

Distracted Driving: Moving Beyond Policy to Process and Performance

by Paul Farrell



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Abstract

Distracted driving among both individuals and company fleets continues to present a steady number of fatalities and injuries each year. Employers' response to the hazard has been primarily focused on creating policy, but may have been hindered by a lack of results—which, in turn, stems from an unresolved process for translating written expectation into solutions, such as educating drivers, monitoring for policy violations, and providing corrective coaching. A 2012 verdict against the Coca-Cola Company (\$22 million, since vacated) focused on the lack of these kinds of processes. This article provides suggestions on how to put processes in place for company fleets to get stronger results.

There is really little question that society has a hang-up with distracted driving—more to the point, people do not seem to know when they ought to simply hang up the phone and drive.

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The most recent statistics on texting estimate that more than 200 trillion text messages are sent each day in the United States alone. Texting while driving increases the odds of a crash by 23 times, compared with a driver who is not looking at or manipulating his/her phone (simply talking on a phone increases the odds by 4 times).¹ In the average time needed to answer a text (about 4.6 seconds), a vehicle traveling at 55 mph covers the length of a football field—and does so by a driver who is effectively blind to the road.²

While statistics from sources like the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) specify between 3,000 and 5,000 deaths per year because of distracted driving, it is hard to know the full scope of the distracted driving problem. Many crashes occur each year in which some form of distraction played a role but is not cited as the cause. (No one likes to admit driving while in-texticated). Further, Distraction.gov defines the problem broadly stating, “Distracted driving is *any* activity that could divert your attention away from the primary task of driving.”

All distractions endanger driver, passenger, and bystander safety. These are among the most prevalent:

- Texting
- Using a cell phone or smartphone
- Eating and drinking
- Talking to passengers
- Grooming
- Reading, including maps
- Using a navigation system
- Watching a video
- Adjusting a radio, CD player, or MP3 player



The many sources of distraction can be categorized into three main groups, based on the way that they interrupt driving duties:

- Visual (taking one's eyes off the road)
- Manual (taking one's hands off the wheel)
- Cognitive (taking one's mind off driving duties)

Each of these disconnections from driving can make the difference between an uneventful journey and a crash; however, it stands to reason that any combination of these types of disconnect stack the odds even greater against the driver. The risk further increases with a fleet

operator, or driver for a company, for such drivers are frequently on the road, pressed for time, and operating vehicles that may be difficult to maneuver.

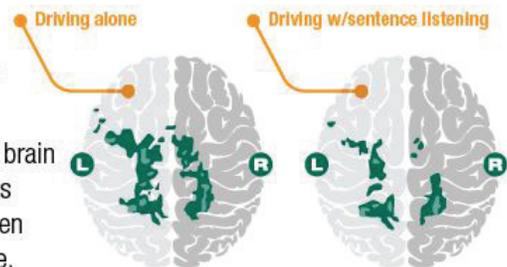
A good question to ask is whether one category of distraction is more troubling than any other? The answer is likely “cognitive,” as tasks such as tuning a radio are far less complex, and therefore much less distracting, than tasks that engage the mind.

Further, many people feel confident that, by simply going hands free (perfectly legal in all states at the present time), they have eliminated their risk, or materially reduced it below an imagined threshold. The most recent studies, however, suggest that cognitive distraction (which still occurs

MULTI-TASKING: THE BIG FAT MYTH

The brain quickly toggles between tasks – but can't do two things at the same time.

The activity in the area of the brain that processes moving images **decreases by up to 1/3** when listening to talking on a phone.



during hands-free conversations) can be significant enough to reduce a driver's effectiveness to that of a drunk driver with a blood alcohol level of 0.08 or more.³

This can be explained, in part, by inattention blindness, which greatly reduces a person's visual scanning zone. Think, for example, of the difference between staring down the hood of a vehicle at the road ahead versus scanning the entire surroundings for hazards and threats.

Many drivers believe that they can multitask (have their mind activity processing two or more tasks simultaneously) and handle complex conversations along with their driving duties. Unfortunately, however, science has shown that our minds do not work that way.

In reality, we toggle back and forth between tasks instead of processing them simultaneously. This has a huge impact on distracted driving, because when we are processing complex conversations, for example, our minds are not processing data from our eyes about the road ahead! As a result, people's inflated—and unfounded—confidence about their capabilities can become their biggest error while driving.

Combating the Problem

The first cell phone was released on April 3, 1973. Over time, the notion of having a portable phone system moved from curious to commonplace, and as people slowly changed their habits and behaviors around the technology, we began to recognize the unintended consequences: crashes.

Just as it took time to recognize the problem, it will take time and effort to redefine people's habits and attitudes. If we really want to make a difference with organizations that operate fleets of commercial vehicles, for example, we have to approach the issue methodically.

Most safety advice has focused on creating organizational policy to

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address the issue of distraction while driving. There is ample justification to begin here: such safety programs and associated policies are typically created by a safety team and published by the senior manager of the organization. By having authority, leading by example, and initiating involvement, this manager sets the tone and validates the importance of this issue.

Many leading safety organizations (CDC, ANSI Z15, NSC, NETS, distraction.gov, et al.) have published guidance, templates, and case studies to help craft new or enhanced driver safety programs—and, specifically, distracted driving policy statements.

From Policy to Process

When we recognize that policies are simply written expressions of management's expectations for the ideal performance of individuals within the organization, we must also recognize that issuing a policy is never a one-and-done activity.

There is a process associated with the promulgation of new policies. The three essential process steps typically include:

- Test the policy against contrived scenarios to diagnose conflicts with current policies (policy alignment exercises) and to consider potential exceptions that may need to be granted to avoid conflicts (exception authoring). This testing should extend to all departments that interact with drivers via cell phones to avoid missing outliers.
- Communicate the policy to all affected individuals.

Communication is not just about issuing the policy (sending a memo), but about considering the complexity of the underlying hazard that the policy addresses. Do the employees (and/or contractors, invitees, etc.) understand the nature of the problem at hand? Are they aware of the seriousness and potential consequences of ignoring the policy (i.e., injury consequence and potential disciplinary action)? Will training be provided? What method of training will fit your organization best? How will you assure that all affected individuals receive training?

Policy communication should not be a one-way exercise. Testing the communication channel to assure that the message was accurately and completely received helps to gain policy acceptance and voluntary compliance. If the message is garbled and misunderstood, compliance will be ineffectual and incomplete through no fault of the individuals; however, the organization will still be exposed to loss because of this potential and unintentional noncompliance.

Having individuals sign a policy acknowledgement form may not be adequate confirmation on an emotional and complex issue like

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distracted driving. Some firms use online training courses with quizzes to help document a consistent level of understanding of the underlying hazard and policy intent.

Policies may make a big splash as they are introduced, but a plan needs to be in place to assure that newly hired individuals receive the same training and message confirmation on policies as those who were part of their initial rollout. Arguably, the care and urgency invested in the communication program may help influence total compliance more than supervisory surveillance (especially considering the difficulty in monitoring for distracted driving policy violations).

For driving policies, an organization must consider all potential drivers: full time, part time, casual, those who drive their own car on company business, and possibly commuters who drive to their work location or job site in their personal cars.

- Review the policy in light of changes in society, rules, regulations, case law, etc.

Just as technology and laws may change, so must policy statements, as necessary. For that reason, each safety policy should have a freshness expiration date. Each time the policy is revised, the revisions need to be communicated with the same vigilance as the initial policy introduction.

If policy exceptions have been granted, the safety team should review the circumstances for them when revising the policy. Policy violations may also be considered when revising the policy or planning refresher training.

“Making the same mistakes as others wastes time and endangers lives”

Moving From Policy Process to Performance Monitoring

Policies are largely ineffectual unless the management team enacts a process to monitor compliance and intervene thoughtfully when violations are detected.

Because of the remote nature of distracted driving policy infractions, it can be very difficult to universally monitor compliance. Some companies have investigated various technologies to remotely monitor and enforce policy through web applications and hardware connections that work cooperatively (pairing and nonpairing Bluetooth connections) to lock down cell phones.

Unfortunately, most policy enforcement efforts occur after a crash has already happened and cell phone records indicate that the phone may have contributed to the incident. If we can devise stronger monitoring programs, it would be possible to detect minor violations earlier and provide coaching to correct habits before they lead to a crash.

To the extent possible, positive reinforcement of proper behavior (specifically, compliance with policy) should be provided. When performance monitoring shows a driver performing properly, a genuine gesture of thanks can go a long way to building a positive culture of compliance within the organization. This may take many different forms in various organizations,

ranging from private praise to formalized reward programs.

Crisis Management—Be Prepared

While the point of this article is to help form practical strategies to prevent collisions, it is possible that a tragic crash may occur because the driver was distracted and, as a result, negligent.

Because of this, management teams should prepare for handling crisis communication. Every organization has its own approach to crisis management, and developing such a plan is beyond the scope of this article; however, each crisis may yield learning that will influence future policy revisions.

Benchmarking With Peers—Directly or Indirectly

Other organizations that have served as pioneers may be willing to share their experiences. Peer-to-peer benchmarking can help organizations through the learning curve and help ensure stronger results. Making the same mistakes as others wastes time and endangers lives.

Sometimes it can be hard to find an appropriate benchmarking peer, but other resources can help fill that gap: published lessons from losses, case law, and safety organizations that are made up of many safety teams. One example of indirect benchmarking from case law includes the 2012 court case in which Coca-Cola was sued over a traffic crash that referenced distracted driving. While much media coverage focused on the large verdict, and although the verdict was later vacated, the case offers many learning points, particularly through recaps of key witness testimony and issues raised about the company's safety policy—how it was created, communicated, monitored, and enforced.⁴

Some of the takeaways from the Coca-Cola case are questions that risk managers should ask within their organizations:

- Do our drivers understand the serious nature of the risk that has created the need to secure a safety policy?
- Do our drivers understand that driving hands free, while legal, is not risk free?
- How can we be certain that all drivers understand the policy? Would drivers be able to state the policy in their own words and explain it correctly if asked to do so?

Resources and Repercussions

We can help our clients who are struggling to create and communicate a solid policy by directing them to reliable sources for templates and examples. The National Safety Council has been a pioneer in this area; additional sources include the Network of Employers for Traffic Safety (NETS), AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, ASSE Body Of Knowledge (BOK), and NHTSA's www.distraction.gov portal.

As with other experts, safety, risk, and insurance professionals can become overly accustomed to the seriousness of the underlying hazard and its potential, tragic consequences. We need to be certain that all individuals affected by the policy understand these risks equally well. Testing the communication channel to confirm that the message was received clearly represents time well spent, both to offset the difficulty of monitoring compliance and to prepare in case of eventual litigation. Periodic review, revision, and recommunication of the policy to all affected individuals is vital, as the nature of the risk continues to evolve.

Beyond creating and communicating the policy to drivers, managers need to be prepared to monitor for compliance and to discipline, coach, or counsel when violations are detected. Monitoring performance may come from How's My Driving? programs, which average 3 percent to 8 percent of all call reports; video recording systems; telematics systems, especially those with integrated "cell control" interfaces; or supervisory ride-behinds, or discreet tailing of drivers to monitor performance.

Another area to investigate is policy alignment. Various departments' policies could unintentionally contradict each other and confuse the individual who is trying to comply with each policy.

For instance, there may be a policy requiring drivers to receive calls from key managers or dispatchers at all times—in violation of the no-cell-use-while-driving policy. Such a directive can cause uncertainty among drivers who want to comply and be safe, but who do not want to disregard their supervisors' wishes.

Assuring a no-repercussion means of providing feedback on such a situation may help to get the policies straightened out quickly. Once assured of policy alignment, supervisors must be prepared to act consistently and fairly to enforce company policies when violations are detected.

It takes determination and leadership within all levels of the organization to challenge assumptions and change entrenched behavior. Typically, drivers want to be safe, but sometimes they become frustrated when policies are not clearly communicated, or when policies are misaligned.

The bottom line is this: we need managers to communicate a clear message to drivers that distracted driving

is a *choice*. Becoming involved in a crash while distracted is a chance occurrence; we know that making better choices can significantly reduce those chances.

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Endnotes

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