

Comprehensive mining security requires effective substance abuse policies and procedures

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When it comes to security in mines, the major focus tends to be on preventing theft and unauthorised access, as a result of the high value commodities involved in the industry. However, comprehensive safety and security needs to cover so much more, including aspects such as theft of time as well as risk to employees. When one considers that the mining sector has some of the highest rates of intoxication in the workplace, the importance of this security aspect becomes clear. Employees entering the mining workplace while under the influence of alcohol or drugs not only pose a health and safety risk, they are typically less productive than their sober colleagues, effectively stealing time from their employers. While substance abuse is not traditionally considered an element of mining security, it does introduce risk and an element of theft, and should form part of any comprehensive security solution.

Mining by its very nature is a hazardous environment, involving heavy and often dangerous equipment as well as challenging working conditions. Accidents can happen even if the entire workforce is sober and alert. However, the chances of an incident occurring are multiplied drastically when one introduces alcohol and drugs into the mix. Alcohol and drugs have a negative effect on behaviour and reaction times, not to mention the productivity of employees.

Employees who are not productive as a result of such intoxication are not working to their full capacity, and this theft of time is an aspect that is often not considered as part of security strategy. In addition, risk mitigation should always form part of security strategy, and reducing employee risk is essential. In order to achieve this, it is essential to put effective substance abuse policies and procedures into place. While random testing is typical and can deliver some benefit, this approach fails to identify the majority of mining employees affected by alcohol or drugs. This not only introduces an unacceptable level of risk; it has the potential to negatively impact the productivity of the entire mine. Mandatory

testing of each employee at the start of every shift needs to be included in the security policies of mining organisations. This approach has been proven to be highly effective, particularly where safety regulators enforce this as a daily, compulsory practice.

In addition to compulsory daily testing, it is also essential to include educational programs on the dangers of alcohol consumption in the workplace. Such programs should include real-world examples of the consequences of actions taken under the influence. When combined with compulsory alcohol testing, such practices can act as a significant deterrent to the use and abuse of alcohol in the workplace.

The Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Act specifies a zero tolerance approach toward alcohol and drug use in the workplace. In addition, the South African Mine Health and Safety Act states that employers must provide conditions for safe operation, and may not permit intoxicated employees to enter mines. However, the benefits of minimising the risk posed by substance abuse in mining go beyond simple compliance. By including substance abuse into security, identifying intoxicated employees and not permitting them to enter a mine, mine owners can improve employee safety as well as ensuring maximum productivity.