

6 Best Practices World-Class Organizations Use to Address Distracted Driving

By Colin Duncan

In recent years, organizations have been challenged to take on a greater role in the driving safety of their employees. Driving-related accidents, which have long been among the leading causes of worker fatalities,¹ have become more frequent with the widespread adoption of mobile technology. Cell phones, onboard computers, entertainment systems, and navigational devices have all introduced new distractions into an environment with an already significant potential for serious injury or death. In 2011, distraction-related crashes killed 3,331 people and injured 387,000 in the United States alone.² Distracted driving is now widely recognized as a major public safety hazard,³ leading to legislation that has banned the use of handset devices in many U.S. states and most of Europe, with further bans being considered.

For organizations concerned with the safety of their employees—and the safety of people in the communities where they operate—this situation poses a unique challenge. How do leaders address an exposure that happens largely outside the gates, among employees who are typically alone at the time, and in an open environment with so many other uncontrolled variables? Is legal compliance enough or is something more required? This paper outlines best practices that world-class organizations are using to frame and respond to the problem of distracted driving.

Distracted driving is an organizational safety issue

The first step to addressing distracted driving is recognizing it as a safety issue in the first place. In many organizations, distracted driving occupies a no

man's land with respect to resources and attention, largely because it falls outside the boundaries of "typical" organizational safety issues. For example, there is a higher prevalence of risky behaviors among drivers under 20,⁴ leading many to characterize distracted driving (wrongly) as a "young driver" problem. Distracted driving behaviors also happen "outside the gates", creating ambiguity about accountability and intervention, particularly in cases where employees are using personal vehicles. Add to that the fact that many of the conditions found in the open road (e.g., the weather, road conditions, other drivers) are outside an organization's control, and it's not surprising that so many organizations would respond to the issue by drafting a policy that satisfies legal and regulatory requirements but does little else.

The reality is that distracted driving is a common occurrence, and risk factor for serious injury, among working adults. It also poses considerable legal and reputational risk if not adequately addressed. Consider some examples you probably see every day:

- the driver of a company fleet who continues to type on his onboard computer even as he puts his truck in motion;
- a sales executive who eats lunch in the car while driving to her next appointment;
- an executive who takes meetings from the road;
- the harried professional who checks e-mails at a stop light.

1 Bureau of Labor Statistics, Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries 2011, October 2012. Available at <http://bls.gov/iif/>. Accessed January 18, 2013.

2 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. <http://www.distraction.gov/content/get-the-facts/facts-and-statistics.html>. Accessed January 30, 2013.

3 Fernando A. Wilson and Jim P. Stimpson. "Trends in Fatalities From Distracted Driving in the United States, 1999 to 2008." *American Journal of Public Health*: November 2010, Vol. 100, No. 11, pp. 2213-2219.

4 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Traffic Safety Facts: Distracted Driving 2009. Washington, DC: US Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, September 2010. Publication no. DOT-HS-811-379. Available at <http://www.distraction.gov>. Accessed December 16, 2012. *See also*: Porter Novelli. (2010). HealthStyles 2010 Survey. Unpublished raw data. Washington, DC: Adam Burns; Porter Novelli. (2010). EuroPNStyles 2010 Survey. Unpublished raw data. London, England: Melissa Taylor.



Looked at objectively, there is no difference in terms of exposure between these employees and a young, inexperienced driver texting behind the wheel. In every instance, the driver is significantly increasing the exposure to himself and others by taking his full attention off of the task at hand. The question becomes not whether distracted driving is the organization's concern, but what the organization should do about it.

Best practices in addressing distracted driving

Among organizations that excel in safety, there is a general recognition that exposure to harm is the same no matter where it happens and they treat distracted driving accordingly. Driving safety is on the agenda alongside other organizational safety issues, and it gets the same resources, leadership attention, and effort as “inside” safety issues. This does not mean that the practices and activities look the same as other safety interventions. In fact, they would probably not be effective if they did look the same. Rather, driving requires special consideration in developing organizational safety interventions due to its unique challenges. Our experience is that effective interventions adhere to several key practices.

1. Understand and articulate what “distracted driving” means

Safety excellence of any type requires defining the risk in sufficient detail that employees can easily and accurately assess exposure in the live workplace. With respect to driving, this means defining distracted driving in a way that neither distorts the issue (does safe driving mean you only think about the road and nothing else?) nor minimizes it (e.g., “we only care if you're texting”). In this respect, legal compliance is a poor guide and can give leaders a false sense of security. Laws typically only provide a minimum, not optimal, level of protection.

Experts define three main types of distraction:⁵ Visual (taking your eyes off the road); Manual (taking your hands off the wheel); and Cognitive (taking your mind off the task). A good definition might then be something such as: *Distracted driving happens*

5 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Injury Prevention and Control: Motor Vehicle Safety. Atlanta, GA. Available at http://www.cdc.gov/motorvehiclesafety/distracted_driving Accessed January 27, 2013.

any time you operate a motor vehicle while also doing an activity that takes your attention away from the task at hand. Seen in this light, a driver talking on a headset may be less distracted than if he had to hold his phone, but may still be preoccupied with the conversation to the extent that he loses focus on the environment around him.

2. Develop a safe driving policy that aligns with organizational realities

World-class organizations bake exposure reduction into their policies, standards, and expectations of people in everything they do. When it comes to operating a vehicle or mobile machinery in particular, the message is that an employee's focus is always on the task at hand. This means that cell phones in any form, whether hands free or wired, are not permitted. Ideally, the practice calls for cell phones to be switched off and in the trunk.

To be effective, a safe driving policy must be within the control of employees to follow and it must align (or at least not conflict) with other performance expectations. Some of the chief areas to pay attention to include technology, processes, and culture:

- **Technology** – Company-issued mobile devices can inadvertently blur the line between driving and other tasks. It may seem more efficient (and some might even say expected) to make use of mobile devices while driving. World-class organizations address the technology blur by explicitly defining when and how to use mobile devices. Some organizations are also taking advantage of new technology to create barriers to at-risk practices, such as installing apps that shut off a device when it travels over a certain speed.
- **Processes** – It's not uncommon in some fleets for drivers to be rated on route times, regardless of how they achieved them. Similarly, other employees may feel pressure to “multi task” in order to meet deadlines (even those that are internally set). Leaders need to assure that processes are developed to accommodate real-life conditions and that they are designed with the safety of the employee in mind. This may mean building flexibility into other processes

to accommodate driving safety, e.g., making it “okay” for people to miss meetings if they are traveling or making resources available, such as a driver, so that executives who must spend long hours on the road can do their work safely.

- **Culture** – Ironically, high-performing organizations can struggle with setting the right tone for driving safety because their cultures value getting the job done “no matter what.” In these organizations you might see a sales executive drive 300 miles or more to keep an appointment when his flight gets cancelled. While the commitment to customer service excellence is laudable, heroic efforts are never acceptable when they risk the employee’s (and others’) safety. It is up to leaders to communicate expectations and set the example around driving decisions and practices.

3. Collect data on driving exposures

Treating distracted driving as an organizational safety issue requires that the organization track information on its prevalence, the conditions under which it happens, and the barriers to doing it safely. Being able to detect trends and identify barriers is essential to the development of effective intervention strategies. In one transit organization we worked with, exposure measurement detected that drivers on one route were routinely violating the safe driving policy. The data identified route planning as the leading factor; drivers were attempting to meet times set by office workers who lacked any experience of the live route. Using this information, the agency developed an intervention that enlisted drivers themselves in designing new route timetables that accounted for road work, high traffic times, seasonal weather conditions, and other variables not found on a map.

Collecting exposure data on driving is challenging because most employees drive alone. With the right guidance and prompts, however, self-reporting can be an effective means of collecting data if self-reporting can be protected from negative consequences.⁶ Many organizations also arrange for “ride-alongs”, pre-scheduled passenger-conducted observations. The

⁶ Airlines and railroads have such near-miss reporting systems now, in which employees can self report with their identities protected, and no negative consequences resulting.

goal is to provide an accurate picture of risk across the organization, identify barriers, trends, and patterns, and feed problem-solving efforts to eliminate risks. Data that are helpful to track include:

- **The circumstances of safe and at-risk driving behaviors** – Draft a behavioral checklist that embodies your organization’s definition of safe driving and train employees to self-report instances of using those behaviors. A good strategy will draw reports from a cross-section of employees, offering a representative sample across regions, levels, time of day, and driving context (e.g., fleet driving vs. personal travel). The point is not to punish people who use at-risk behaviors but to understand what is happening and why.
- **Barriers to safe driving** – Whenever a driving behavior is recorded at risk, it is critical to capture the why. The context behind exposure, whether the person lacked awareness, felt production pressure, or simply didn’t feel it was a risk, provides important information about why driving exposures occur or persist. Often, the reasons behind an exposure are systemic and cultural—issues that require leadership intervention.
- **Driving incident data** – Driving incidents and near-misses are a rich source of exposure data. It is important not to investigate incidents based on actual outcome but on the incident’s *potential*.

4. Put the focus on decreasing exposures, not reducing accidents

This point may seem counterintuitive; the ultimate objective of driving safety, of course, is to prevent driving accidents. However, focusing on accidents puts the emphasis on outcome over activity and can (wrongly) send the message that it doesn’t matter what you do so long as “nothing bad happens.” The reality is that none of us can truly determine whether or not a decision we’ve made will lead to an injury. This is especially true when it comes to driving behaviors; most people have engaged in risky behavior at one time or other without adverse consequences. The problem is that every time a person chooses to engage in a

distracted behavior, even if he doesn't believe anything will happen, he is allowing exposure to himself or someone else to rise above acceptable levels. The results then become no better than a roll of the dice.

An exposure focus simply means that the organization is oriented towards finding the *potential* for injury in what people do, and examining the systems, procedures, and decision-making that influence that potential. This focus requires leaders to take a long-term view of decisions. It also requires asking people to act in spite of their belief that "nothing bad will happen."

5. Address attribution bias

Related to focusing on exposure, distracted driving behaviors are particularly prone to attribution bias: the belief that others' behaviors are the result of their personalities rather than their situations but holding the opposite when explaining your own behaviors. In other words, it's okay if I talk on the phone while in the car, but not if you do it. Other cognitive biases can lead us to overestimate our abilities (I'm a good driver so I'm less susceptible to distractions than most people) or to be selective in the data we examine. If leaders are going to address safety in any real way, they must themselves model the value for safety and reducing exposure in everything they do. This means learning to recognize risk in your own day-to-day activities and honestly evaluating whether you are "practicing what you preach." It also means helping others to recognize risk and overcome their biases.

6. Engage customers, vendors, and the community in improving driving safety

Safe driving is important to everyone in the communities where we live and work. Most of us know someone who has been hurt in a car accident — perhaps we have been in one ourselves. When we take up driving safety, distracted driving in particular, as a partnership opportunity, we have an opening to do good in a way that benefits everyone. Partnering with others helps us learn, build common ground, and advance the good work we do in reducing harm to ourselves and others.

A charter for continuous improvement

Advancements in technology have always come with a mix of benefits and challenges. The mobile technologies that have transformed how people live, work, and communicate today are no exception. Just as a cell phone or GPS device can be an important safety tool for a stranded traveler, it can also become a hazardous distraction in the context of driving itself. Organizations, with their resources, expertise, and reach, can play an important part in defining the discussion around distracted driving. Recognizing the responsibility that organizations have to employees and the communities in which they work, many leaders have already taken up the charter to assure that new technologies live up to their promises of convenience and productivity without harming the lives they were meant to improve.

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