

“Is the Time Right for Impairment Testing?”

by Evelyn Beck

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About: Evelyn Beck’s 2001 article from *Workforce* weighs some pros and cons of impairment testing and concludes that the scale tips in favor of the pros.

Summary: Because drugs are not a significant factor in workplace incidents and that urine testing does little to identify risk and improve safety, employers and researchers alike have begun seeking alternatives, and in doing so are re-examining the viability of impairment testing. “One advantage of impairment testing,” author Evelyn Beck writes, “is that it focuses on workplace rather than leisure behavior. Another...is that it provides immediate results” and reduces the ability to cheat, as people have been known to substitute or dilute a urine sample. Impairment testing also can screen out employees who are under the influence of alcohol, fatigued, or stressed, which a urine test cannot. Although impairment testing is largely viewed as less invasive, valid criticisms include that invasiveness is a personal, subjective matter, and performing daily baseline tests can be considered invasive. Prescription medication may affect a performance test, and employees may find alerting supervisors of their personal medications to invasive as well. Despite these concerns and also despite a generally positive outlook on impairment testing (among those who are even aware of it, which are relatively few), the largest obstacle impeding its widespread acceptance is cost, as implementing the technology “has traditionally required a very large initial investment,” Beck asserts. In addition, because implementing impairment testing is a disruption to what had been normal operating procedures and that “drug tests have a history,” “employers are leery” of undertaking what may appear to be thorough overhaul of their screening processes or even their entire safety system. “That may be why today’s impairment testing is being touted as a complement to rather than a substitute for drug testing,” Beck writes, “a quick way to make sure that workers can perform and an alert to the occasional need for closer investigation of workers with problems.” Given that the American Management Association discovered that “55% of companies in 1999” had begun using some sort of “fitness-for-duty testing,” “the word might finally [be] out,” Beck concludes, “that drug testing is not the only—and perhaps not the best—tool for making workplaces safer.”