or drunk in the past year, and 11 percent of heavy drinkers and 18 percent of drug users had skipped work in the past month.ⁱⁱⁱ

Productivity—Increased absenteeism, among other factors, contributes significantly to less productivity from substance abusers. According to the National Safety Council: “The typical worker misses three work weeks (15 days) annually for illness, injury or reasons other than vacation and holidays. Workers with substance use disorders (SUD), however, miss two more weeks annually than their peers, averaging nearly five weeks (24.6 days) a year. Most of these extra days of missed work are associated with illness and injury.”^{iv}

The federal government once claimed that substance abusing employees were one-third less productive than non-drug abusing workers.^v

Turnover— Replacing workers can be expensive, averaging around 21% of the job's annual salary to recruit and train a new employee. Costs are typically greater for workers with higher education and training, and lower for workers who are paid less and who have fewer work-related skills.^{vi}

The same report showed: “One-fourth of currently employed workers report having more than one employer in the previous year. Employees with a substance problem are much more likely

than their peers to report having more than one employer per year: 36% among workers with any substance abuse problem. Workers with a prescription pain medication disorder were even more likely (42%) to have more than one employer.^{vii}

Some industries are more prone to turnover by substance abusers. For instance, “In entertainment, lodging, hospitality, and food service, nearly half (49%) of workers had more than one employer in the prior year. Other sectors also had high turnover rates among workers with SUDs: mining (41%), information and communication (43%), and other services (44%).”^{viii}

The Cost in Dollars

Add all of the above together and the annual cost is around \$81 billion a year.^{ix} But the number that should resonate most with each employer is \$8,800, the average cost per year caused by each substance abusing employee according to findings from NORC at the University of Chicago.^x

To put this in perspective, look at it this way:

- If your company has 1,000 employees, and
- 15% are substance abusers, then...
- You have 150 current drug users on your payroll, and
- If each one is costing on average \$8,800 per year, then...
- Substance abuse is costing your company approximately \$1.32 million dollars a year.

For employers, of course, the bottom line when it comes to drug testing is often all about the bottom line. So, here's the bottom line:

- America has a drug problem.
- More job seekers today are current illicit drug users.
- Drug users are far more costly to employ than non-substance abusing workers.
- As employers avoid hiring drug users, they save many thousands of dollars each year through reduced accidents, absenteeism, theft, violence, and health care costs.

The United States Postal Service Study

Some statistics are time-sensitive and expire quickly, while others are timeless and support arguments that remain unchanged for many years. A 1987 U.S. Postal Service (USPS) study, perhaps the most compelling study ever conducted on the impact of substance abuse on the workplace, is an example of a timeless report that is just as relevant today as it was 35 years ago. USPS initiated a major pre-employment drug testing study sponsored by the federal government to determine the relationship, if any, between drug use and job performance. USPS tested 5,465 applicants between September of 1987 and May of 1988. Of the 4,375 applicants who were hired, 395 tested positive (63 percent for marijuana, 24 percent for cocaine, and 11 percent for all other drugs combined). No one in the Postal Service was aware of the test results except those conducting the study.

After 1.3, 2.4 and 3.3 years the Postal Service noted remarkable differences between the “test-positive” group and those who had tested negative:

- **Involuntary Turnover.** At the 1.3-year mark 15 percent of the test-positive group had been terminated. That represented a 47 percent higher rate than the test-negative group. At 2.4 years the rate was 69.4 percent higher; at 3.3 years the rate was 77.4 percent higher.
- **Absenteeism.** After 1.3 years the test-positive group was 59.4 percent more likely to be heavy users of leave. Those who tested positive for cocaine were 4 times more likely to be heavy leave users; those who tested positive for marijuana were 1.5 times more likely to be heavy leave users. After 2.4 years the positive testers were absent almost 10 percent of the total work hours scheduled. At 3.3 years they were absent 11 percent of the scheduled work hours.
- **Employee Assistance.** After 3 years of employment 14 percent of the test-positive group had been referred to the company’s employee assistance program (EAP) compared to just 7 percent of the test-negative group. If the EAP identified an alcohol problem the referral rate was 3.5 times higher; if a problem with illicit drugs was identified the referral rate jumped to 5.7 times higher. Interestingly, the referral rate between the two groups for emotional, marital, or stress-related problems was virtually the same.
- **Disciplinary Actions.** The test-positive group had a tendency to face disciplinary action more often than the test-negative group. At the 3.3-year mark, 37 percent of the test-positive group had been disciplined compared to 19 of the test-negative group.

USPS’ Cost Conclusions

While the findings of the Postal Service study are interesting and enlightening, they would be of little significance to employers if there weren’t a direct tie to the cost of doing business. USPS projected what it would have saved if it had avoided hiring the test-positive group in the first place. The conclusion was astounding. The Postal Service would have saved approximately \$52 million by 1989 if it had not hired the known drug users in 1987—in just 2 years! By 1991 the estimated savings would've increased to \$105 million.

The Postal Service report remains relevant today because drug abusers have not become better, more reliable employees over the course of time. If anything, because of the dramatic rise in substance abuse since the start of 2020, there are more drug and alcohol abusers in the workplace resulting in more employees changing jobs prematurely, being absent from work more than others, and being subject to workplace discipline. As such, pre-employment drug testing, which empowers employers in the hiring process, is more important than ever.

Rapid-Result Oral Fluid Testing

If you're convinced now that it's a smart business decision to conduct pre-employment testing, the most important question is—how best to go about it? You have several options when it comes to drug testing methods: lab-based urine, hair testing, and oral fluid testing, as well as rapid-result urine and oral fluid testing.

If all three specimens—urine, hair and oral fluid—are capable of producing accurate, legally defensible results, which they are, then the decision really comes down to which method aligns best with pre-employment testing? To help with the decision-making process, look for a method that:

- Is easy to collect and does not require the services or cost of a professional collector or the use of a secured restroom where the hot water is turned off and blue dye has been added to the toilet water.
- Can be conducted on-site where job interviews are being held so applicants are not required to expend the time or expense of traveling to far-away, off-site facilities to provide a sample.
- Significantly enhances an applicant's experience.
- Cannot be adulterated, switched, or subverted in any way.
- Is capable of detecting drug use within minutes of a person consuming a drug.
- Can detect tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) for the entire 3-to-10-hour window of marijuana impairment.^{xi}
- Can detect a wide array of drugs, including substances that are commonly abused today like synthetic opioids and amphetamines, not just marijuana.
- Has been endorsed by the federal government for lab-based testing (SAMHSA lab certification) or for rapid-result testing via a device that has been cleared by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA).
- Is considered union friendly.
- Yields a rapid result, within about 10 minutes, to enable fast hiring decisions.
- Enables you to make immediate, same day hiring decisions so you can make a job offer to your first choice for a vacant position.

There is only one drug testing method that checks all of the boxes—rapid result oral fluid testing. Like its lab-based cousin, rapid-result oral fluid testing is easy to collect, does not require the use of a secured restroom, can detect recent-drug use, detects drugs during the entire marijuana window of impairment, can detect THC as well as virtually all other drugs, and is considered union friendly.

Additionally, rapid-result oral fluid testing yields a result within 10 minutes making it possible to act on a negative result with a job offer the same day the test is conducted.

The job candidate's experience is significantly better because they don't have to endure the typical safety precautions associated with urine testing such as removing outer clothing like sweaters or coats, emptying their pockets, or possibly being observed by another person while urinating into a collection cup. The candidate also is not required to drive to an off-site collection facility, visit an occupational health center where sick people typically gather, or take the chance of losing a job elsewhere while spending 2 to 3 hours or more waiting to provide a urine sample required at their first job interview.

Perhaps, best of all, the candidate who passes the rapid-result oral fluid test can learn immediately that their test was negative and receive a job offer on the spot. In the case of rapid-result oral fluid testing, the drug test may turn out to be one of the most pleasant parts of the job interview process.

Pre-employment screening with rapid-result oral fluid testing also gives an employer a unique advantage over many other would-be employers who rely on lab-based testing—the ability to learn a drug-test result immediately and make same-day hiring decisions. Rather than losing out on an ideal candidate for a position a company is in desperate need of filling, the job offer gets made, the candidate accepts the position, and in some cases, the new employee starts working the same day. It's a win-win experience for both the employer and the job candidate.

Return On Investment

Let's get back to the bottom line. Measuring return on investment (ROI) can be done in many ways, depending on a company's drug testing objectives. An easy way to do it regarding pre-employment drug testing is by tracking the cost of drug testing against the cost of the drug abuse.

Based on the following assumptions we can build a simple ROI model:

1. The cost of each substance abusing employee is approximately \$8,800 per year.
2. About 15% of the workforce has a substance abuse problem.
3. About 4% of all pre-employment drug tests are positive.

Using these figures let's estimate the cost of drug abuse for a company with 500 employees. This company has a turnover rate of about 15 percent which means they hire 75 new employees every year. If 15% of this group (the percentage of the workforce with a substance

abuse problem) or 11 new workers were hired at an average cost of \$8800 per year due to substance abuse, the company would be taking on a total extra cost of \$96,800 annually.

However, if the company conducts pre-employment testing utilizing rapid-result oral fluid drug testing they could avoid hiring the 11 substance abusers. The cost to conduct 75 pre-employment drug tests at an average per test price of \$40 would be \$3,000. In other words, if this company spends \$3,000 on pre-employment drug tests, they could save more than \$93,000 (the cost of substance abuse, \$96,800, minus the cost of drug testing, \$3,000). That's an ROI ratio of more than 25-to-1... \$25 saved for every \$1 spent.

Play with the percentages, lower the total number of drug tests conducted or the percentage that test positive, etc. No matter how you figure it, pre-employment rapid-result oral fluid drug testing is worth every dollar spent and much more.

Conclusion

When you take into account the number of people who abuse drugs, the cost per substance abuser, and the cost of screening job applicants for drugs, pre-employment drug testing really is some kind of an intelligence test. However, it's not the drug abusing job applicant who is being tested, it's the employer.

To begin with the mind, envision a faster and easier drug testing process. One that saves time and money and makes same day hiring decisions possible. Pre-employment testing combined with rapid-result oral fluid testing is the proverbial "no-brainer."

ⁱ "COVID-19 Is Driving Record Unemployment - That's Bad News for Substance Use." The Recovery Village. September 2020. <https://www.therecoveryvillage.com/drug-addiction/news/covid-unemployment-abuse/#:~:text=Compared%20to%20employed%20individuals%2C%20unemployed,develop%20a%20dependency%20on%20drugs.>

ⁱⁱ Substance Abuse in the Workplace. Aspenridge Recovery. <https://www.aspenridgerecoverycenters.com/substance-abuse-in-the-workplace-statistics/>

ⁱⁱⁱ The Dangers of Substance Abuse in the Workplace. Verywell. September 2020. <https://www.verywellmind.com/substance-abuse-in-the-workplace-63807>. See also: "A Substance Use Cost Calculator for US Employers with an Emphasis on Prescription Pain Medication." NCBI. September 2017. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5671784/>

^{iv} Implications of Drug Use for Employers. National Safety Council. <https://www.nsc.org/workplace/safety-topics/drugs-at-work/drug-use-in-the-workforce-whos-affected>. See also: <https://www.nsc.org/getmedia/9dc908e1-041a-41c5-a607-c4cef2390973/substance-use-disorders-by-occupation.pdf>

^v Why Drug Testing. Current Consulting Group. William F. Current. Page 10.

^{vi} "There are Significant Business Costs to Replacing Employees." Center for American Progress. 2012. <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/16084443/CostofTurnover0815.pdf>. See also: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5671784/>

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} “The High Cost of Drug Addiction in the Workplace.” The Recovery Village. December 2021.

<https://www.therecoveryvillage.com/drug-addiction/related-topics/high-cost-drug-addiction-workplace/#>

^x “New Analysis: Employers Can Save Average of \$8,500 for Supporting Each Employee in Recovery from Substance Use Disorder.” National Safety Council. December 2020. https://www.nsc.org/newsroom/new-analysis-employers-stand-to-save-an-average-of#_ednref1

^{xi} “Scientists put the stopwatch on cannabis intoxication.” University of Sydney. April 2021.

<https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2021/04/12/scientists-put-stopwatch-on-cannabis-thc-intoxication-lambert-drug-driving.html>