Distracted Worker



INCIDENT

A worker at a shipyard was installing hatch covers on the top of deck openings and was applying silicone to rubber gaskets to keep them from drying out. A hatch lowered into position as he was applying the silicone. Since he was talking with a coworker, he wasn't paying attention to where the hatch was.

His hand got stuck and was crushed.

He no longer has feeling in his hand, even after 6 months of therapy. A "disabled" classification made it so he had to look for a new insurance carrier.

NEED TO KNOW

Many people think they can multitask effectively, but studies have shown that people are incapable of doing several things well simultaneously.

1. Three common distractions in the workplace that may not be dangerous, but definitely cause stress and reduce productivity are: loud co-workers, people stopping by for a chat, and too many meetings that take up too much work time.
2. If you find yourself distracted and unable to focus, one thing that can help is to take a quick break outside and get some fresh air.
3. A whopping 80 percent of young drivers polled believe that texting while driving makes no difference to their driving performance. (National Highway Transportation Safety Administration)
4. An interruption of less than five seconds causes a tripling of task-related errors made by workers. (Michigan State University)
5. Reports of distracted walkers being treated at emergency rooms increased by four times over a seven-year period. (Associated Press)
6. One form of workplace distraction that many people might find surprising is poor housekeeping. Something as simple as putting a screwdriver down in a messy area and being unable to find it can cause frustration, waste time and distract workers from the jobs they are performing.
7. Two things supervisors need to do to minimize dangerous distractions are: Train workers to never approach co-workers who are performing safety-sensitive tasks until those tasks have been completed and, train operators to shut down equipment, turn power tools off and stop what they are doing

before talking to another worker who approaches them.

Accidents occur for many reasons. In most jobsites people tend to look for “things” or “people” to blame when an accident happens, because it’s easier than looking for “root causes,”

Failure to Pre-Plan the Work:

There is a lot of talk today about Job Hazard Analysis. JHA’s are an effective way to figure out the smartest ways to work safely and effectively. Being hasty in starting a task, or not thinking through the process can put you in harm’s way. Instead, Plan Your Work and then Work Your Plan.

While some factors in the workplace can play a role in causing distractions, the fact remains that more hazards result from unsafe acts than from unsafe conditions. In truth, much of the safety of employees lies in their hands. So think straight, follow safe procedures and you don’t have to worry about hurting yourself before each work day ends!

Mental Distractions:

Mental distractions often lead to inattention. You could miss noticing that another worker is working below you just because you’re too engrossed over that argument you had with your wife. Whether you’re worrying, daydreaming, or chatting, mental distractions can be likened to hazards or defects in machines that you need to secure with “guards”. Always remind yourself of these mental distractions with a DANGER sign, close the “door” and focus on the work at hand.

If that’s all too hard to do, then you may consider taking a break and getting some fresh air to blow those distracting thoughts away or finishing that nice chat with a co-worker.

Poor Housekeeping:

Housekeeping is a big player for you to continue focusing on your job, safety is next to the latter as well. Just imagine how distracted you’d be if your workstation is cluttered with all your personal stuff, unsorted files, bolts, screws, wires, food wrappers and other junk. Visual clutter can easily translate itself to mental clutter. It would be easy to miss that obstruction in the equipment operations when dust and all these debris mess up with your focus.

Ignoring Safety Procedures:

Purposely failing to observe safety procedures can endanger you and your co-workers. You are expected to follow the company safety policies-not to make your own rules. Being “casual” about safety can lead to a casualty!

Here are Some of the Most Common Distractions in the Workplace and Measures you can Take to Minimize or Eliminate them.

Pressure to Perform

Companies often demand employees meet deadlines or quotas to ensure profitability. However, getting work done quickly can often overshadow safety.

The risk of injury increases substantially when supervisors or managers urge employees to work towards a goal instead of doing all work safely.

Employees may also push themselves to do more than they should to meet or exceed production goals. They may want management to notice their performance in hopes of a raise or promotion, or simply to ensure job security.

Regardless of whether the company or the employee exerts pressure to perform, the result is often the same. Employees take risks to meet goals, injuries impact your production goals and safety record, and insurance premiums increase.

Repetition Breeds Complacency

When employees perform the same tasks repeatedly, they're confident they know their job. The work becomes routine and employees can do the work automatically. Unfortunately, daydreaming in the workplace or becoming over-confident can cause employees to overlook existing or new hazards which can lead to injuries.

Internal Distractions

Socializing with fellow employees is great in the lunchroom or during a coffee break, but it is a major distraction while working. When employees are busy talking about their weekend plans while they're working, they're not totally focused on their work.

Of course, you can't tell people not to talk to each other, and socialization is an important part of the work environment. However, you can minimize interruptions, which clearly pose a safety threat.

External Distractions

Employees often carry distractions with them when they come to work. They may have financial worries, problems with the kids, or they're thinking about their upcoming vacation.

BUSINESS / REGULATIONS

There are many ways in which safety, operations, and production can gauge how a culture is doing in terms of combating safety complacency, beyond just a review of the Lost Time Injury (LTI) and Experience Modification Rate (EMR) rates in recent years. Do safety leaders—such as the operations manager, superintendent or general manager—take the time to walk with the on-site safety professionals? Or, if an incident occurred, and corporate staff conducted a review and came up with a list of items that could be incorporated into policy to prevent or to curb re-occurrence—were those changes actually implemented?

Another question: have other leaders in the organization listened to, or taken to heart the hazards that field personnel have brought to our attention—or have they just placed their suggestions into the back of their memory bank and gone on with their day?

What Is Safety Complacency?

Complacency is a state of mind where a worker is out of touch with the hazards and risks around them. Often times, complacency happens over time, where workers

take the conditions or the context around for granted.

For example, consider a worker who is so caught up in a regular routine each day, that he/she doesn't notice cues around them that are out of the norm. These signs could be something that's wrong with his/her equipment, or worse yet, it could be a more immediate threat that could put his/her in harm's way. If someone is cutting corners on protocol, or almost in a "trance" on the job, they are potentially putting his/her life, and others' lives, at risk.

Complacency can be one of the most problematic mindsets that can contribute to injuries and incidents on the job.

Additional Liabilities for Distracted Employees

As any employer with industrial machinery knows, preventing accidents starts with making sure employees are aware of their surroundings. The inappropriate use of cell phones imperils employees' ability to recognize and react to hazards, such as passing forklifts, which can hit pedestrian employees. Of recent concern is the use of "augmented reality" games, such as **Pokémon Go**, in which players view the world through cell phone screens, walk around while distracted, and search real world sites for game-related information. These games encourage cell phone use and distraction while walking around, and should be prohibited from the worksite.

OSHA citations and associated penalties are not the only liabilities that employers must be concerned about when it comes to cell phone distractions. For example, thirteen states ban the use of handheld phones while driving for talking. 46 states and the District of Columbia ban text messaging for all drivers, and in many of the remaining states similar bans are in place at the county or city level. These laws make texting while driving illegal and also open employers to liability for accidents that result from their employees' distracted driving and improper use of cell phones.

Employees face both individual civil and criminal liability for damages that result from accidents caused by texting while driving or engaging in other work Likewise, employers face vicarious liability for the acts of their employees under agency law for personal injury or property damage they cause during the course of employment. When an accident happens as a consequence of distracted driving or operating machinery while the employee is on company time, the employer is potentially liable. Where the employer has not affirmatively prohibited texting while driving and enforced that policy, the employer faces potential liability as a result of the accident.

Vicarious liability, as it is called, is not a new legal concept. Employers have faced liability in similar situations for decades for the acts of their employees that occur during the course of the employment relationship. Consider the claims made against pizza delivery companies whose drivers were instructed to deliver a pizza in 30 minutes or less. In the context of distracted driving, the price of vicarious liability can be significant. In Florida, a lumber wholesaler settled for over $16 million after one of its salesmen hit and severely disabled an elderly woman while talking on a cell phone.

Beyond potential OSHA administrative penalties and civil and criminal liability, employers should also consider how their policies and practices can affect their insurance rates. There is no question that with an increase in accidents caused

by distracted employees, the cost of worker's compensation and other insurance coverage will rise.

Cell Phone Fires and Explosions

Modern cell phones use lithium-ion batteries, that in some cases, allegedly have caused fires and sparks while in stand-by or charging. Defective batteries allegedly have produced smoke and grounded a flight, ignited a car, and smoldered on a child's pillow. A cell phone manufacturer has reported 35 cases of its devices' batteries burning or exploding while charging, and has issued a recall for millions of devices. The Federal Aviation Administration has issued a warning about a particular model of personal device, telling passengers" not to turn on or charge these devices on board aircraft and not to stow them in any checked baggage."

Consequently, some cell phones may represent a recognized fire hazard at the workplace. As the Agency's understanding of the hazards develops, OSHA may address this issue under the **General Duty Clause**, citing employers who fail to protect employees from the recognized hazard of cell phone battery fires. Employees who work around flammable vapors or dust may face risks from fires and explosions. It is a common practice at gasoline stations to have warnings that cell phones should not be used while fueling because of the potential for ignition of flammable gasoline vapors. Employers must manage and limit the potential fire hazards posed by recalled cell phones in the workplace.

Conclusion

As OSHA's enforcement relating to inappropriate employee cell phone use gains more notoriety, it can be expected that it will have a significant collateral impact on law enforcement at all levels. Employers may wish to look closely at their policies, procedures, and training systems to determines whether updates are appropriate to reduce potential individual civil and criminal liability of employees, as well as the vicarious liability to the employer.

Prohibit the use of cell phones at work

There are currently no other federal OSHA standard that specifically forbids the use of a cell phone while at work.

OSHA did address the potentially hazardous use of cell phones when they partnered with the Department of Transportation to implement a "Distracted Driving Initiative" a few years ago. As part of that initiative, OSHA warned employers that they should prohibit any work policy or practice that requires or encourages workers to text while driving. Otherwise they could face a citation for violation of the **General Duty Clause (paragraph (5)(a)(1) of the OSH Act of 1970)** for failure to provide a workplace free from recognized hazards. One can only assume that OSHA compliance officers may try to use the same strategy when it comes to citing an employer when their employee is found to be using a cell phone while performing complex tasks.

Despite the near absence of federal OSHA standards directly addressing the subject, employers should consider developing and implementing a formal policy regarding the use of cell phones while at work. As with all newly-implemented

policies, employee training on this topic is the key to making sure workers are aware of your policy as well as the reasons it is important to protect worker safety.

Of course, a policy addressing this (or any other) topic is worthless unless it is fully and consistently enforced, so make certain not to let it fade away and be ignored. Can you imagine the ramification if you had a long-standing policy against the use of cell phones during a certain task(s) that was not enforced, and then an accident occurred? That could be even worse for the employer than having no policy at all.

STATISTICS

In studies conducted by Queens School of Business and the Gallup Organization, disengaged workers have 37 percent higher absenteeism, 49 percent more accidents and 60 percent more errors and defects. Organizations with low employee engagement scores experienced lower productivity, profitability, job growth and share price over time.

Engaged workers fully are committed to their work and the success of the company. They put in more effort, have a higher quality work product, go out of their way to assist others, have fewer accidents and are willing to provide feedback and suggestions on ways to increase efficiencies and improve the work environment.

In contrast, companies with highly-engaged employees are sought after by other workers and, as a result, have seen a 100 percent increase in job applications for current and future job openings, according to the studies.

The top workplace distractions involve not just where you work, but who you work with. According to a new poll by Udemy and Toluna, 80 percent of people report being distracted by chatty coworkers, the number one office place distraction. Office noise is the second most cited workplace disturbance, with seven out of ten respondents citing noise as a top bother in their day-to-day workflow. Lower on the list, but still a problem, was social media. Half of the people surveyed thought that personal social media use was a disturbance to them at work.

The report found that reducing workplace distractions increased workers productivity, motivation, confidence, and overall happiness. As open office plans have come into vogue in the modern workplace, new studies have brought into question how effective they are at fostering a collaborative environment as many complain of their distractions and misuse.

Injuries caused by being distracted due to using a cellphone while walking has become so common that National Safety Council has actually added “distracted walking” as a category in their statistical report *Injury Facts*. This report tracks data around the leading causes of unintentional injuries and deaths.

Other researchers have been looking at the details of these injuries. Some of their findings include:

- 52% of distracted walking incidents involving cell phones happen at home
- 68% of those injured are women
- 54% are people ages 40 or younger

Recent injury statistics that show the total number of injuries due to distracted walking are hard to come by. One study conducted by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission shows that in 2011, a total of 1,152 people of all ages were treated in hospital emergency rooms in the U.S. for injuries sustained while walking and using a cell phone or other electronic device. As you can imagine these numbers are probably higher now due to an increased smartphone use.

Overview

What People Find Distracting at Work

- 80% Chatty coworkers
- 70% Office noise
- 61% Feeling overwhelmed by changes at work
- 60% Meetings
- 56% Social Media

RECOMMENDATION

Complacency can be a safety issue and there are no OSHA regulations that apply to it we cannot control the thoughts and make sure they understand how important it is for them to stay focused on the job safety procedures every day. Companies that take the time to focus on getting managers and workers to avoid complacency will prevent accidents.

There are 5 key steps to curb safety complacency:

1. Keep the company’s values and safety mission at the forefront all the time. For example, start the day with a safety message and remind managers and workers that their safety and well-being are far more important than getting a job finished.
2. Make sure all workers understand their job, what is expected of them, and how to perform it safely. Make sure workers know and understand the safety rules, how to use the equipment they will be expected to use, and exactly what you wish them to do.
3. Avoid routines that require the worker to do the same thing all the time. Training workers to do different things and giving them the opportunity to diversify their tasks keeps them interested so they don’t become complacent.
4. Managers and workers should be instructed to observe their fellow employees because it helps raise their awareness as well as that of the co-worker. Obviously when something is not being done correctly, there must be an emphasis on safety, and the observer should advise his/her co-worker.
5. Formal safety training is where it all starts but it is important to remember that most people will only remember about 10-20% two weeks later. Therefore, it is important to follow up with additional training such as toolbox talks and other regular reminders about safety.

Many companies implement a team approach, charging all employees with looking out for each other. The purpose is to ensure that the inexperienced workers learn how to perform the work safely and to ensure complacency does not become part of your company’s internal culture.

Complacency can be a safety issue and there are no OSHA regulations that apply

to it. We cannot control the thoughts within the employee's mind but we can help to change their mindset if we train them regularly and make sure they understand how important it is for them to stay focused on the job safety procedures every day. Companies that take the time to focus on getting managers and workers to avoid complacency will prevent accidents.

Have you formally addressed the use of cell phones within your organization? If so, has it been readily accepted by workers, or are they allowed to eventually revert to their old habits? Have you ever been cited by OSHA because an employee using a cell phone while at work? If you would like to **share your experiences** or other information pertinent to this topic, please do so by **clicking here** and entering your comment in the "Comments" box. And last but not least, I would like to encourage you to **Share this Blog post with others in your Network** who might benefit from reading this information.

PREVENTION

Complacent workers stop recognizing that they are at risk performing certain tasks and are more easily distracted than others who are aware of danger. Any task can be hindered by distraction-related errors, but some errors are more grievous than others—and some distractions are downright deadly.

Three Deadly Distractions

Here are three common distractions that can take workers' minds off their task—and strategies for addressing them:

1. ***Electronic devices.*** Operating a motor vehicle or a piece of heavy equipment is exactly the sort of safety-critical operation we are most likely to think of. But it's not just cell phones that can cause these problems: laptop and notebook computers and tablets are also potentially deadly distractions—even when their use on the job is required.

Eliminate device-related distractions: Put a policy in place to ensure that workers are not required to use their cell phones, laptops, or tablets at moments when they should be focused on what they're doing—like driving.

2. ***Interruptions.*** *Eliminate interruptions:* Create your own "sterile cockpit" rule for hazardous tasks. The term comes from the airline industry, where many routine tasks have a high disaster potential. Airlines have gone to great lengths to ensure that pilots will be fully focused during landing procedures. Pilots are trained to work together in teams when landing and are constrained by the sterile cockpit rule during landing, takeoff, taxiing, and while flying below 10,000 ft. The rule strictly limits nonessential communication and activities during those times.
3. ***Divided attention.***We like to think we can multitask safely—but the truth, researchers say, is that we're probably not doing any of those multiple tasks well. If any of the tasks you're performing have the potential to cause serious injury, divided attention can trigger disaster.
4. ***Eliminate divided attention:*** Address the problem at the planning level. When workers are required to perform potentially hazardous tasks, don't give them more than one thing to do at a time. Either give them a stepwise procedure to follow, or give them a single task to do, but assigning multiple, potentially hazardous tasks is an invitation to disaster. Plan

tasks with care, and make sure that adequately trained personnel are on hand to do them.

The following are 6 steps employers can take to eliminate and mitigate against employee distraction.

1. MONITOR BEHAVIOR

Since an employer cannot eliminate distractions, they must focus on employee behavioral changes. A strong relationship between managers, supervisors and the people they oversee is the best way to identify warning signs to reduce risk.

Employers should conduct regular walk-throughs to detect potential issues, discuss problems with employees, and seek ways to reduce distractions.

2. VARIETY & PROPER SCHEDULING

Good managers and supervisors schedule work into digestible sections instead of assigning huge projects. This not only allows employees to take short breaks between each section, but it also makes employees feel more accomplished. There's something extremely satisfying about "finishing" a job.

Managers and supervisors should also try to vary employee tasks so they're not performing the same duties for long periods. Working employees until they're fatigued or bored to tears isn't beneficial to a smooth and safe workflow.

When employees tire or fall into a set routine they react slowly, make mistakes, can't concentrate, and quality suffers. Of course, tired or bored employees are also more likely to injure themselves, which stops or impedes production.

3. INCORPORATE BREAKS

Companies need to encourage employees to step away from their work to take a break, even when they're trying to meet a deadline or production quota. Employees may skip breaks even when they're entitled to them if the company does not cultivate a "safety first" environment.

A recent study shows that "micro-breaks" of just a few minutes can increase job satisfaction, make it more likely an employee will go above-and-beyond their job description, and they reduce emotional exhaustion. Micro-breaks also increase productivity and lower the risk of injuries due to distractions.

4. LIMIT DEVICES

Limiting MP3 players and cellphones to break time increases employee focus and minimizes risk. Employees can still receive emergency calls through the main office line or listen to music on a coffee or lunch break.

5. ENLIST EMPLOYEE INPUT

Employers should ask employees about problems they see in the workplace and take steps to resolve them. For instance, if a particular machine constantly jams and the employees must unjam it, then there's a higher risk of injury.

An employee safety program provides consistent reinforcement and reliability.

A dedicated safety officer with the power to make changes is the employee go-to for reporting unsafe conditions or to make suggestions for improvement.

6. ENCOURAGE WELLNESS

Employees with a healthy lifestyle have superior stress management skills, improved focus, more energy, and a stronger body and mind. A Harvard Business School study also found companies that invest in wellness average a $2.71 return for every dollar spent due to increased productivity, decreased absenteeism, and reduced healthcare cost.

Many U.S. companies now institute wellness programs to reduce workplace distractions and improve health. It also improves employee retention and strengthens your brand.