

# DISTRACTED DRIVING: CELL PHONE USE WHILE DRIVING

## Introduction

The issue of driver distractions is an increasing fleet safety issue. According to the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#) driver distraction is a factor in 80% of crashes. The significant increase in cellular phone use has served as the catalyst for the growing interest and overall problem of driver distractions.

What is driver distraction and how can it be defined? Driver distraction is not just talking on a cell phone when driving. Driver distraction is a form of inattention in which a driver is delayed in the identification or recognition of information needed to properly and safely accomplish the task of driving because some activity, event, object or person within or outside of the vehicle compels the driver to shift their attention away from the driving task. One NHTSA report roughly estimates that drivers engage in potentially distracting secondary tasks approximately 30% of the time their vehicles are in motion. Conversation with passengers is the most frequent secondary task. Other distractions include:

- Talking or texting on a cell phone
- Eating and reading
- Manipulating controls
- Navigation and hand held computers or devices
- Smoking
- Route Problems - looking for route and/or traffic signs
- Unfamiliar situations such as staring at an automobile crash

## Policy Statements

The Policy Statement by the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#) (NHTSA) states:

*“The primary responsibility of the driver is to operate a motor vehicle safely. The task of driving requires full attention and focus. Cell phone use can distract drivers from this task, risking harm to themselves and others. Therefore, the safest course of action is to refrain from using a cell phone while driving.”*

An excerpt from the [National Safety Council](#) Distracted Driving policy states:

*“When driving on personal time or company business, NSC employees may not use cell phones (including hands free) or any other mobile electronic devices while operating a motor vehicle. This includes, but is not limited to, answering or making phone calls, engaging in phone conversations, reading or responding to e-mails and text messages, adjusting a Global Positioning System (GPS) and accessing the Internet.”*

Portions of the [American Society of Safety Engineers](#) Position Statement on Distracted Driving in Motor Vehicles state:

*“The Society’s view is that operating a vehicle while distracted is always a potentially unsafe act, and all drivers should be cognizant of the hazards associated with distracted driving.”*

One initiative ASSE recommends that the Society and its members pursue is:

*“Encourage and support employer rules banning any employee use of electronic devices while driving, including proactive training of employees about the risks associated with electronic devices and other sources of distracted driving.”*



Have you and your company formally addressed the issue of cell phone usage by your employees? Current national attention is focusing on the banning texting while driving – but is this enough? As can be seen from the above statements the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, National Safety Council and American Society of Safety Engineers have policies in place calling for the ban of using electronic devices while operating a vehicle.

## Supporting Facts and Statistics

- Drivers who use cell phones are four times more likely to be involved in a crash. (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety).
- Cell phone use attributes to an estimated 6 percent of all crashes, which equates to 636,000 crashes, 330,000 injuries, 12,000 serious injuries and 2,600 deaths each year. (Harvard Center for Risk Analysis)
- No difference exists in cognitive distraction between hand held and hands-free devices. Research shows that driving while using a cell phone can pose serious cognitive distraction and degrade driver performance. (NHTSA)
- 80 percent of crashes are related to driver inattention. The number one source of driver inattention is cell phones. (Virginia Tech 100-car study produced for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.)
- The annual cost of crashes caused by cell phone use is estimated at \$43 billion. (Harvard Center for Risk Analysis)
- Talking to a passenger while driving is significantly safer than talking on a cell phone. (University of Utah study)
- The National Safety Council polled 2,000 members about employee use of wireless communication devices. The findings were:
  - 469 companies prohibit both handheld and hands-free devices while driving for some or all employees.
  - 99 percent said productivity did not decrease.

## Website Resources

- The Zero Fatalities website by the State of Utah provides a video on the tragic result of a texting driver: Website: <http://ut.zerofatalities.com/index.php>  
Video: <http://ut.zerofatalities.com/texting.php>
- The National Safety Council provides a free Cell Phone Policy Kit. The kit contains information on employer policies, cell phone fact sheet, sample employee policy, key research studies, etc. This information may be obtained from their website at: [http://www.nsc.org/safety\\_road/Distracted\\_Driving/Pages/EmployerPolicies.aspx](http://www.nsc.org/safety_road/Distracted_Driving/Pages/EmployerPolicies.aspx)
- State laws on cell phone use and text messaging may be obtained from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety website at: <http://www.iihs.org/laws/cellphonelaws.aspx>
- Information on the recent Department of Transportation Distracted Driving Summit is located at: [http://www.rita.dot.gov/distracted\\_driving\\_summit/](http://www.rita.dot.gov/distracted_driving_summit/)

As a fleet manager and employer you need to weigh the benefits of cell phone use against the costs of potential liabilities. An employee distracted while driving from the use of a cell phone may cause personal tragedy for them and others involved in a collision, as well as potential financial circumstances for the employer.

## References

[National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#)  
[National Safety Council](#)  
[American Society of Safety Engineers](#)  
[Insurance Institute for Highway Safety](#)

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