

# Managers' attitudes to Illicit drug testing in the workplace

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**ABSTRACT:** The aim of this study was to collect data regarding managers' views on the need to introduce drug testing at work and on the employment prospects of illicit drug users by means of a self administered questionnaire. A slight majority of managers (258, 56.5%) favoured the introduction of pre-employment drug testing with a smaller proportion (219, 47.9%) in favour of testing during employment. Practically none of the respondents (1.1%) was willing to employ a current illicit drug user and less than half (41.6%) were willing to employ a person with a past history of drug use. An increased willingness was noted among managers of younger age groups and in larger companies to employ past drug users. These results indicate that there is the possibility that workplace drug testing may be used as a tool to discriminate against workers suffering from drug abuse rather than to offer opportunities for rehabilitation of the individual. The findings highlight the urgent need for the establishment of guidelines to be followed during drug testing in Malta by the appropriate statutory authority, since suitable legislation is absent.

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## Introduction

The negative effects which drug abuse has on workers' health and on their efficiency in the workplace have been well documented<sup>1-4</sup>. The increasing awareness of problems related to drug abuse in Malta may make companies and other organisations more likely to consider introducing programmes such as drug testing in an attempt to identify drug abusers amongst their employees.

This paper presents the results obtained from a survey which, amongst other issues, investigated managerial attitudes toward the introduction of drug testing at work, and the willingness of managers to employ drug users.

## Method

The data was collected by means of a questionnaire conducted in April and May 1996 to investigate managerial attitudes towards illicit drug and alcohol abuse in the Maltese workplace. Two hundred and fifty companies were randomly chosen from the 666 companies included in the publication "Made in Malta - 1996 - Manufacturers and Exporters"<sup>5</sup> The activities of these companies were various and included the manufacture of textiles, furniture, metal, machinery, as well as printing, paper, rubber, chemical, transport, construction, food and beverage industries, and business services. The questionnaire required 'yes', 'no' or 'uncertain' replies to a total of 27 questions covering demographic information, drugs use, alcohol use and policy. This questionnaire was sent to persons occupying managerial grades in the companies whose general manager showed interest in taking part. In view of the fact that some of the information being requested was personal and involved an admission of indulgence in an

illegal activity, the questionnaire was designed so as to guarantee the respondents' anonymity. An attempt was made to minimise the number of non-responders by sending a second letter addressed to all participants urging them to return the questionnaire.

Results were analysed using BMDP statistical software. Managerial responses were compared using Pearson chi square test; statistically significant differences were accepted at  $p < 0.05$ .

## Results

Of the 250 general managers invited to participate in this survey, 190 (76%) agreed to take part and sent details of their managerial staff to be included in this study. A total of 764 managers were sent a copy of the questionnaire, and responses were obtained from 457 of them giving a final response rate of 59.8%. The majority of participants consisted of male managers (89.5%). The age of the respondents was normally distributed, with about 15% and 17% in the younger (<30) and older (<50) age groups respectively and about 34% in each of the two middle age groups(30-39, 40-49). The distribution of participants by company size appears in Figure 1.

The majority (56.4%) of managers felt that there was a need for the introduction of pre-employment drug testing, though the figure dropped slightly to 47.9% in favour of testing during employment (n=457). Managers overwhelmingly agreed that they should be included in any such programme if drug testing was introduced (n=457, 93.2%).

A perceived need to introduce pre-employment drug testing was associated with a readiness to introduce testing during employment, ( $\chi^2_1=19.69$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). There was a significant gender difference in the attitude

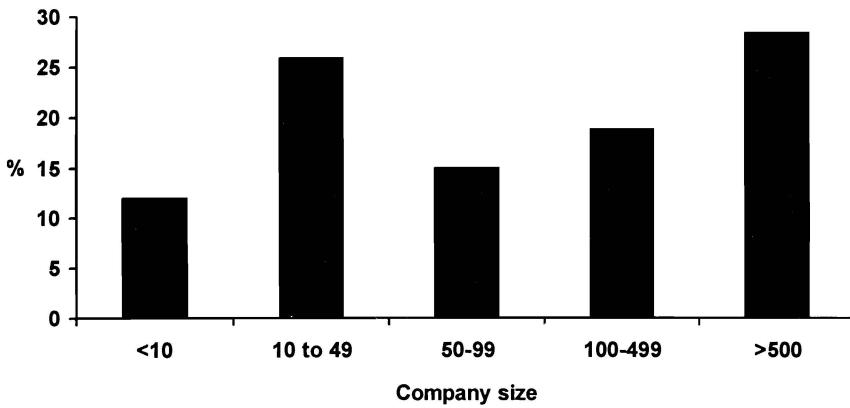


Figure 1 - Distribution of managers and size of employing company (n=457)

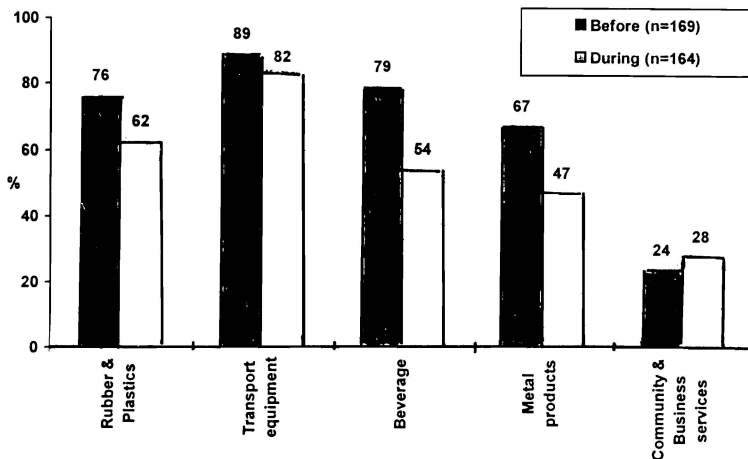


Figure 2 - Proportion of managers in different industries and perceived needs to introduce drug testing before and during employment

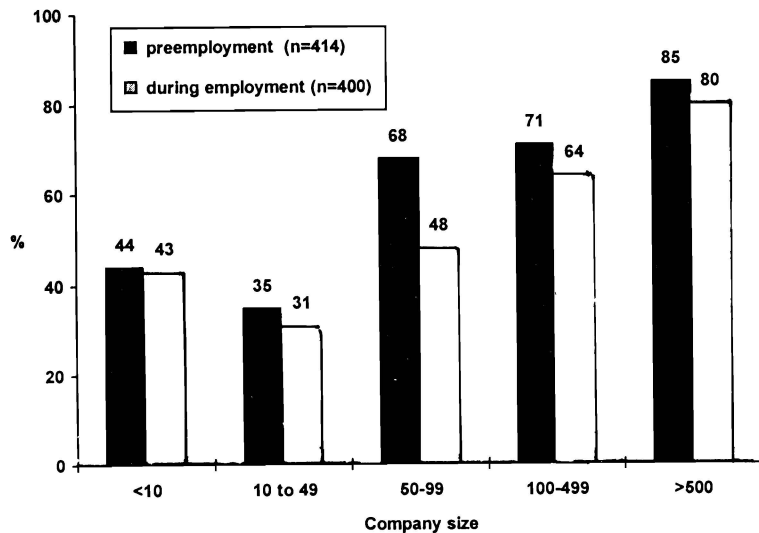


Figure 3 - Proportion of managers reporting a need to introduce drug testing and company size

towards the introduction of both pre-employment drug testing and testing during employment. Female managers were more in favour of pre-employment drug testing than their male colleagues (females 91%, males 67%), ( $\chi^2_1=4.30$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) but not in the case of testing during employment (males 57%, females 40%), ( $\chi^2_1=4.50$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). However no demonstrable association was found between managerial age and the introduction of drug testing.

Type of industry was significantly associated with a perceived need to introduce drug testing both before ( $\chi^2_1=13.44$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), and during employment ( $\chi^2_1=19.09$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) (Figure 2). There was a strongly positive association between the perceived need to introduce drug testing both before ( $\chi^2_1=6.96$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and during employment ( $\chi^2_1=5.89$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) with the size of the manager's company (Figure 3).

Managers who felt the need to introduce pre-employment drug testing at their place of work also agreed that they themselves should undergo drug testing if this was introduced ( $\chi^2_1=14.36$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). This was also the case for managers who felt the need to introduce drug testing during employment, ( $\chi^2_1=10.89$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Inclusion of managers in drug testing was not significantly affected by type or size of industry, or managerial age.

Practically none of the respondents (n=457, 1.1%) was willing to employ a person who was currently using drugs. However, the proportion of managers who would employ a person with a history of drug use increased substantially (n=457, 41.6%). The willingness to employ past drug users also significantly related to age of responders ( $\chi^2_1=8.02$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) (Figure 4), (willingness to employ decreasing with increasing managerial age), and to company size (Figure 5) ( $\chi^2_1=14.61$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), with more managers from companies employing more than 50 workers being in favour of employing such persons. However no association between age or company size, and attitudes towards the employment of current drug users could be found.

The employment of past or current drug users was not shown to be significantly affected by the attitudes of managers from different types of industry, size of company, or by gender.

### Discussion

The introduction of drug testing in the workplace is a controversial issue<sup>6</sup>. Drug testing of certain workers is already taking place in Malta, albeit not on a widespread scale. The results from this study show that there is a small majority of managers who favour the routine use of this procedure as a pre-employment selection tool. This may reflect the difficulty in identifying a substance abuser, particularly in the case of occasional drug users or those not showing overt signs of dependence.

This study strongly suggests that the employment opportunities of known drug users are bleak. Whilst the fact that practically none of the respondents would

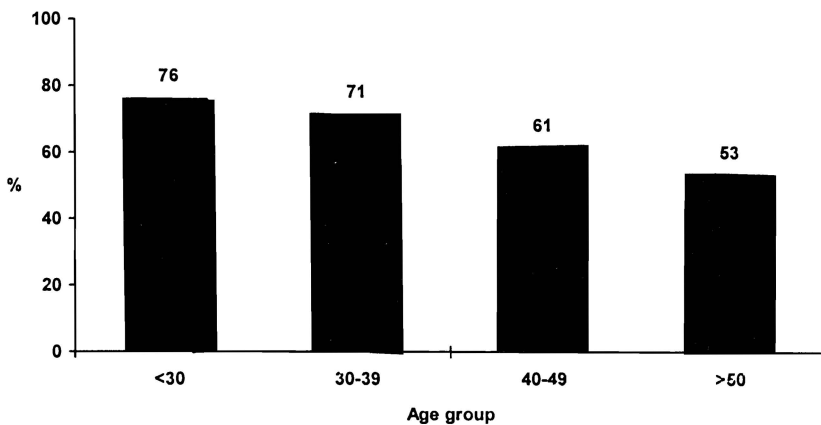


Figure 4 - Proportion of managers in different age groups willing to employ past drug users (n=291)

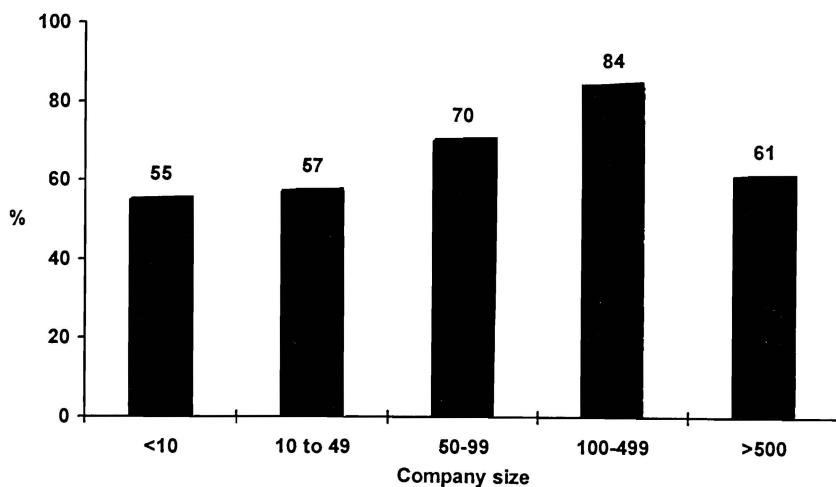


Figure 5 - Percentage of managers willing to employ a past drug user and company size (n=291)

employ a current drug user may be understandable given the nature of the illness, and in certain occupations, such as those where there may be a high risk of injury to self and to others, is definitely commendable, the relatively small proportion of managers willing to employ a past drug user (41.6%) is particularly worrying. This data indicates that there is a certain amount of prejudice against these persons and that in certain situations such persons may be discriminated against. This finding is obviously not encouraging for a person who is undergoing rehabilitation. Even worse is the implication that very few workers will admit to having a substance abuse problem and agree to self-referral if they know that such an action may result in their being victimised. The reduced willingness of managers from smaller companies (<50 workers) to employ past users may be partly explained by the frequently encountered issue of reduced flexibility in the allocation of workers to cover for any absenteeism in an attempt to meet production deadlines with the result that managers may be unwilling to risk having an employee who is seen as more likely to have such problems at work.

The findings of this study highlight a difference in attitude between managers from small companies and those from large ones with regards to the perceived need for drug testing during employment. This reduced need in smaller companies may be due to a number of factors,

such as low prevalence or lack of awareness of such problems, financial considerations or by a managerial conviction (which is often expressed privately) that despite not actually being able to recognise the effects per se of drug use on a worker, a manager may nevertheless learn about such a problem due to the small size and close proximity of workers in the Maltese workplace.

The willingness of managers to include themselves in such testing was a positive finding in that it reveals an understanding that all categories of workers may be affected by such problems and that all workers, irrespective of grade should be subject to the same company policy. The difference in attitude demonstrated by managers employed by different types of industry towards the need for the introduction of drug testing may be explained by various factors amongst which are different rates of prevalence of such problems in these workplaces, increased tolerance of drug use, or reduced awareness of the effects of drug use.

A limitation of the study was that larger companies may have a larger complement of managers, which could have possibly resulted in over-representation of this sector. A possible source of bias on which little control could be exerted was that there was a reliance on the companies' General Managers to submit all the names of

their managers who would be asked to participate in this survey. There was no way of ascertaining whether all the managers were included in this list or not. The classification of industry by codes was the one adopted by the Departments of Social Security and Labour in 1968, as well as the Employment and Training Corporation. This code obviously has great limitations, not only because of its age but also because a wide spectrum of work activities are grouped together under each heading. In view of the fact that certain industries remained under-represented in this survey, and due to problems with regards to statistical analysis, it was decided to limit analysis to those industries represented by more than 20 managers.

Whilst it may be argued that the company's health and safety responsibilities can only be upheld by drug testing, citing amongst other reasons, the possible danger which a person with substance abuse problems may have on both co-workers as well as the public, issues such as the violation of the person, invasion of privacy, assumption of guilt, possibility of error, need for reasonable cause, due process and assumption of guilt are strong arguments against<sup>7,8</sup>. The introduction of pre-employment testing on its own has gross limitations and it was therefore surprising to note a reduced willingness to introduce drug testing during employment. This may indicate a lack of information about the rational use, and

limitations associated with drug testing, particularly because a negative drug test before employment has little bearing on whether a worker has taken drugs in the past or whether a person will start taking drugs after commencing work. One must also stress that care is needed in interpreting the results of such testing since the fact that a positive drug result to urine testing merely indicates exposure to the drug and not necessarily intoxication, habituation or addiction<sup>9</sup>. Drug testing per se does not measure performance or ensure safety, and care must be taken to ascertain that any testing for a just cause, which should only be introduced by joint agreement of management and workers, is not used simply to pick on an employee or as a means to obtain objective criteria to facilitate a punitive response, even more so in the absence of any legal framework<sup>7</sup>. However, there is a growing tendency abroad to introduce drug testing in safety sensitive occupations<sup>6,10</sup>. Whilst being a complex issue drug testing may be of benefit in certain situations but it is important to carry out a cost-benefit analysis prior to its introduction since any potential benefit will be greatly affected by the prevalence of drug use in the population under consideration<sup>11</sup>.

The interest shown by managers in the introduction of drug testing at work, as well as the fact that drug testing has been introduced in some Maltese workplaces increase the urgency for legislation or at least the establishment of guidelines to be followed by medical practitioners involved in drug testing in Malta by the appropriate statutory authority, particularly with regards to ethical issues and procedures for ample collection and analysis. No drug testing should be introduced at a workplace until the burning question of what action will be taken in the case of persons testing positive has been carefully examined and a suitable policy has been formulated after consultation between the employer and the workers' representatives. Drug testing should be viewed as an opportunity to identify a sick worker and offer suitable support and rehabilitation. Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) have been developed as a strategy to combat workplace substance abuse, and have recently been introduced in a small number of selected workplaces in Malta during 1997. The aim of EAPs is to aid management to identify a potential problem at an early stage and to take steps aimed at full rehabilitation of a productive worker rather than his or her dismissal<sup>12</sup>. Such programmes stress the importance of prevention in the form of worker education to increase awareness about the effects of these substances, to use alcohol responsibly and to provide them with information about the available treatment and rehabilitation facilities. Both supervisors and workers representatives should be trained to enable them to recognise signs suggestive of substance abuse and to encourage the use of the company substance abuse programme when necessary<sup>13</sup>. Such initiatives should be undertaken in partnership with the workers' representatives, whose support for these programmes will be vital to ensure that they will have a reasonable chance of success. The ultimate key to success in addressing the problem of substance abuse is prevention and the commitment of employees<sup>14</sup>.

Further studies are needed to obtain a better indication of the prevalence of substance abuse at different workplaces, including Government Departments, and the types of drugs most commonly abused. The study strongly suggests that a substantial effort is required to counter managerial perceptions if any EAPs introduced are to have a reasonable chance of success. There is also a need for the authorities concerned to undertake an exercise aimed at identifying those occupations in which a worker suffering from such problems may cause serious accidents as in the case of transport workers, and take steps, if necessary through appropriate legislation, for the routine testing of these workers as part of employee assistance programmes.

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