

From Sober to stoned: how Gen Z's drug use is shaping South Africa's workforce



As Generation Z, the first truly digital natives, begins to dominate the South African workforce, employers are faced with a new challenge: a generation that is saying no to alcohol but yes to drugs. This shift in substance use patterns has significant implications for workplace safety, particularly in industries where even a minor impairment can have catastrophic consequences.

The impact of a new era of substance abuse on workplace safety

While many Gen Zs seems to be leading the charge towards a sober future when it comes to alcohol consumption, their drug use outpaces all other age groups. Prescription medicines, opioids, and marijuana are the top choices, reflecting a cultural shift and a growing openness to alternative substances. This trend is likely influenced by factors such as increased access to information, changing social norms, and a desire to explore new experiences.

The rise of drug use among some Gen Zs has significant implications for workplace safety, particularly in safety-sensitive industries such as mining, engineering, and construction. Impaired employees are more prone to accidents, injuries, and reduced productivity, which can lead to increased costs, decreased morale, and a tarnished reputation for the company. Additionally, drug use can contribute to a toxic work environment, affecting employee engagement and productivity.

Adapting drug testing policies to keep up with Gen Z

To mitigate the risks associated with drug use in the workplace, employers must adapt their drug testing policies. This means updating testing equipment and protocols. Drug testing panels must be expanded, as

traditional drug testing panels may not detect the full range of substances that some Gen Zs are using. Employers should consider expanding their panels to include prescription drugs, marijuana, and other relevant substances, depending on the nature of the work and industry. Testing methods will need to become more advanced, as urine testing can have limitations in detecting recent drug use.

Implementing alternative testing methods like oral fluid swabs or hair testing can provide a more accurate picture, while disposable saliva tests offer a non-invasive, convenient, and hygienic option for on-site drug screening. Products like Sotoxa Mobile Testing Systems can be used for pre-employment screening, random testing, or reasonable suspicion testing, while multi-panel drug test cups allow for simultaneous testing of multiple substances at the point of collection, offering a cost-effective and efficient way to conduct on-site drug screening in accordance with the company's specific workplace policy.

Communication, education, and compassion

Implementing stricter drug testing policies should be accompanied by clear communication and education for employees. Some best practices include the development and publication of a clear drug and alcohol policy, outlining prohibited substances, testing procedures, and consequences for violations. Thereafter, it is necessary to educate employees on this policy by providing workshops or training sessions to increase awareness of the dangers of drug use in the workplace and the company's drug testing policy.

Employers should also strive to create a supportive environment where employees can feel comfortable asking for help if they might have a problem with substance abuse. This could include providing access to resources such as counselling, rehabilitation programmes, or employee assistance programmes (EAPs). Employers have a duty to respect the confidentiality of employees who disclose prescribed medications or seek help for drug use.

The role of mental health and the bigger picture

It is important to recognise that drug use can often be a symptom of underlying mental health issues. Employers should consider offering mental health support services to employees, as this can help address the root causes of drug abuse and promote a healthier workplace culture.

The changing landscape of substance use among some Gen Zs presents a significant challenge for South African employers. By adapting drug testing policies, implementing advanced testing methods, and prioritising clear communication and mental health support, employers can create a safer and healthier work environment for all. Remember, while alcohol still remains a major concern, the rise of drug use among a rising portion of Gen Zs necessitates a shift in focus to ensure a workplace free from all forms of intoxication and impairment.