



Distractions

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You've heard of the hazards of distracted driving. Those hazards exist in the workplace, too. It's not quite as dangerous as when you're on the road, surrounded by other distracted drivers inside of 2000 pound vehicles. But anything that keeps people from paying close attention to what they're doing can be a hazard.

What distracts people from doing their work safely?

Time Pressures

It's 4:30 on a Friday, start of the holiday weekend. You have one more job to do before you can get out of here. Are you likely to work carefully and deliberately? Or will you be rushing? Which is more likely to result in an accident?

A body technician whom we know torched a car, because he was trying to save some time. The car was in a prep station (really a spray booth), masked and ready to be primed, when the people working on it noticed a spot that needed to be welded. Given the choice of moving the masked car back to the body shop or moving the welder to the spray booth, employees took the option that seemed quicker...and moved the welder. It's fortunate that the spray booth was sprinklered, so the resulting fire damaged only the car. Time saved: in the negative numbers. The car was totaled.

Encourage employees to take the time to do the job right. Give them the time to get it done.

Personal Pressures

You have a splitting headache. You had a fight at home this morning. You're concerned about that doctor's appointment you have tomorrow. You need to schedule that meeting with the lawyer. Are you going to be paying close attention to the work at hand? Probably not.

Personal pressures distract. We're human. Be aware of this. And consider rearranging work, if needed, so that critical or dangerous tasks aren't done by people who are already under too much pressure.

Deliberate Distractions

Technology has made it easier to be distracted. People claim they're expert at multi-tasking. They aren't. They're actually switching quickly from one task to another. People just aren't as good at doing that as they think. Tasks actually take longer and error rates go way up when people try to do multiple things, such as converse with someone and match a paint shade, at the same time.

What if that person you're conversing with is separated by a cell phone? The conversation becomes even more dangerous. A person next to you will notice the thinner you poured onto the floor, or the rag that you set on fire. The person on the cell phone won't.

Remember that distractions are mental as well as physical. Talking on a phone using a Bluetooth® isn't safer than trying to juggle a cell phone and a spray gun.

What about listening to the radio? People may not listen closely enough for that to be significant – or they may. Headphones? Those could be a distraction, or they may just be background noise. But shops are plenty noisy as is. Adding headphone noise to the sound of power tools increases the risk of overexposure to noise. And too much exposure to noise leads to increased stress and problems sleeping, which leads to personal pressures, which leads to distracted working.

What Can You Do About Distractions?

Schedule work realistically. It costs less to tell a customer that a job will take a bit longer than to pay for the employee's broken leg or the fire-consumed vehicle. The loss might be covered by insurance, but you pay for the insurance.

Run an efficient workplace. Insist that people keep the shop tidy, because that means less time is spent hunting for things.

Keep a friendly eye on employees (but don't hover over their shoulders, as that'll be distracting). Routinely spend time in the shop, so you see how the work progresses. If an employee seems distracted or others complain about substandard work, find out what's going on.

Minimize external distractions. That means cell phones and texting only when they're needed, not while people are working, and especially not while they're working with power tools or around moving equipment, including vehicles moving around a shop.

Keep track of the almost-a-problem problems, the near-accidents. Require that employees report equipment or shop damage and report the near accidents. Those are the red flags that changes are needed. Review those, and use them to stop problems before they become injuries.

If you have questions about work safety rules or other safety issues, contact CHESS at 651-481-9787; toll free at 877-481-9787, or carkey@chess-safety.com.

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