

As South Africa plans to get back to 'normal' - alcohol testing equipment needs to be dusted off



As South Africa scrambles to restore stability in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, industry leaders need to dust off their alcohol testing equipment to ensure worker safety. Covid-19 precautionary measures shouldn't overshadow the need to prevent intoxicated persons from posing a risk in the workplace. Although testing should have continued throughout the pandemic, with stringent alcohol restrictions imposed by the government, there was a tendency for businesses to slack off on testing because of alcohol availability limitations. However, with the sale of alcohol now back to normal, workers must return to a safe and healthy workplace. However, with testing equipment going unused for a couple of months, recalibration will be necessary to ensure that readings are as accurate as possible.

Safety isn't just a priority, it's the law

In terms of the Occupational Health & Safety Act, an employer cannot allow any person who is or who appears to be intoxicated to enter or remain in the workplace. The Act does not provide a limit as to what would be considered a positive test, which makes it important for businesses to have a clear alcohol policy in place that determines the rules and provides the legal basis for drug and alcohol testing in the workplace. Generally, high-risk industries run on a zero-tolerance policy for intoxicating substances which means that any substance level above zero, is deemed to be under the influence.

Where there is no alcohol policy or testing procedures in place and an accident is caused by a worker who is under the influence, the consequences are by no means trivial, especially if management is aware that there is a problem. In most instances, companies are made aware by employees raising a concern to management that colleagues are drinking and creating a hazard or making it a higher risk for them. If management ignores the situation and someone is injured, then the directors will be held liable for that

injury. Where the accident is fatal, the company can be shut down in addition to facing massive fines and criminal charges for the unlawful, negligent killing of another human being as they knowingly allowed intoxicated employees into the workplace.

Reliable results through regular recalibration

With this legal obligation to ensure that individuals who are under the influence are not permitted to enter or remain in the workplace, it becomes necessary to perform regular alcohol and substance testing in the workplace. Here, it's important to ensure that testing equipment such as breathalysers are properly calibrated beforehand and regularly thereafter. As such, it is recommended that testing equipment be recalibrated by instrument service providers twice a year, in line with best practice drawn from the National Road Traffic Act which requires that breathalysers used for evidentiary purposes be recalibrated every six months.

Safety through accuracy

Along with establishing reliability, part of the process involves a pre-calibration check, which reports on the condition of the instrument when it arrived at the service provider. This is a good indication of the accuracy and reliability of that instrument, identifying whether faults have developed in the period between calibrations. Calibration is critical for accurate readings, and if a breathalyser has not been properly calibrated, it could give a false positive or a reading that's so far off the mark that it's misleading. When livelihoods are on the line – someone could face immediate dismissal for a false positive. Management must be sure that the machines they rely on for evidentiary purposes to enforce safety laws are correct.