

# In Practice

## Relieving News

Following a couple years' worth of sound and fury, reason and calm seem to have prevailed on the drug-testing front.

According to Business & Legal Reports (BLR), a Connecticut research organization, only 13 percent of 2,000 companies surveyed say they have a serious employee substance-abuse problem, and less than 1 percent allow surprise random drug tests.

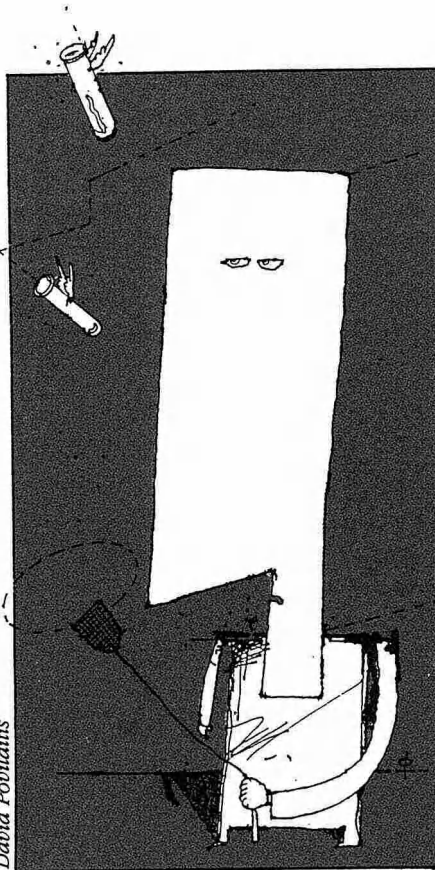
Random testing causes controversy in many quarters. Lawyers and civil-liberties experts argue that it violates employees' legal rights and that many ill-conceived programs use unreliable testing methods that could brand an innocent worker as a drug user.

And although plenty of companies initially embraced random testing as a way to ensure drug-free work environments, most now shy away from the practice because they fear defamation suits or don't want to risk lowering employee morale.

For the most part, employers limit testing to situations where there is "reasonable suspicion" that a worker is using drugs, according to BLR. Experts say the best programs emphasize redundant testing to confirm preliminary findings of substance abuse, and many companies offer extensive counseling and employee-assistance services in lieu of firing.

That's not to say the issue is dead. Later this year the federal government plans to implement a \$15 million program designed to randomly test federal workers who hold sensitive jobs—from aircraft mechanics to Navy physicians. This has put the Department of Justice in a tricky bind. The federal "sensitive" list includes DOJ attorneys, several of whom have threatened to sue the attorney general should the plan proceed.

Even though most private firms



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avoid testing current employees without cause, 15 percent screen job applicants for illegal drugs. Of corporations with more than 500 workers, 22 percent require preemployment testing.

BLR says this practice varies by industry. Forty-five percent of all transportation concerns test job applicants. In the manufacturing sector the figure is 23 percent, while only 5 percent of health-care, education, communications, and electronics firms require drug tests.

When BLR asked companies to rank the relative seriousness of various abused drugs, the business community displayed an awareness long promoted by health professionals: 76 percent consider alcohol the most dangerous drug in the workplace. Only 10 percent named marijuana, and cocaine rated a mere 5 percent.

## Beware of Trainer

So-called "New Age" training has taken a lot of flak lately, and now the government has gotten into the act. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) recently issued a policy statement that says some such programs may interfere with employees' religious beliefs.

New Age is a catch-all term for a variety of nontraditional training techniques. Some border on the just plain weird, emphasizing the power of tapping into the collective subconscious, sleep deprivation, and even past-life regressions. But most use relatively benign techniques like accelerated learning, creativity exercises, and activities that reveal hidden capabilities.

Nonetheless, many people, including some with deeply felt religious convictions, feel uncomfortable with New Age training. A few people have lost their jobs for refusing to take part in these programs, and several current lawsuits challenge the right of employers to compel workers to participate.

The EEOC expects more complaints and urges companies offering New Age training to excuse those who object or to develop alternate programming.

## Day-Care Options

Company-sponsored day-care benefits are a pretty rare phenomenon, and those that do exist are new, according to a survey released by the American Productivity Center.

Of 283 responding companies, only 12 had access to on-site day-care facilities at their offices or plants. Of those 12, six started up within the last year and a half.

Sixty respondents said they offered some other form of day-care

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assistance, with employee costs covered by either reimbursement or flexible benefit plans.

Although 80 percent thought workers would welcome day-care assistance, few believed the sponsoring company would garner any pay-off. Only 13 percent thought the benefit would reduce absenteeism or improve performance, and only 17 percent believed that offering day care would help retain employees.

## Controlling the Means of Production

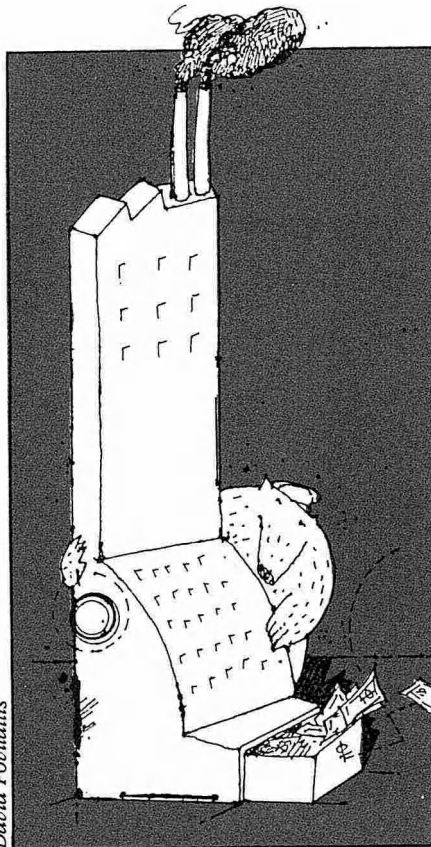
"We are in transition to a new form of management. This [requires] a process of retraining that must be conducted quickly. We really can't draw this out over five or 10 years."

No doubt the words of a beleaguered senior executive, right? Probably one feeling the pinch of changing markets, increased competition, poor cash flow, and the need to rapidly modernize plant and equipment. The problems—and the solution—sound familiar to American ears, but the man stating the case for sweeping retraining programs spoke with an unfamiliar accent.

As the U.S.S.R.'s top executive trainer, Evgeny K. Smirnitsky visited eight U.S. business schools this May to find ways of improving Soviet productivity. Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* campaign has altered the rules by which Soviet industry plays, and Smirnitsky is convinced that executive and managerial development holds the key to domestic and international competitiveness.

During his 10-day U.S. sojourn Smirnitsky sat in on classroom sessions at such respected MBA centers as the Harvard Business School, M.I.T.'s Sloan School, and the University of Maryland's College of Business and Management.

The crash course in Western management theory came at a crucial time. Earlier this year Gorbachev delivered an ultimatum to 60 percent of his country's firms: Make money



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or fold. Enterprises, as Soviet businesses are known, can no longer depend on unlimited state subsidies. *Perestroika* forces them to make quality products, market competitively, manage assets, and—Marx must be spinning in his grave—turn profits.

A host of workplace changes accompany the shift. Under the old system, central ministries determined products, organized production, and set quotas. No more. Now all these decisions fall to the enterprises' executive staffs. Managers keep their jobs through worker referenda instead of the traditional tenure tracks that guaranteed employment before *perestroika*.

Soviet line employees may soon begin to see payoffs from the new system. During his trip to the U.S., Smirnitsky expressed particular interest in worker-motivation techniques, incentive plans, and merit pay.

## Older Workers and HRD

*Submitted by Ross Rolander, a training consultant in Rochester, New York.*

A training program designer was concerned about her upcoming project, a two-day workshop to provide basic skills to newly transferred employees. "Most of these participants are over 50," she thought. "How can I design this workshop to meet their particular needs?"

A word processing instructor checked his room setup and pondered logistics: "This room is pretty large, and there's no P.A. system. I wonder if the older people will be able to hear me?"

A veteran O.D. specialist discussed early retirement with a friend. "Maybe I ought to leave now," she mused. "My boss keeps stressing next year's heavy workload. Maybe she's hinting that I won't be able to keep up."

These challenging questions, and others like them, will become more common during the next few years. According to the American Association of Retired Persons, "Today, 49 million Americans are 55 and over. In four decades, this figure will jump to 91 million." To keep older workers—and their companies—productive, HRD professionals need to confront some well-entrenched stereotypes about what these people can and cannot do.

Three common myths, as identified by a Department of Health and Human Services study, particularly affect the field of planned learning: **Myth:** Older workers are less productive than the average worker. **Fact:** HHS research indicates that "productivity does not decline with a worker's age. Older workers meet the productivity goals of their companies."

Obviously, employee productivity varies regardless of age. Some workers perform less effectively late in their careers, but others produce at their highest levels.

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**Myth:** It costs more to prepare older workers for a job than it does for other workers.

**Fact:** "There is little reason to believe that job preparation (training and orientation) of older workers is more costly than for other age groups," according to HHS. "Employers should, of course, consider the most cost-effective ways of preparing older workers. . . such as practical exercises and on-the-job training."

No surprise here! Good training and development programs always weigh cost-effectiveness, practicality, and relevance. Learner age does not matter.

**Myth:** Older workers are unwilling to learn new jobs and are inflexible about the hours they will work.

**Fact:** HHS research debunks this stereotype, as does evidence collected by the Older Americans Program of the Travelers Corporation.

Older workers, says Harold E. Johnson, Travelers' senior vice president, "are willing and eager to learn how to use the latest technology." Older workers are no more or less flexible than the rest of the population.

To properly develop older workers, HRD practitioners need to remind themselves of the professional basics that apply to all training scenarios.

■ **Encourage a nonthreatening atmosphere.** Many older workers seem more comfortable in a conference setting than in formal classrooms. Kathy Lewis, former director of a New York organization called Gaining Resources for Older Workers (GROW), theorizes this is so because many of these workers haven't been in a classroom in years. Reduce this intimidation by planning an informal environment.

**Learners need to see and hear what's going on.** Check room acoustics and public-address sound levels before learners arrive. When using flipcharts, blackboards, or videos, make sure everyone has an unimpeded view. During breaks,

ask people if they can hear and see well enough.

■ **Involve learners in the instruction.** Kathy Lewis of GROW maintains that older workers, even more than their younger colleagues, dislike lecture formats. Everyone learns more when they participate actively.

■ **Avoid biased examples, exercises, and audiovisual materials.** Training should reflect the real work environment, and session materials should include workers of various ages. In role plays and case studies, show older workers in a positive light.

By their sheer numbers, older workers are destined to have an increasing impact on American business. And they will require training and development. By disregarding the myths that sometimes limit opportunities, and by applying the basic principles of adult education, the human resource development profession can help tap the experience and potential older workers offer.

*"In Practice" is edited and written by John Wilcox. Send items of interest to: In Practice, Training & Development Journal, 1630 Duke St., Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313.*

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