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Distracted on the job

Identifying and minimizing worker distractions can help reduce injuries

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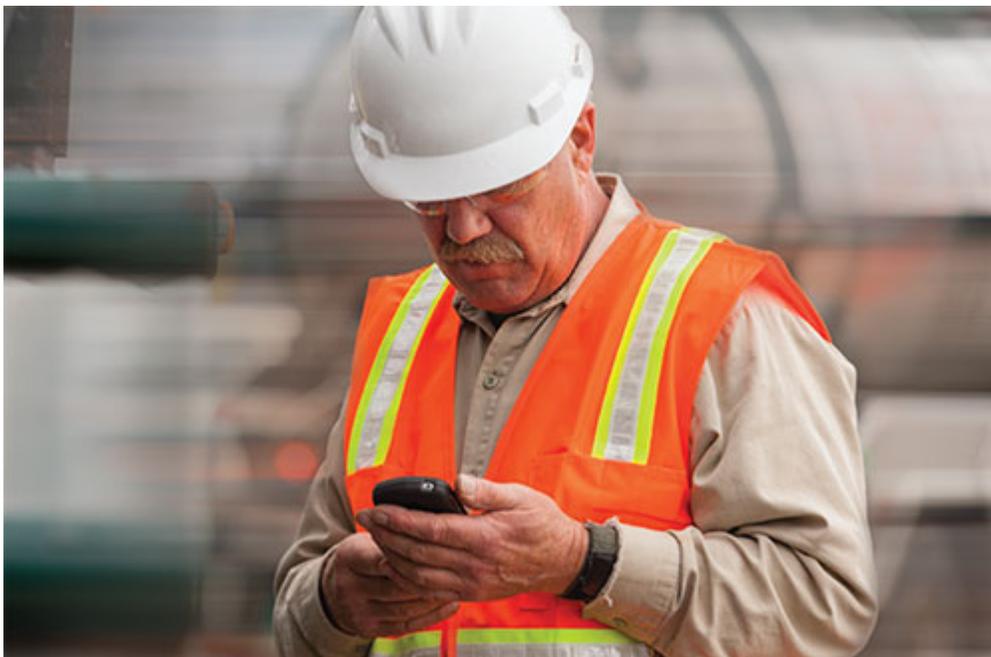
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Deadlines and pressure to meet production goals are some of the biggest on-the-job distractions, experts say.

Allowing short breaks and empowering workers to speak up when they observe distractions can help mitigate the problem.

Although employees may pay more attention to the job at hand and are able to better minimize distractions shortly after a near miss or a workplace incident, experts warn this will eventually fade.

The risks associated with distracted driving have received increased attention in recent years. However, distractions – and the risks they pose to workers – are not limited to those found on the roadways or in the company parking lot.

“When we do accident investigations, a lot of times we’ll find injuries can be attributed to some type of distraction,” said Carol Keyes, co-owner of consulting firm Complete Health, Environmental and Safety Services in Woodbury, MN. “It’s a huge problem.”

Although it may not be possible to completely eliminate distractions, experts say steps can be taken to minimize them and recognize when they occur.

Different types of distractions

According to Tulsa, OK-based safety consultant Carl Potter, workplace distractions, regardless of type, have the same effect: When people are distracted, they are not paying attention and fail to see hazards, which can lead to injuries.

“People must be distracted from what they’re doing or they wouldn’t do what they did to get themselves injured,” he said.

A major distraction is the need to get the job done quickly. When employees become fixated on completing a job on time, they focus less on safety, according to Vicki Huebler, corporate director for quality, health, safety and environment at ION Geophysical, a Houston-based provider of services and solutions for the oil and gas industry.

Huebler, who also is the chair of HSE & Security Steering Committee for the International Association of Geophysical Contractors, said this is sometimes a result of a supervisor asking an employee to hurry up and finish a task. Other times it is self-im-

posed – the employee feels he or she must complete the job quickly to meet production goals.

“We see that in manufacturing when employees are being pushed for production, that’s their sole focus,” Keyes said. “So they stick their hand in the machine to unjam a part and they get their hand caught. You sort of blow those [production] goals right there.”

Huebler said that although good managers and supervisors care about their employees, too often expectations are placed on the schedule and task instead of safety. This can create a dangerous loop: Employees are more susceptible to injuries when they focus on finishing on time instead of safety. Then when an injury or incident occurs, time is lost to provide care or correct the problem. After an incident, employees may feel additional pressure to make up that lost time, Huebler noted.

Distraction of complacency

Another facet of distraction is complacency, which Huebler describes as the mindset that leads to distractions and inattention to the job at hand.

“It’s the idea that I understand how to do this task,” she said. “So now I can do it easily, and somehow I miss those additional risks and I don’t identify some additional hazards just because I’m so complacent, so overconfident in my ability to do the task.”

Work becomes mundane, and employees can become automatic to the point that they forget doing the work they just completed, Potter said. Then, when a new hazard emerges during a task, employees may be distracted, and this can lead to injuries.

“Every day we’re doing the same thing day in and day out; we tend to forget we can be injured,” he said.

Not all distractions are workplace-related, however. A bad drive in to work, financial problems or aging parents are all examples of distractions employees may deal with every day, but often are overlooked as workplace distractions, according to Keyes. These types of mental distractions can cause workers to miss potential risks that lead to injuries.

Addressing the problem

A workplace can never fully eliminate distractions, Keyes said. “It’s human nature to find something that distracts, especially with a job you don’t like,” she said. However, she added, workplace distractions that pose the greatest risks can be minimized, or even eliminated, with the right steps.

It starts with upper management, Potter said. Employers should conduct more walk-through observations, keeping an eye out for employees who may be distracted from the job at hand. This should not be a rare occasion – walk-throughs themselves can be distracting to the worker if they are not performed regularly, he warned.

Good managers and supervisors interact with their employees and are able to recognize differences and changes in behavior, Huebler said. These managers know employees’ workflow and workload, and should be able to understand the stress those workers would experience under a schedule and can make appropriate alterations.

Employers also may want to set up rules to minimize certain distractions. Banning the use of MP3 players or other similar devices could help employees keep their focus, Keyes suggested. Likewise, Potter recommended eliminating cell phone use on the job, noting it is “not a right” to talk on a personal phone while on the job.

In her experience, Keyes has found that employees at workplaces that have cell phone restrictions at first did not react well to such limitations. Eventually, however, the employees became happy with the policy when they realized they would have fewer interruptions on the job, and they could return personal calls or texts during breaks.

“It means you can focus on your work, and when people have those kinds of guidelines, I tend to think people operate better because they know what to expect,” Keyes said.

In the event of an emergency, families can still reach loved ones through their work number, as they did before cell phones became prominent, Keyes said.

Breaks and wellness

Although it may seem counter-intuitive, offering employees more breaks from work during the day may increase productivity while lowering the risk of injuries due to distractions.

Several experts advocate “micro-breaks,” during which employees step away from their workstation for a few minutes to recharge. This is not a typical, 15-minute break, Keyes said, but simply standing up and stretching for a bit or going for a short walk.

“The production goal would ideally be realistic to allow that minuscule extra time for safety. And it doesn’t have to be a lot of time,” she said.

These micro-breaks can be taken as needed – when a headache occurs, for example, or when a back needs stretching – or can be incorporated regularly into the workday.

If possible, structure the work into stages or sections instead of a long run of continuous work, Potter suggested. After a short burst of work, allow a quick break, and be prepared for unexpected breaks, too.

Investing in other areas also may limit distractions and safety hazards. For example, Keyes had a client whose machines often jammed, and employees were being injured while un-jamming them. The employer was encouraged to invest more time in machine maintenance so the jams would not happen in the first place. The employer took the advice, and productivity did not drop.

Ongoing effort

As with workplace safety in general, the effort to minimize on-the-job distractions is an ongoing one. Although employees may pay more attention to the job at hand and are able to better minimize distractions shortly after a near miss or workplace incident, experts warn this will eventually fade.

Potter advises employees to watch each other’s backs. When one employee observes another working distracted, the first employee should tell the other to “remember where you’re at,” he said. It will remind the employee of the risks of the job, Potter said, and offers the worker an opportunity to refocus.

Employers should go to employees to find out what may be distracting them, Keyes said, as many times the workers will be able to highlight a distraction that supervisors were unaware of. Huebler agreed, noting employees should have empowerment to stand up and tell others about unsafe conditions or distractions.

“But that empowering has to be directed to someone who has the ability to make changes,” she said. Too often, Huebler said, someone did see something wrong before an incident occurred, but the information was communicated to an inappropriate person.

One way to ensure the ongoing effort of reducing the risks of distractions is to encourage employee wellness, according to Keyes. If workers are healthier and feeling better, they tend to handle on-the-job stress better and will stay more focused on the risks of the job, she said.

At one worksite with fewer than 30 people, the employer instituted a wellness program encouraging employees to walk during their lunch break. The program cost virtually nothing for the owner, and employees became healthier, happier and missed less time from work, according to Keyes.

Such a positive attitude is important, Huebler said, noting that when employees have a positive attitude toward workplace safety, they are able to pay attention to the details of the job and understand that job’s risks.

“A distraction can impact almost every aspect of almost every and any job,” Huebler said. “You have to recognize the risks and the potential that it’s going to make on your ability.”

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