The Next Desk
Managing risk in the modern, small business workplace

The Distraction Issue
The only thing we can concentrate on is how distracted we are

Babies on Facebook. Puppies on Instagram. Celebrities on Twitter. These are weapons of mass distraction.

Distraction is one of the great hazards of modern life and it is a serious issue in the modern workplace. We walk distractedly. We drive distractedly. We work amidst the distracting din of the open office. We try to multitask. We resolve to concentrate on important projects, only to be interrupted by the ding of an email or a text.

Distractions rob us of our focus, making us more likely to tune out, mess up and miss something important.

In this issue of The Next Desk, we’re taking out our earbuds, muting our smartphones and focusing on the subject of distractions in the workplace – what you as an employer may need to manage to protect your employees and your business.

So fix yourself a cup of coffee, settle into a state of situational awareness and spend a few minutes perusing this issue. Think of it as a constructive distraction.

Inside:
Why toggling can be boggling 3
Driver’s ed for driven professionals 4
The wide-ranging issues of wide-open spaces 5
Hitting the wall, literally 6
I can’t hear myself think: the pros and cons of beats and buds 7
Meet Pepper the intern, your new CDO 8

Today’s workplace looks remarkably different. So we take a remarkably different look.

Sloppy. Your errors go up and quality goes down.

Sluggish. One study found that the reaction time of people who talk on the phone and drive is more impaired than those who drive drunk.

Slow. Cognitive processes suffer.

Sulky. As you push your brain past its natural, high-performance sweet spot, your mood plummets.

Stressed. Multitasking causes higher blood pressure and heart rate.

Slacking. You bail when the going gets tough.
On a typical day, you may need to plan a presentation, review a stack of résumés and update the employee handbook to include policies for mobile devices. In the interest of efficiency and productivity, you try to do all these things at once.

Fifteen minutes in on the presentation, someone stops by your office to ask you about expense reports. Ten minutes after that, you start to dig into the handbook. Then your email dings. Once you get caught up on your email, you turn to the résumés, only to see something that reminds you of an open question on the presentation. So you make a note of it – in the handbook document. Oops.

This is what experts call “toggling,” when you flip the brain’s switch between one task and another. Those who believe that this kind of multitasking makes us more productive argue that toggling allows us to stir the pot of several projects and processes at one time.

Others maintain that toggling can actually slow progress and productivity by forcing us to refocus with each flip of the switch. Multitasking may actually be a risk to progress, to accuracy, even to personal safety. Changing focus constantly opens the door to distraction: inattention to crucial details, sequential mistakes, inadvertent loss of critical information, process errors and data entry goofs.

The consequences of interruptions and distractions can depend, in part, on the complexity of the task and the potential harm an error can cause. For high-stakes workers, such as equipment operators or physicians, a work distraction can be catastrophic. But even those without life-or-death job descriptions can cause harm to themselves, and maybe others, with just a few seconds of inattention. Products break, processes bog down, customers get disappointed and employees get hurt.

Emerging research suggests there’s a better way to work. For optimal productivity and safety, the ideal state for the Workplace 2.0 employee is what is known as situational awareness. Situational awareness has long been a topic of keen interest to high-stress, high-stakes employers like the police and the military. The U.S. Coast Guard defines situational awareness as “the ability to identify, process, and comprehend the critical elements of information about what is happening to the team with regard to the mission. More simply, it’s knowing what is going on around you.”

Situational awareness is vital to Workplace 2.0. Yet the ever-present din and ding of digital devices can hamper our ability to be productive and safe in the office or on the shop floor.

So what can you do? That depends on your business. In general, the road to higher productivity and greater safety lies not in multitasking but in task sequencing. Establish clear priorities for employees so they know what comes first in the face of conflicting demands. If they must keep several projects spinning at once, make sure they can identify the natural break points where it’s safe for them to put one task down and pick up another.
We know. It’s tempting. But statistically speaking, trying to multitask on the road isn’t the express lane to a corner office – it’s the quickest route to an accident.

Driving distractions extend beyond texting and talking on the phone. You may be surprised to find many commonplace habits qualify as dangerous. The CDC defines three different categories for distracted driving:

• **Distractions that take your eyes off the road**, such as texting or consulting a navigation app. Driving while visually distracted is like driving with your eyes closed.

• **Manual distractions that take your hands off the wheel**, such as snacking, sipping your latté, fixing your hair, checking your teeth in the rearview mirror or applying lipstick. Even drivers who consider themselves conscientious will think nothing of adjusting the air conditioning or changing the radio station while their car is hurtling down the interstate at 70 mph.

• **Cognitive distractions that take your mind off the road**, such as phone calls or chatting with passengers. If your brain is focused on an engrossing conversation, you may not have enough bandwidth to finesse a lane change or monitor how soon your exit is coming up.

When you think of distracted drivers, you probably envision texting teens. But employees who are looking for extra hours in the workday often think they can find time for multitasking behind the wheel.

How many of these distractions occurred during your commute this morning? (There is no prize if your answer is “All the above.”)

As an employer, you can set a good example by not calling or texting the office from the car. Take a leadership role by defining and enforcing policies for safe driving while employees are on the clock.

**Need help getting started?**

Distraction.gov, the government’s official website on distracted driving, offers sample policies and communication materials you can download and customize.

---

**The likelihood of an accident increases¹**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Increase in Likelihood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>if you’re texting</td>
<td>23x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>if you’re trying to reach for something</td>
<td>9x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>if you’re reading a map app</td>
<td>4x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>if you’re checking your hair or makeup</td>
<td>3x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>if you’re eating</td>
<td>2x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The wide-ranging issues of wide-open spaces

Spend a few hours in an open-plan office environment and you’ll learn a lot. You’ll learn that Carole needs to find a new roommate. Adam is pricing a new Jeep. Chris is feuding with his landlord. The marketing team is trying to achieve consensus on the next happy hour venue. The developers are organizing a Slither.io tournament. And nobody’s getting much work done. Or so it seems.

Employers have been quick to embrace the notion of the open-plan office as an incubator of collaboration and creativity. Open offices are often far less expensive than conventional office space. And, to be perfectly honest, they look cool.

We get it. Nothing signals the geek-chic of Workplace 2.0 like a cluster of cushy sofas and a pool table. It’s easy to believe that offering a relaxed, casual, comfortable environment with elements of fun will make free-range millennials more amenable to long hours. But a growing body of research suggests that open-plan workplaces actually cause stress to rise and productivity to plummet.

Workers in open-plan environments cite multiple distractions that hamper their effectiveness on the job: conversations of chatty co-workers, being unable to modulate noise and temperature, even worrying about shared germs from coughs and colds.

These may seem like trivial concerns, but recent research suggests that even small distractions can have a big impact. A study conducted by Michigan State University showed that interruptions (distractions) of only 2.8 seconds during the performance of a complex task can double the error rate. If the distraction lasts 4.4 seconds, the number of mistakes triples.

Making small adjustments in Workplace 2.0 can increase productivity and improve safety without hampering collaboration. If you have an open-plan office, provide quiet rooms where people can concentrate. Some business trend forecasters are even predicting that “monotasking” will become as desirable to employers as multitasking used to be.

But what if your workplace is more traditional, fostering concentration at the expense of collaboration? Consider adding lounge areas where people can brainstorm in a relaxed, sociable setting.

Increase productivity without hampering collaboration

Open office space: Provide quiet rooms where people can concentrate

Traditional office space: Add lounge areas where people can brainstorm in a relaxed, sociable setting

A growing body of research suggests that open-plan workplaces actually cause stress to rise and productivity to plummet.
ABC News recently coined the word “petextrians,” to describe people who try to walk and text at the same time, oblivious to their surroundings. Almost everyone agrees it’s annoying (when other people do it) and even dangerous (ditto). But many of us do it anyway.

How many? Between 2000 and 2011, an estimated 11,000 injuries involved distracted walking with cell phones. A slight majority of these incidents, 52%, occur at home; however it’s the most reported workplace injury event. Those most at risk include college students, adults under 30, and those whose walking routes put them near traffic.

Even when the total number of pedestrian injuries dropped, injuries from walking while using a cell phone more than doubled over a five-year period. Experts believe the actual numbers might be higher than reported, since the injured may be reluctant to disclose the true cause of their injuries.

Distracted walking has become such a problem that, for the first time, the National Safety Council included cell phone distracted walking as a cause of unintentional deaths and injuries in its 2015 Injury Facts Report.

When distracted walking meets Workplace 2.0, employee well-being can suffer. Workers who operate machinery while texting or using their smartphones may injure themselves or others, which may lead to lost time from work. Employees who are focused on their devices as they pass in common corridors may not be as engaged in their immediate surroundings and might not see potential hazards like walls, stairs or co-workers.

As an employer, you may also be concerned about how distracted walking affects employee productivity, especially if you notice employees walking and talking or texting during business hours. Distracted walking can be part of a broader conversation about the use of mobile devices, personal email, texting and browsing the Internet during the workday. Defining official guidelines that address distracted walking, as part of a policy on the appropriate use of personal devices in the workplace, can help define behavioral boundaries for employees and reduce distractions.

You can also set a good example. If you need to take a call or read a text while you’re walking through the office, simply step out of the way.

We joke about not being able to walk and chew gum. What on earth makes us think we can walk and text?
I can’t hear myself think: 
the pros and cons of beats and buds

Employees who need peace and quiet often use headphones and earbuds to insulate themselves from office chatter, coworkers’ phone calls, and machine noise. In fact, in many offices, putting on headphones is like putting up a “Do Not Disturb” sign.

If your employees are tuning out with headphones and earbuds, you need to tune into potential problems. One concern is that they contribute to hearing loss. Headphones have always posed a risk for those who listen to music at high volumes. But experts believe that earbuds can be more damaging to hearing because they don’t block ambient noise as well as regular headphones; so users tend to dial the volume higher to compensate. As a general rule, if you can hear the music – even though the headphones or earbuds aren’t on your head – it’s probably loud enough to endanger the user’s hearing. That goes for Mozart as well as Metallica.

The drawbacks of headphones:

The superior noise-blocking performance of headphones poses other problems. Headphones can prevent wearers from hearing important announcements, signals and alarms. They can inhibit office camaraderie. And they can even affect the employee’s ability to hear the ring of incoming calls.

Despite these drawbacks, headphones and earbuds are here to stay in Workplace 2.0. So observe how headphones are affecting your workers. And consider whether you need to develop rules about their use.
Meet Pepper the intern, your new CDO
(Chief Distraction Officer)

Pepper is a nine-month-old Yorkie who is currently on leave from the Metropolitan Obedience Academy. She hopes to resume her studies, with a double major in hospitality management and shoe chewing, as soon as a certain Cockapoo drops the charges.

Are pets a boon or a hazard in the workplace? The most accurate answer is: they are both. On the plus side, studies show that pets can lower our blood pressure and help us cope with stress. The presence of pets may boost workplace morale and creativity. Taking Fido and Fifi out for a midday walk can even help your employees get a little extra exercise.

On the minus side, however, pets can aggravate workers with allergies. An estimated 15% to 30% of the population contends with some sensitivity to pet dander, with symptoms ranging from a mildly stuffy nose to severe rashes and respiratory disorders.3

The presence of pets can also cause emotional discomfort. If an employee had a bad experience with a dog in the past, even the best-behaved Labradoodle could prompt intense anxiety or even a panic attack.

Another issue to consider is that all pets, even the best-behaved ones, are a distraction in the workplace. It’s challenging to work through lunch when Bella is begging for a bite of your sandwich. It’s difficult to keep your mind on a less-than-riveting conference call when Duke wants a tummy rub. Pets need food, water and potty outings. And pet-friendly offices need conscientious owners who will respond immediately when Buster leaves a biohazard in the break room. (Buster! Bad dog!)

If you decide that the benefits outweigh the distractions in your workplace, or if you want to welcome pets on a trial basis, make sure you protect your business. First, review your lease to make sure you won’t be in violation. Then, establish a well-defined pet policy, communicate it clearly and enforce it consistently.

Pet-friendly offices need conscientious owners who will respond immediately when Buster leaves a biohazard in the break room.


Pets in the workplace

NEXT ISSUE:
A healthy curiosity

Wasn’t technology supposed to make our jobs easier? So why is work-life balance more elusive than ever? Do your employees need an in-house gym? How about a nap room?

As an employer, you need to balance protecting the health of your employees with protecting the health of your business. In the next issue of The Next Desk, we’ll explore the health and wellness challenges of Workplace 2.0.