

Staffing Management: Tools & Techniques: Save on Screenings

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Stephenie Overman



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On-site health centers can help companies reduce the time and costs associated with pre-employment screenings.

Here's good news for companies turning to on-site health centers for help with occupational injuries and wellness programs: These facilities can also be used to conduct pre-employment screenings.

The number of companies opening on-site health centers is growing, according to research by Watson Wyatt and the nonprofit National Business Group on Health. Nearly one-third of companies surveyed (29 percent) have or plan to have an on-site health center by 2009. That's up from 27 percent in 2006.

The increased interest in on-site health centers—which are typically run by physicians who are board-certified in occupational medicine, family physicians, nurse practitioners or physicians' assistants—is being driven by a focus on overall wellness, according to Patricia Berger-Friedman, a senior consultant with Watson Wyatt. But the centers, which may be managed by the company or a third party, can also be used to conduct drug testing and other pre-employment screenings. And that can save companies time and money.

Drug screenings in particular can result in some of the biggest cost and time savings, says Berger-Friedman, and they are not difficult to administer. Some types of screenings may be better done by outside providers, she admits, "but drug testing, if you have the facilities, is fairly easy."

The Longaberger Co. in Newark, Ohio, has found this to be true. "We check for everything," Tom Coles, executive director of human resources, says of the basket-making company's thorough on-site drug screenings. "It's been cost-effective and greatly reduced our time."

Richmond Behavioral Health Authority (RBHA), which provides mental health and substance abuse prevention services to Richmond, Va., residents, expects similar results. The organization already has a strong wellness program in place for its 400 employees. Now its health and wellness coordinator, registered nurse Megan Wellford, plans to roll out an in-house drug screening program.

"By pulling it in-house, we're saving over half the amount an outside company charges for a urine drug screen. Our

Before You Screen

Pre-employment drug testing should be applied consistently to either all applicants or all applicants for a safety-sensitive position, according to HR consultant Kara Blumberg, SPHR, of Boise, Idaho.

Although the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits pre-offer medical examinations, drug tests are not considered to be ADA medical exams. However, in the Society for Human Resource Management white paper Critical Components of Workplace Drug Testing, Blumberg notes that it's still best to conduct tests after a contingent offer of employment has been extended, not before.

"Your company should establish procedures for the various types of testing prior to implementation," she writes. "For example, if conducting pre-hire testing, determine when the applicant will complete the form and when he or she will be tested. The least expensive option is to only test applicants following a contingent offer of employment, thus only paying to have the most qualified applicants be tested."

Also, "determine how the testing process will be communicated to applicants and how the results will be reported back to the organization," she adds.

screening runs about \$12.50 per employee," Wellford says. "And it saves time. It wastes a lot of [work] time for the person to have to drive to the lab and sit there waiting."

Wellford says after RBHA makes a job offer, "we'll have the [prospective] employee come into the office and sign the offer letter. We'll do a urine drug screening on the spot so there's no time to plan ahead to try to skew results." She plans to conduct dipstick tests, and if a test is positive, "I will send the test to an outside company. They will handle the rest and report back to me."

It's important for companies to determine which method of drug testing works best for them.

Urine testing is still the No. 1 drug testing method in the United States, but oral fluid testing—which consists of swabbing the inside of the mouth—has become more popular because "it helps minimize the 'yuck factor,'" says Sandra Serrano, executive director of occupational health care solutions for Employment Background Investigations (EBI), a background screening, drug testing and occupational health care solutions provider in Owings Mills, Md. A majority of states allow oral fluid testing.

Some states, however, prohibit instant drug testing kits, which is why Serrano recommends using lab-based testing. "Sometimes the test is only as good as the person conducting" it, she says.

Coles says companies that want to conduct drug screenings on-site should shop around for the most cost-effective tests.

Companies may need to conduct other pre-employment screenings specific to their industry and environment; many can be done at on-site health centers. "Every individual company has a different need," Serrano says. Longaberger, for example, conducts a fitness-for-duty screening based on the job involved. "Some positions might require lifting, pushing, pulling, standing for long periods. We want to make sure we're placing people in the right positions," Coles says.

And Wellford plans to administer tuberculin skin tests at RBHA for both pre-hires and employees because "our population is pretty high-risk." She expects that conducting these tests on-site will result, like the planned drug screenings, in "quicker turnaround and a huge savings for the company."

Another common type of pre-employment screening is baseline hearing testing. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA) Occupational Noise Standard requires employers to establish and maintain an audiometric testing program for all employees who are exposed to certain noise levels. Annual audiograms are compared with the initial baseline audiogram to determine if hearing loss is occurring.

A company's on-site health center may be managed by either the company or a third party.

Longaberger's two on-site clinics used to be managed internally, but "five years ago, we went to a vendor relationship. Clinics are not our specialty," Coles says.

That's the main reason companies hire third parties to run their health centers, according to Stuart Clark, executive vice president of Reston, Va.-based Comprehensive Health Services, which staffs, manages and operates companies' on-site health centers. "Outsourcing this is definitely the trend," he says. "The basic issue is that it's not their core competency. They make steel, they make cars, they make computers. They don't practice medicine very well."

Another plus: Having a third party operate the center may help allay applicants' and employees' concerns that their medical records might be shared with managers.

Incidentally, Clark notes, privacy concerns are unfounded if a health center is being managed properly. "All nurses and doctors—even when they are employed directly by a company—have a code of ethics, and they will not answer questions that are not work-related," he says.

Whether companies conduct screenings directly or use a third-party vendor, they should follow all appropriate procedures and codes, including their own policies and regulations, experts say. For example, "Make sure applicants can't switch samples and make the sample invalid," says Watson Wyatt's Berger-Friedman.

Companies can help ensure that third parties follow procedures by thoroughly vetting pre-employment screening vendors. For vendors that provide drug testing services, for example, companies should "Make sure all the labs are of the highest certification," EBI's Serrano says, and make sure those who need to know understand how to collect specimens and maintain proper chain of custody.

Pre-employment screenings should also follow all Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements, as well as guidelines set forth by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and OSHA. The ADA prohibits pre-employment medical examinations but has certain exceptions, such as for post-offer exams.

In addition, it's important for companies to work with third parties to design a screening program that makes sense for them. At EBI, "We sit down with them to go over all the requirements and see what they need to add. It's custom-build," Serrano says.

For example, "When a client tells us they want applicants to just take a physical, we ask 'what type?' We help them build a program" that meets specific needs based on job descriptions, such as lift tests for warehouse workers, she explains. "If they just want vital signs, we can do that as well."

Lauren Tierney, director of communications for Take Care, part

of Walgreen Co. in Deerfield, Ill., which operates worksite clinics for companies, believes that customized screening processes are the way to go: "We like to say, 'If you've seen one site, you've seen one site.' "

Stephenie Overman is editor of STAFFING MANAGEMENT magazine.

Society for Human Resource Management

1800 Duke Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314
USA

Phone US Only: (800) 283-SHRM
Phone International: +1 (703) 548-3440

TTY/TDD (703) 548-6999
Fax (703) 535-6490

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