

WORKPLACE SUBSTANCE ABUSE STILL A NATIONAL PROBLEM A CASE STUDY FROM GEORGIA POWER

America still has a substance abuse problem. And that problem continues to have a significant impact on the workplace. If you doubt that's true, consider the following case study...

A series of substance abuse-related incidents brought the issue to the forefront at one major electric company. As a result, Georgia Power took a closer look at the issue of substance abuse, says Brenda Robinson, the company's Substance Abuse Program Administrator. The result has been a renewed effort to maintain Georgia Power as a drug-free workplace. The company produced a training video on alcoholism directed toward management and employees. It discusses the issue of enabling, which Robinson says may have been a problem.

"We give our employees information to improve their lives, both at work and at home," she says. "Supervisors are trained to look for problems and we keep training them regularly."

Numbers Tell the Story

However, it wasn't that long ago that Georgia Power, a member of the Southern Company corporate family, was the subject of a major workplace study sponsored by the federal government. In 1989, the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) released the findings of a study that measured the impact of an extensive drug-testing program at the power company. The job performances of those who tested positive were compared to control groups of workers who were believed not to be substance abusers. In virtually every area of job performance monitored by the study, the test-positive group compared poorly to the control groups. For example, those in the test-positive group were 1.55 times more likely to get fired. They were also more likely to:

- be absent (165 average hours annually vs. 47 hours for the control group),
- utilize medical benefits (\$1,377 average annual usage vs. \$163 for the control group and \$590 for the company overall), and
- file for workers' compensation benefits (\$264 average annually vs. \$25 for the control group and \$197 for the work force in general).

Georgia Power estimated that it saved between \$294,000 and \$1.7 million by terminating and replacing 198 workers who tested positive for drugs between 1983 and 1987. GP also estimated the average cost per drug user to the company to be between \$7,000 and \$8,000 annually.

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“We were doing drug testing before it was cool to drug test,” said Robinson noting that she took over management of the program in 1990. She said by that time the company wasn’t doing much testing anymore, but it was gearing up for testing required by the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT).

Robinson says the company still does not test *every* employee, but she is hopeful that will change in the near future. Most of the rest of Southern Company tests all employees she says. In the meantime, Georgia Power continues to comply with the DOT regulations conducting pre-employment, post-accident, reasonable suspicion, random, and follow-up testing. In all, the company does about 3,000 tests a year with a relatively low annual positive rate. For example, out of 2,800 tests conducted in 1999, there were 37 positives... less than 1.5%.

Random Testing

However, Robinson believes that drug testing works, and she is a strong proponent of random testing. She says those who are subject to testing the most produce the fewest positives. This is evident in the fact that only about five random tests conducted each year are confirmed positive.

“I think random testing has a deterrent effect,” Robinson says. “We get complaints constantly from the employees who are chosen for random tests. That tells me that even if they don’t like random testing they know it’s there, they know it’s going on. That means the program is working.”

Robinson also believes employees who don’t use drugs like the fact the Georgia Power has a program. “Employees will come forward and say ‘we’re so glad that you finally figured out that [Charlie] had a problem... we were scared to death to work with him.’ Employees know who the drug users are.”

Adulteration Issues

Robinson says efforts to adulterate urine samples are increasing, but that the company and the labs that do GP’s testing have gotten a lot smarter about adulteration issues. “We’ve had four cases just recently where the pH was too low and the MRO concluded that the samples were not consistent with human urine,” Robinson says, noting that the MRO ruled them dilute specimens. “They’re mostly coming from random tests.”

She says GP treats adulterated samples the same as a refusal to be tested and the employee is let go. “It may have worked in the past to tamper with your sample because of the way results were being reported to us,” she says, “but we get our reports differently now and you’re going to get caught.”

Does GP’s program work today according to the woman responsible for its day-to-day maintenance? “Our positive levels are not huge, but sometimes someone is negative at the time of the test, but they’re still using,” she says. “We can get them help. We have an internal program with two counselors and an EAP provider. And they’re hearing from the employees and their families,” Robinson says. “They’ll hear people say ‘At first I was against what you were trying to do, but you helped me change my life for the better.’”

Any time you’re saving lives you must be doing something right. Georgia Power has learned that workplace substance abuse testing programs can be extremely effective when conducted properly.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ON IMPLEMENTING A WORKPLACE SUBSTANCE ABUSE TESTING PROGRAM,
CONTACT FIRSTLAB AT 800-732-3784 OR VIA EMAIL AT MKT@FIRSTLAB.COM**