FAIL SAFE
IMPROVE SAFETY
2023 ACP WORKFORCE
SAFETY CAMPAIGN

Maintaining alertness, ignoring interruptions

We have limited attentional resources. In fact, we "only attend to a very small proportion of the available sensory data" in our environment (U.S. Department of Energy, 2009a). Competing priorities can make it difficult to remain focused and attentive while completing work tasks. These distractions can lead to a wide range of human performance errors.

For example, an individual is on a conference call and replying to emails simultaneously. Due to the competing priorities of listening to the call and writing replies, someone may address the email to the wrong person, or "Reply All" instead of replying to the intended recipient.

Photo credit: AES

Workers are preparing to do an inspection at a solar site. One of the workers is hearing their cell phone ring continuously while trying to navigate the site. They take out their cell phone and begin responding to messages. While the worker is looking at their cell phone, they trip over uneven terrain and sprain their ankle.

There are several strategies that can mitigate the risks associated with distractions. According to the Hierarchy of Controls, the most effective strategy for eliminating workplace hazards is to eliminate them from the environment. Examples of this can include turning your online status to "Do Not Disturb" or silencing notifications when it is unsafe to use your phone.

Team members can also assist their peers with mitigating the risks associated with distractions. Two human performance improvement tools that can be used in teams are: peer checking and three-way communication.

Peer checking should be used in conjunction with self-checking. During peer checking, both the task performer and the peer "agree on the action to take and on which component" (U.S. Department of Energy, 2009b). The benefit of peer checking is that the peer may observe hazards not seen by the person performing the task (U.S. Department of Energy, 2009b).

Three-way communication involves a sender and a receiver communicating a message regarding "changes to physical facility equipment during work activities" (U.S. Department of Energy, 2009b). This process requires "the sender to get the attention of the receiver" and clearly communicate the message (U.S. Department of Energy, 2009b). Then, the receiver paraphrases the message back to the sender where the sender will either confirm they heard the message correctly or restate the original message (U.S. Department of Energy, 2009b).

Distractions are all around us. However, by utilizing tools to eliminate distractions where possible and checking in with one another, it is possible to reduce the impact distractions have on human performance.

What are some tools that you use to minimize distractions while working?

What resources would be helpful to assist with minimizing distractions and improving attention while on the job?

Have you witnessed a situation where distractions contributed to an unfavorable outcome? What could have been done to eliminate the distraction(s)?

Resources

U.S. Department of Energy. (2009a). *Human performance and improvement handbook: Volume 1: Concepts and principles*.
https://www.standards.doe.gov/standards-documents/1000/1028-BHdbk-2009-v1/@@images/file
U.S. Department of Energy. (2009b). *Human performance and improvement handbook: Volume 2: Human performance tools for individuals, work teams, and management.* https://www.standards.doe.gov/files/doe-hdbk-1028-2009-human-performance-improvement-handbook-volume-2-human-performance-tools-for-individuals-work-teams-and-management/view

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