

# Driver Distractions from In-Vehicle Devices

## Risk Control from Liberty Mutual Insurance



### Highlights:

- Drivers are typically aware that doing other things while driving increases the chance of a crash but they engage in these activities anyway
- What employers should do
- Common distraction concerns

When a driver engages in activities such as using a cell phone, eating, personal grooming, and other tasks, their eyes can be off the road and their hands can be off the wheel, but mostly it is a driver's mind being off the task of driving that makes distractions so hazardous.

Operating a motor vehicle involves gathering information from seeing, listening, and feeling what goes on in and around the vehicle. Drivers need situational awareness when operating a motor vehicle. But even after a distracting task has ended, it takes time to regain that situational awareness.

Most discussions around distractions relate to motor vehicle operation and cell phone use because of the frequency of use. Texting is considered significantly more hazardous due to drivers taking their eyes off the road and the mental focus on the messaging. Using a phone, calling, or messaging is not the only distracting activity drivers engage in.

Companies should have policies in place on a wide range of distractions while operating vehicles as well as for workers in areas where vehicles are used, machinery is operated, or similar hazards exist.

### Impact of Distractions

The percent of all crashes and fatal crashes as a result of distractions will vary based on the source and time period studied. Estimates range from low double digit to high double digit percentages. Typically, drivers are aware that doing other things while driving increases the chance of a crash but they engage in these activities anyway. In addition to phones and texting, other distractions exist.

Diverting a driver's attention away from the road could be necessary for safe vehicle operation, like turning on a defroster. However, many distractions are from things not related to vehicle operation.

Understanding if a distraction was involved in a crash can be complex. Studies have shown that it takes a driver time to regain situational awareness after a distracting task or activity. Recovery time can vary based on the task or activity. A driver may not have been engaged in a distraction at the time of a crash but that does not mean distractions did not play a part.

### What Employers Should Do

Distractions should be addressed as part of every fleet safety program. As with other safety programs, senior management needs to support the program and expect it to be followed.

- Adopt a formal distractions policy that applies to employees operating motor vehicles on company business or operating a company owned motor vehicle.
- Communicate the policy at the time of hire and during regular communications.
- Prohibit use of company cell phones and texting when operating the vehicle or stopped in traffic.

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- Address a wide range of distractions as part of the distractions policy.
  - Have management set a good example by complying with the policy.
  - Review work processes to identify and eliminate distractions that employees or management may view as part of the job. This could include participating in conference calls, viewing incoming work-related texts, changing job tasks via text messages, and other work-related activities.
  - Review infotainment systems in new vehicle specifications and limit distractions that could be included with the vehicles.
  - Review the company distractions policy with employees and include testing to verify they understand the policy.
  - Adopt a “no cell phone policy” for employees and visitors when walking or working in parking areas or on property roadways where they are likely to encounter motor vehicle traffic.
  - Obtain a signed distraction policy statement where the driver acknowledges the policy and agrees to comply.
  - Make observations or use technology to measure compliance with the policy.
  - Make consequences for policy violations part of a progressive discipline policy.

## Common Distraction Concerns

**We can't keep an employee from using a personal phone.** This starts with a policy on distractions and should apply to company and personal cell phones. A policy may not prevent a driver from using a phone but an employer should clearly communicate their expectations and the impact violations can have on the public, the employee, and the company.

**Aren't workers more productive when they get some business done when driving?** They may not be. Drivers that shift their attention from driving to a conversation and back to driving can miss important parts of the conversation and not have accurate recall of conversation details.

**Isn't it okay to text at a light because the vehicle is stopped?** Because it takes time to regain situational awareness after a distraction has ended, texting or calling while stopped at lights is a hazard. Drivers should stay aware of the road environment even when stopped.

**Isn't a hands free phone use policy good enough?** Many studies have shown that the main distraction for using a phone is cognitive, not manual. A hands free policy may allow a company to feel like they have addressed the issue of distractions but they have not measurably lowered the risk of a distraction related crash.

**Aren't some people good at multi-tasking?** Humans do not really multi-task, which is doing multiple things at the same time. Rather, the brain shifts back and forth between the tasks. This impacts the quality of awareness and decisions that need to be made while driving.

**Isn't telling employees to obey local or state laws on calling and texting good enough?** No it is not. Laws vary by state and setting one standard for performance has a better chance of working. In addition, vehicles can be operated on private property where the laws may not be enforceable.

**Are there case studies of companies that banned cell phones when driving?** Yes. The National Safety Council, 2014, resource listed below outlines what one company did to implement a ban.

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**In addition to cell phones and texting, what other distractions should be part of a distracted driving policy?** Distraction policies should include and address the things we see drivers doing on the road, including activities like the following:

- Eating or drinking
- Watching in-vehicle entertainment/infotainment systems
- Smoking
- Personal grooming
- Watching non-traffic situations outside the vehicle (crashes, people, construction)
- Doing paperwork from your last client
- Using video players
- Reaching for loose items
- Interacting with passengers
- Child care
- Reading books, newspapers, or other printed material
- Transporting pets in the vehicle (unless in carriers and secured)
- Changing clothes

## Resources

American Automobile Association (AAA). (June, 2013). Measuring cognitive distraction in the automobile.

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). Distracted driving. Retrieved from <https://www.nhtsa.gov/risky-driving/distracted-driving>

National Safety Council. (2014). Employer ban cell phone policy: A case study. Retrieved from <http://www.nsc.org/DistractedDrivingDocuments/Employer-Ban-Cell-Phone-Policy.pdf>

On working memory and a productivity illusion in distracted driving. (2016). *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*. 445-453.

Seppa, Nathan (August 9, 2013). Impactful distraction. Talking while driving poses dangers people seem unable to see. *Science News*. Retrieved from <https://www.sciencenews.org/article/impactful-distraction>

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