

Hands on the Wheel – Mind on the Phone

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Let's face it: we're addicted to electronic devices, especially cell phones. In the attempt to forestall the increasing number of highway fatalities associated with what used to be called *cell phone use* (we now have *electronic devices*) the Department of Transportation issued a regulation barring drivers of commercial vehicles from using a cell phone while driving.

Of course, the DOT could only issue a mandate regulating driver actions over which it had jurisdiction. Notice that it was left up to the states to pass their own legislative acts regarding cell phone use for the general population. The DOT requirement went into effect on January 1, 2012.

Distracted driving collisions are now so common, with tragic consequences, every driver is at risk of being involved in a collision; every driver is at risk of losing their life or being seriously injured as a result of a careless decision of anyone who believes that they can drive while distracted...and that only *other* drivers are the ones who can't multi-task safely.

Right now, only a social revolution, widespread outrage, or a concerted and focused campaign to make distracted driving socially unacceptable will reduce the potential of distracted driving collisions from happening. In the meantime, every driver who recognizes the gravity of the situation has to participate.

But, it should be emphasized, however, that it is not just motor vehicle drivers who are being impacted by this type of regulation. Every other mode of regulated (i.e., commercial) transportation is already affected by a cell phone while “operating” prohibition: airline pilots, railroad engineers, helmsmen. In some cases, the prohibitions extend to other operations (last year a Secret Service agent was on the cell phone making a personal call when an intruder jumped the fence at the White House and the agent missed the intrusion).

Become part of the solution: put down the cell phone, smartphone or other hand-held device and turn it off when you are driving. This is not only a teenage issue, plenty of “grownups” are guilty of using electronic devices while driving (a recent study reported nearly 70 percent of Americans ages 18 to 64 recently chatted on their phones while driving, and about 30 percent of this group sent text messages while behind the wheel).ⁱ The point is that everybody who is tied to a device is at risk...it works both ways. You can drift into the oncoming lane or off the road, or you can be struck by somebody who is using a device. If you both are on the phone at the same moment and neither of you is paying attention the result may be fatal.

What you hear about “Hands-free is safer” is a myth. A driver is still mentally focused on the conversation...you become, in essence, a steering wheel holder. Crash risk is four times higher when a driver uses a cell phone, whether or not it’s hands-free.ⁱⁱ

Driving while distracted has become a daily occupation that many now treat as a part of daily living. We have welcomed these devices into our cars and trucks along with breakfasts, lunches, dinners, snacks, drinks, books, newspapers, computers, etc., without any thought given to the potential of threatening somebody else's life and/or livelihood. Some activities, such as texting, take the driver's attention away from driving more frequently and for longer periods than other distractions.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet, we have trained and convinced ourselves that we can do better than somebody else in this respect. In short: we can handle it – others cannot.

The next step, that may be as difficult as putting the phone down, is paying attention to driving and how safely you are driving. Drive as if your life depends on it...because it *does!* You have to be the better driver on the road and compensate for other drivers' errors of driving behavior. This means you have to concentrate on what is happening two, perhaps three or four (or more) vehicles ahead of you, not focusing your concentration on the tail lights of the one right in front of you. The action is well ahead and you have to anticipate what is going to happen so you can respond appropriately. This is called *defensive driving*.

Most of what we do behind the wheel of a vehicle is react to the conditions around us. Those conditions are what are taught in defensive driving programs: weather, road, light, traffic, vehicle, and the most unpredictable, the driver.

It is driver condition that is most variable. The driver is the key factor in traffic safety. Driver condition includes being focused on the task of driving, not what's being texted to you or on a phone conversation.

What must you and your company do now? Make sure your drivers are not practicing a nasty habit (along with texting and answering your cell phone at the dinner table and in restaurants) that endangers your and others' lives.

Even without the law, distracted driving is a killer. If you haven't done this already, you are falling behind: Implement a company prohibition on cell phone use. No excuses.

Drivers who text and drive or use cell phones while driving have to ask themselves: what is so important that the activity that distracts has to be conducted while you drive? Too often, the question is asked in the past tense: What was so important that the driver had to conduct a conversation while driving?

Keep your mind on the task...and live.

ⁱ Mobile Device Use While Driving -- United States and Seven European Countries, 2011. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. March 15, 2013.

ⁱⁱ Redelmeier DA, Tibshirani RJ. Association Between Cellular-Telephone Calls and Motor Vehicle Collisions. *The New England Journal of Medicine*. February 13, 1997

ⁱⁱⁱ National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Statistics and Facts about Distracted Driving. Washington, DC: US Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2011.