



## Drug use a problem for employers

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Two families with deep Colorado roots — the Johnsons of Colorado Springs and the Haseldens of Centennial — have built rival commercial construction companies, each employing hundreds of people and reporting hundreds of millions of dollars in annual revenue. In business, they are practically sworn enemies.

But there is at least one issue where the Haseldens and the Johnsons are in agreement and encourage key members of their staffs to collaborate: construction safety. It is of paramount importance, and all of their employees must be drug-free.

“I’ll get straight to the bottom line,” said Rick Reubelt, Haselden Construction’s director of environmental health and safety. “If you’re in the construction industry, marijuana use is not acceptable at any time, under any circumstance or condition.”

“He couldn’t have said it better,” said Jim Johnson, GE Johnson’s chief executive officer. “We endorse that stance, and this is one thing we absolutely unite on.”

### Company hires out of state

**Johnson said his company has encountered so many job candidates who have failed pre-employment drug tests because of their THC use that it is actively recruiting construction workers from other states.**

The dwindling candidate pool especially affected GE Johnson during its trumpeted, \$57 million renovation of the luxurious Broadmoor hotel’s West Tower in late 2013. The company had such a tough time staffing required shifts that Johnson said his team decided to abandon local job-recruitment efforts, pay current workers plenty of overtime wages and look outside Colorado for drug-free employees.

“This is a very troublesome issue for our industry, but I do not see us bending or lowering our hiring standards,” Johnson said. “Our workplaces are too dangerous and too dynamic to tolerate drug use. **And marijuana? In many ways, this is worse than alcohol. I’m still in shock at how we (Colorado) voted. Everyone was asleep at the wheel.**”

Since Colorado’s 2009 boom in medical marijuana dispensaries and 2012 vote sanctioning the psychoactive drug’s recreational use, many of the state’s employers have had to confront marijuana’s growing impact on their budgets, operations and staffing.

So far, the prevailing interpretations of Colorado’s state amendments sanctioning marijuana use have sided with the rights of employers to terminate employees who use the drug even if their use is off the clock and premises and/or part of a healthcare regimen.

Marijuana-using workers are challenging those restrictions, claiming their employers have no right to regulate what they do during their free time. Though the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has not approved THC as a safe and effective drug for any condition, employees are using arguments of medical necessity against employers who don't tolerate marijuana use.

### **Hard to test lingering effect**

Legal skirmishes also center on employee drug testing. Marijuana-using workers and lawyers representing the marijuana industry argue that a positive test showing low levels of THC does not meet the burden for proving impairment on the job. Unlike alcohol, marijuana can remain in a user's system for weeks. **A heavy user who stops using can test positive for the next 60 days or more.**

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However, the number of workers nationwide who **tested positive for marijuana jumped 6.2 percent from 2012 to 2013, according to the Quest Diagnostics Drug Testing Index. And the number of positive tests was dramatically higher among workers in Colorado (up 20 percent) and Washington state (up 23 percent).** It was the first national spike in positive drug test rates recorded in 10 years — and one attributed largely to the use of marijuana and amphetamines.

### **Substance-abusing workers are more costly for companies than their drug-free colleagues.**

A U.S. Postal Service study found that **absenteeism is 66 percent higher among substance-abusing workers.** The U.S. Department of Labor cites multiple studies showing higher use of health benefits among substance-abusing employees. It also found lower turnover among companies with substance abuse programs that include drug testing. ■

Entire article here: <http://goo.gl/PR3wmc>

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