Distractions Derail Safety



WHAT'S AT STAKE

Electronics technology has progressed so quickly that instant messaging, the Internet and credit-card sized music players are now in the hands of millions of North Americans. The downside of these conveniences is that people mistakenly think they can perform their jobs safely while they use these devices.

WHAT'S THE DANGER

Whether a worker is text-messaging someone while driving or listening to a personal music device while working, he is dangerously distracted and at risk for causing injury to himself and others.

EXAMPLE

A commuter train engineer who was sending and receiving multiple text messages while operating a train failed to notice a red signal and crashed the crowded train into a freight train, killing 25 people. He had sent a text message just 22 seconds before the trains collided.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Many people brag that they could do their jobs in their sleep, but if you aren't paying attention to the task at hand, your distracted state could put you in harm's way at any second.

Here are some examples of how distracted behaviors put workers and others in danger:

- If you're talking on a cell phone while driving, it's easy to lose track of your surroundings. Many drivers report having watched other drivers run red lights or cut off other drivers while using cell phones. Several studies have suggested that using a hands-free cell phone while driving isn't much safer than using a hand-held one.
- Texting while behind the wheel is even more dangerous because your eyes are off the road for several seconds at a time. You can travel the length of a football field with no idea what's going on beyond the device in your hand.
- The use of MP3 players and other music players in the workplace is growing. Not only are people damaging their hearing by listening at loud levels, there's also the concern that they're tuning out everything else around them. Many people who

listen to music on the job are listening at levels that will prevent them from hearing warning sounds, such as back-up alarms on forklifts, or hearing warning shouts from co-workers.
- Many cell phones are equipped with games that can be a powerful attraction for a worker who is bored on the job. Playing these games not only kills a worker’s productivity but also zones him out regarding what’s going on around him.

FINAL WORD

Many workplaces now have policies regarding the use of cell phones, personal digital assistants (PDAs) and MP3 players. Ask your supervisor if your workplace has such a policy. Even if no policies are in place, it’s up to you to use these devices responsibly. A freeway is no place for a texting conversation and a busy shop floor is no place to have music pounding your senses when you need to be paying attention to your job and your personal safety.