

# A Test That Too Many People Fail

More workers are not passing drug tests. Do companies have an answer?

**A** vehicle delivery company had hundreds of slots open for equipment drivers in the Southwest and Texas. It was going to require a lot of hiring. The firm found plenty of good applicants and figured it was on the right track—until the drug screening stage. Remarkably, more than half of the applicants didn't pass.

Fail rates that high are very uncommon. But the problem ap-

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“In different markets, employers are finding it increasingly difficult to identify people through their screening who are

not using drugs,” said Dr. Barry Sample, director of science and technology at Quest Diagnostics, which analyzes urine and blood samples for a variety of reasons. The tests themselves date back to the Reagan administration's “War on Drugs” program, and today companies routinely administer them to millions of job applicants, often as a precaution when the jobs involve handling machinery or are in the medical field. If failure rates continue

to rise, experts say, corporate leaders may need to rethink their strategies for finding good applicants, whether that means seeking out prospects from more conservative regions or considering more older workers, who tend to have fewer drug issues. The latter solution isn't fool-proof, however, said Wendy Muller, project director at Futurestep,

a Korn Ferry division. “Retirees are failing the drug screens too,” she said. Overall, “we've seen fail rates of up to 75 percent in the South.”

Drug use in the U.S. had been declining for years, but began to creep back up over the past decade. Among adults 26 years or older, it jumped to 8.3 percent in 2014 from 5.5 percent in 2004, according to the latest survey data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The bulk of that increase comes from marijuana use, although other drugs such as heroin and prescription pain killers are part of the story.

“If you look at 27 million people who used an illicit drug, you find that 22 million of that was marijuana,” said Arthur Hughes, a statistician at the agency.

This trend comes hand in glove with the increased legalizing or decriminalizing of recreational pot use. Colorado, Washington, Oregon and Alaska

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have already legalized marijuana, with other states considering the move on ballots this year. Decriminalization, to one degree or another, is already a reality in 17 more states.

“In Colorado, dispensaries are all around,” said Muller, who explained that the more experienced job seekers often self-screen by not applying. “It’s one of the first things I tell them, about the drug screening,” she said. “They look at me and I can tell what they are thinking, and they leave.”

The problem certainly raises costs for companies, both in retesting and finding new pools of applicants. These costs become significant when large-scale hiring is involved. One answer, say some consultants, is to rely more on referrals from existing staff. “Current employees spread the word about the drug test,” said Susan De La Vega of

Hay Group. They might even discourage acquaintances from applying when they know the candidate will not pass.

Using geography and demographic trends to find stronger applicants can help too, even if that means relocating them from an area like the Northeast, where failure rates tend to be lower. Still, the loosening of laws governing marijuana use in some parts of the country suggests that this is a long-term issue. And laws aside, drug testers say there are difficulties already arising in identifying what level of marijuana use is acceptable for what job. “There is no consensus for what level is a problem,” said Sample at Quest Diagnostics. “What constitutes ‘under the influence’? It’s not clear that a resolution to that question will come anytime soon.”

What is clear is that there is still a need for workers. In addition

to hiring via employee referrals, managers might consider bringing back recent retirees from the same company. The potential candidates already have a deep skill set, and know the company culture and also what’s expected of them. Given the fact that so many baby boomers are delaying retirement, this prospective worker pool could prove fruitful in addressing the drug issue. “In the Northeast and the Southeast, more often than not the retirees pass the tests,” said Muller.

“What we’ve been trying to do is to look for populations that would likely pass such a test,” added Muller, citing the example of stay-at-home moms wanting to work shifts during the day. “We try to understand the demographics in the region where we recruit and understand who would pass.” ●

