

KILL THE DISTRACTIONS,

**NO
DISTRACTIONS**

**KEEP YOUR EYES
ON THE ROAD**

**DON'T TEXT
AND DRIVE**

**STOP
MULTITASKING**



SAVE YOUR EMPLOYEES

BY TIM MCCARTY, BSC, MSC, ARM, CSP

THE STATISTICS SHOULD BE DETERRENT ENOUGH. Motor vehicle deaths in the U.S. were eight percent higher in 2015 than 2014—the largest year-over-year increase in half a century. More than 100 people were killed on U.S. roads every day in 2015. More than 12,000 were seriously injured. Every day. The National Safety Council (NSC) cites economic improvement among possible causes. Higher employment and favorable gas prices often lead to increases in the number of miles Americans choose to drive. Yet we also benefit from safer roads and a vehicle fleet that is increasingly equipped with state-of-the-art safety features, from antilock brakes and stability control to anti-collision and lane-departure systems. In part, these remarkable advances are being defeated by poor driving behavior. Alcohol use and speeding are the traditional sins committed behind the wheel, but distracted driving is now another leading factor in fatal and serious injury crashes.

According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, a driving distraction is a “specific type of inattention that occurs when drivers divert their attention from the driving task to focus on some other activity instead.” These distractions are either visual, manual, or cognitive. Visual distractions draw drivers’ eyes off the road. In a manual distraction, the driver’s hands are removed from the steering wheel. A cognitive distraction causes drivers to take their minds off the task of driving.

NO END OF DISTRACTIONS

Cell phones are by no means the only distractions. Infotainment systems, smoking, eating

and drinking, personal grooming, climate and seat controls, GPS devices, and passengers young and old can all divert drivers’ attention. Reports of drivers watching movies or reading books in traffic are not uncommon—and those are just a few of the distractions inside the vehicle. The exterior environment presents its own diversions, including collision sites and ever-changing scenery.

We’ve all driven while distracted, but cell phones are allowing this behavior to be taken to an extreme. The NSC estimates a minimum of 27 percent of crashes involve drivers talking or texting on cell phones, up from 21 percent in 2010. At any time during daylight in 2013, nine percent of drivers were talking on cell phones. That’s roughly 660,000 vehicle operators across America each elevating the risk of crashes four-fold. As it is, more than 1.5 million crashes per year—and approximately 21 percent of road fatalities—are likely attributable to drivers either texting or talking on their cell phones.

For public entity risk managers, the burden of these statistics is compounded by yet another: motor vehicle crashes are the number-one cause of work-related death. Risk managers oversee diverse driving fleets in which municipal employees may well be more likely to drive while

distracted, first because they are often working while behind the wheel of service vehicles, and second due to the sheer number of distractions they face. Take the case of a police officer whose patrol car features an on-board laptop, two-way radio and light and siren controls. Then layer in up to two cell phones: one for work and one for personal use.

THE MYTH OF MULTITASKING

With so many tools at our disposal, it's easy to understand the pressure and obligation to use them on the job. In a society continuously driven to achieve greater productivity—to increase its ability to do more in a given amount of time—we have bought in completely to the idea of multitasking. However, science tells us multitasking is a myth and attempting to do it impairs performance. When drivers talk on their cell phones, they are actually doing only one or the other activity at any given time. The brain switches back and forth continually between these tasks. One is always primary, one is secondary. Not only does the switching further impair the performance of both tasks, it also takes time—a few tenths of a second per switch, a momentary attention blindness that can mean the difference between stopping in time and plowing into an intersection.

Cell phones' impairment of reaction time is well documented. Drivers using cell phones in one study were found to have slower reaction times than those with a 0.08 blood alcohol concentration.

LOOKING BUT NOT SEEING

Our vehicle windshields afford us a view, but our brains are at a reduced capacity to process what our eyes take in. We miss up to 50 percent of what is going on in the driving environment when distracted by something as simple as

having a phone conversation. Key visual cues may go unnoticed: traffic signals, stopped school buses, cyclists and pedestrians.

And because we are unaware of the information that is lost, we may also be unaware of our limitations. An AAA survey found that 83 percent of respondents believed using cell phones while driving posed either a serious or extremely serious problem. Yet more than half of these same respondents indicated that they drove while talking on cell phones within the previous 30 days—some often.

The implication for risk managers and their municipalities is a heightened threat to worker and public safety, as well as liability. The path to prevention involves four steps—policies, education, technology and enforcement—that should be part of every municipal vehicle safety program and loss control initiative.

❶ Start with comprehensive policies that assess the potential for distracted driving in your organization.

Who are the employees that work behind the wheel? What vehicles do they operate? What tasks could distract them? What hazards do they face?

Make sure your policy encourages all employees to:

- Openly pledge to avoid distracted driving behaviors.
- Turn off unnecessary electronic devices and place them out of reach before starting to drive. (We strongly advise clients to impose an outright ban on use of cell phones, tablets and programming GPS devices while driving.)

- Pull off the road safely and stop the vehicle for any task that could distract from driving.
- As passengers, refrain from activity that would distract the driver and speak up when witnessing distracted driving behavior.

❷ Communicate through training that helps employees clearly understand the risks and implications of distracted driving as well as the reasoning behind your policies.

Build distracted driving components into all driving training programs, and be sure to provide refresher training every two to three years.

❸ Whenever possible, turn to technology for help reducing risky behind-the-wheel behaviors.

For example, install software that disengages mobile data terminals in police vehicles unless they are stopped. Blocking devices can be installed on cell phones to terminate calls and text messaging in moving vehicles. Some GPS systems are now calibrated to block adjustments if the vehicle is in motion. And while hands-free phone systems remain legal in some North American jurisdictions, don't make the mistake of considering them a safe alternative. Hands-free cell phones offer greater convenience but, according to researchers, they deliver no safety benefit compared to hand-held devices.

❹ Finally, ensure your policies and training are supported by effective enforcement.

Disciplinary measures must be in place to help employees understand the consequences of distracted driving; for themselves, the organization, and members of the public they serve.

EXPERT SUPPORT

The National Safety Council offers a free information kit to help employers develop a policy and reduce crash risk from cell phone distracted driving (safety.nsc.org/cellphonekit). The kit includes a range of materials including a sample policy, communications to build management support, posters and newsletter articles. ■

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