PMA COMPANIES

Organizational and Safety Solutions

Distracted Driving

Background

Drivers everywhere everyday are multitasking while driving. They read newspapers, eat meals, put on makeup, and talk on the phone. Do you sometimes find yourself arriving at a destination, but not remembering much about the trip? If so, it is quite possible your full attention during the trip was diverted with a non-driving task, or tasks. A leading transportation researcher says that multitasking while driving has become a national pastime. A spokesperson for a national automobile association once described multitasking while driving as "epidemic."

The impact of drivers distracted with multitasking while operating a company vehicle has taken on additional meaning in recent years. There have been multiple multi-million dollar court settlements involving at-fault drivers who were talking on their cell phones, text messaging, or using a laptop while driving. This technology not only allows device records to verify if the device was in use at the time of the accident, but also to pinpoint to whom the driver was speaking. In several of those cases, the court awarded additional damages to plaintiffs when it was determined the driver was on a business-related call.

How are distractions defined? A distraction is anything that diverts the driver's attention from the primary tasks of navigating the vehicle and responding to critical events. These include anything that takes the driver's eyes off the road (visual distraction), mind off the road (cognitive), or hands off the wheel (manual). Many of the commonly practiced driver distractions often involve at least two of these.

Distractions Becoming More Widespread

Why has multitasking while driving become so widespread in recent years? Three key trends appear to be the primary factors:

1) **The design features of vehicles** - As real differences among car models dwindled, the auto industry turned to comfort and convenience features in their battles for market shares. Examples of a few of these features include:
   - Cup and tray holders
   - Makeup mirrors and lights
   - Additional 110-volt power ports for laptops
   - Fold down front seats with flat backs to be used as desks
   - Expanded audio systems as varied as satellite radio and hookups for digital media players
   - On-board navigational systems

2) **A 2015 survey by AT&T -** revealed that 70% of drivers use their smartphones while driving. This includes not only business use, but also to communicate via social media. 30% of Twitter users said they tweeted "all the time" while driving. Twenty-seven (27%) admitted to regularly checking Facebook while driving, and 17% said they had taken "selfies" while driving.

3) **American employers -** all too often confronted with shrinking bottom lines and the pressure to do more with fewer people, prize productivity. According to most employer surveys, the universal skills most sought by employers include multitasking, adaptability, problem solving, and computer and technical skills. If you place an employee with these skills inside a vehicle, multitasking while driving may occur.

Distraction Research Leads to Adoption of New Statistics

Until 2006, driver distraction research had been confined largely to analysis of police-reported crash data and studies conducted on test tracks and in simulators. Triggered largely by the proliferation of cell phone use while driving, research into this topic has essentially exploded, beginning with a study by the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute (VTTI) in 2006. In what was to become the first of many such studies, cameras, and sensors were installed in 100 vehicles to observe 241 primary and secondary drivers for more than a year. Researchers were able to observe more than 42,000 driving hours and more than 2 million miles of travel.

During this research, the 100 vehicles were involved in 82 crashes and 761 near misses. Camera and sensor analysis revealed:

- 80% of the accidents involved the driver looking away from the forward roadway just prior to (within 3 seconds) the crashes
- Drivers were distracted by secondary activities 30% of the time while driving
- Fatigue (cognitive) contributed to 12% of the crashes
- Distracted drivers experienced a 25% delay in responding to a change in speed of the vehicle in front
- 93% of the rear end crashes involved the driver looking away from the roadway within 3 seconds of the crashes
- A typical distraction lasted 3 seconds (long enough to drift into other lanes or to travel 300 feet at 68 mph) and usually increased crash chances 3-4 times
- Text messaging took the driver's eyes off the road 4.5-6 seconds, and increased crash chances 23 times

The conclusions of the 2006 VTTI study have been consistently reinforced by numerous subsequent studies conducted by a wide array of safety organizations. These studies led the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to amend their long-held accidents-caused-driver distraction statistic: they now state that **driver distractions are a factor in 80% of vehicle crashes.**

Employers Turning to Technology to Overcome Human Behavior

Tremendous amounts of resources have been utilized in an attempt to reduce distracted driving, including education and enforcement. However, there is compelling evidence that they have not had the desired effect in reducing risky distracted driving behavior.

American drivers have been thoroughly educated on the risks of distracted driving. Research clearly indicates that the public overwhelmingly views distracted driving to be highly unsafe and dangerous. Despite the concerns, however, many who view distracted driving as unsafe admit they often are dangerously distracted while driving. In the 2015 AT&T survey referenced above, 98% of drivers who own cellphones and text regularly while driving said they were aware of the dangers, but plan to continue these unsafe practices.

The reality of risk-taking behavior of drivers has led some employers to turn to technology. A number of electronic disabling devices have hit the market in recent years, which disable electronic devices or suspend internet connectivity when a vehicle is in motion. A number of free mobile apps are available which will disable the electronic devices once the vehicle reaches a designated minimum speed.

Similarly, some vehicle technology packages, such as Ford Sync, are designed to disable features such as cell phones and internet connectivity automatically, while the vehicle is moving.

Effective Actions to Reduce Distracted Driving

1) Review all work-related responsibilities for drivers. This may require driver ride-alongs to capture driver feedback adequately. Ask yourself "does our work culture not only encourage but also pressure drivers to multitask, especially with electronic devices while driving"?

2) A clearly worded written policy communicated to employees upon hire and on a regular basis thereafter. The policy must list the behaviors that are not allowed along with the specific disciplinary procedures to be undertaken when the policy is violated. Employers must begin to think of vehicles as a work environment.

3) Track all vehicle incidents and calculate the rate of accidents per miles driven. Set corporate goals for lower rates and publicize goal progress to all drivers on a regular basis.

4) Drivers should obey all appropriate federal, state, and local laws regarding the use of electronic devices. To find out more about laws in your area for cell phone and texting while driving, go to http://www.ghsa.org/html/stateinfo/laws/cellphone_laws.html

5) Texting and laptop use while driving should be prohibited, without exception. Drivers who violate this policy should be disciplined. Currently, available disabling devices may limit these activities and should be discussed as a possible option.

6) Utilize electronic disabling devices that remove risky human behavior from the equation. Contact your PMA Risk Control Consultant for more information about these devices.

7) Utilize available resources that enable the ability to interact proactively with drivers before accidents and/or violations occur. Examples: a) Driver monitoring programs - These programs include effective quality assurance controls, such as callers required to provide decal numbers, exact locations, and time-of-day; b) DriveCam - This program provides a real-time image of the inside of the vehicle (pointed at the driver), an image of the roadside ahead, and the use of electronic devices to provide exact location, speed, RPMs, and fuel mileage.

If you have any questions or would like additional information, please contact your local PMA Risk Control Consultant.

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