
Your Bottom Line

By Dr. Henry J. Oles, Cr.Photog.

Drugs in the workplace

Drug abuse is a serious social problem, far more common than most people realize. Nobody can truthfully say they aren't affected by drug abuse. Indirectly or directly, its far-reaching implications are destructive and unavoidable.

Clients and employees who abuse drugs directly affect studio owners. Drug-using customers are likely to spend their money on drugs rather than photography. Furthermore, staff members who abuse drugs weaken a studio's success through deteriorating employee performance.

I didn't think there was a drug abuse problem at my company—it's an undesirable predicament I never wanted to consider. Consequently, it was easy to be unaware, or ignore, evident symptoms. However, after several employees approached me about a drug abuser on staff, I realized there was a need to take action.

There are varying degrees of drug abuse, ranging from people who think they control their addiction, to individuals totally under the influence. All users insist they don't have a problem, although experts state that controlled drug usage is impossible. Employees often argue that employers cannot interfere with their personal activities, such as using drugs and alcohol on weekends. But that's a fallacy; anyone who abuses drugs constantly affects everyone around them.

Individuals who are addicted to illegal substances often breed discontent in organizations. They are more likely to steal, call in sick, become accident- and mistake-prone, waste time, and display paranoia. By associating with other abusers, these problematic employees can quickly spread their vices.

Professional photographers can exercise lawful steps to eradicate drug abuse in their studios. Many states permit mandatory drug testing for new employees and random drug testing for current employees. Since these programs must be implemented in a prescribed manner, an experienced lawyer should be consulted before initiating drug testing. In Texas, costs

for these drug tests range from \$30-\$50 per person.

In drug abuse programs, studios should institute a zero-tolerance policy—where any detection of drugs or alcohol automatically leads to dismissal. Employers must no longer prove a performance hindrance or safety conflict before terminating an employee for drug usage.

Drug testing definitely causes employee unrest. But once studio owners enforce such a program, problem individuals may depart on their own volition.

After initiating a drug testing policy, my company waited before actually performing tests. This time interval gave employees a chance to clean up their act or leave; in fact, several employees did leave. An organization's effective drug policy also deters users from accepting employment positions.

For a variety of reasons, studios are afraid to institute a strong drug abuse program. Ultimately, there may be no choice—insurance companies may force the measure by refusing to write liability insurance policies unless businesses initiate anti-drug programs. Texas state law mandates that every business institute a drug abuse policy, which can either accept or reject drug use. However, imagine the potential liability problems for a studio that accepts drug use if an addicted employee causes an accident.

A zero-tolerance policy, which includes testing, can curtail drug abuse. Education must be supplemented with strict drug abuse programs to help photographers protect their bottom line. ■