



"Distracted Workers" ... Not Just "Distracted Drivers."

Insights

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I recently wrote an expanded article on *"Why Employees Choose To Get Hurt"* for Occupational Health and Safety Magazine, and while reviewing materials, came across a fascinating little gem in the The Auto Club Group's "Going Places" Magazine. In addition to being my client for 30 years and the preferred travel agent of our Firm, I long ago discovered that AAA also leads the way on many auto safety issues.

OSHA, the AGC, EHS Today and other groups have waged a years-long campaign to restrict driver texting and other distractions. However, we may have missed two very important facts

First, that even listening to music can distract a driver, so we should not alone focus on hand-held phone usage and texting, ... and second, why not apply the *"distraction"* analysis to determine why employees act in an unsafe fashion?

Going Places article *"What's On Your Mind?"* explores how a wide variety of tasks and technology can affect you behind the wheel. I hope that, by now we are all aware that it makes little difference whether one uses a hand-held or hands-free device. However, what I found interesting about the AAA article was its ranking of the amount of distraction caused by a wide range of devices and activities, and frankly, cell phones are not the worst offenders .

David Strayer, a professor of cognition and neural science at the University of Utah has released research performed at the behest of the AAA Foundation For Traffic Safety. The answers Strayer found may surprise you.

- *Phone Conversations had essentially the same effect whether they happened on a hands-free or hand-held device (even as surveys show a majority of motorists believe hands-free to be safer).*
- *Audio Books required even more mental workload than the radio.*
- *"Speech-to-Text Systems" were much more demanding—a Category 3 distraction—than simply listening to the radio or talking on the phone. Strayer suggests it may involve the lack of "backchannel" communication, those conversational cues we get from talking to real people—the same way, he suggests, we often stumble a bit when trying to leave a voice mail message.*
- *"Operation Span" Exercises, which require a series of memory and math tasks, create the absolute highest level of workload.*

This excellent article by Tom Vanderbilt, author of New York Times bestseller, “Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do and What It says About Us,” illustrates that effective driver training and policies will be ineffective if we focus solely on cell phones and testing and ignore the larger problem of “what distracts the driver.”

I have not yet fully researched the broader subject of “*distracted workers*,” but most of what I have read has focused on the enormous loss of productivity.

From May 2011 Fox Small Business:

The survey conducted by software company harmon.ie and research firm uSamp, found that nearly 60% of work interruptions involve tools like e-mail, social media, text messaging and instant messaging, as well as switching windows among standalone tools and applications. The survey also found that 45% of employees work for only 15 minutes at a time or less without being interrupted, and 53% waste at least one hour a day due to various distractions.

I especially liked the 2012 Wall Street Journal Article, “Here’s Why You Won’t Finish This Article”

In the few minutes it takes to read this article, chances are you’ll pause to check your phone, answer a text, switch to your desktop to read an email from the boss’s assistant, or glance at the Facebook FB +3.12%or Twitter messages popping up in the corner of your screen. Off-screen, in your open-plan office, crosstalk about a colleague’s preschooler might lure you away, or a co-worker may stop by your desk for a quick question.

And bosses wonder why it is tough to get any work done.

Distraction at the office is hardly new, but as screens multiply and managers push frazzled workers to do more with less, companies say the problem is worsening and is affecting business.

While some firms make noises about workers wasting time on the Web, companies are realizing the problem is partly their own fault.

Which brings me to the Canadian Occupational Safety Magazine article, “From Distracted Drivers To Distracted Workers.”

“Researchers have found that the human brain really doesn’t multitask — the cognitive demanding task it cannot do at the same time,” said Hayes.

He points out the distractions of cellphone use are not limited to driving, but are also vital to the safety of workers, particularly in high-risk areas like a construction site.

So what are we doing about it? Some employers now ban cell phones from industrial and construction settings. I can understand this approach because I have handled more than one case

where an employee took a cell call, and then returned to his electrical work without putting his gloves back on. But what about work sites where the employees must use their phones to obtain guidance from the home office, to call emergency responders, or to conduct online job safety analysis or use other safety apps?

More importantly, have we broadened our focus from vehicle operation and from cell phones? Where else is “distraction” contributing to injuries? In this age of “multi-tasking,” we already know that we are losing concentration and analytical ability, in part due to our “labor saving” devices but are we also creating yet more safety hazards?

It seems to me that a first step is to increasingly introduce the broader topic of "distracted worker" into our discussions AND with our employees.

Howard