

Cell Phone Dangers: Crafting a Policy for Their Use

In addition to possible electrical hazards, cell phones may pose dangers to hearing and traffic safety. Here's how to write a company policy to minimize some of the risks.

Safety experts, including the military's Naval Safety Center, warn malfunctioning cell phone circuitry or batteries can produce a spark that can explode a flammable atmosphere. Such an atmosphere exists every time we fill our gas tanks.

Before you don a flak jacket to gas up, however, note that the Safety Center said the chances of this happening are exceedingly rare. So today, let's look at safety issues with cell phones that are more in the mainstream.

Now hear this ... or not

The first comes from the American Academy of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery Foundation. *Otolaryngologists* are ear, nose, and throat (ENT) specialists.

The group revealed a study showing serious danger of hearing loss to those making extensive use of mobile phones. "The study found that 100 people who had used mobile phones for more than a year suffered increases in the degree of hearing loss," reported *Occupational Health & Safety* magazine. "Also, that people who used their phones for more than 60 minutes a day had a worse threshold than those with less use."

The ENTs' prescription? Watch out for ear problems including ringing in the ears, or a feeling of warmth and fullness. And use a headset instead of holding the phone against the ear.

Cell on wheels!

An even more recognized issue is cell phone use while driving, ever since a Canadian study found four times the accident rate among road talkers than the general population.

Although experts differ as to whether accidents are caused by phone use or just distraction in general, governmental entities have acted by proposing or enacting partial (for minors, school bus drivers, etc.) or total bans on cell phone use behind the wheel.

At the company level, your organization can be sued if a driver of a company vehicle, or even a private vehicle on company business, has an accident due to cell phone use, and that's whether or not you supplied the cell phone.

The solution begins with a cell phone use safety policy. Key elements such a policy should include:

- **Goal:** Safe driving is the first priority. Never allow a phone conversation to distract you from concentrating on driving.
- **Use restrictions:** Use a headset while driving, or pull over to use a hand-held cell phone. Plan any calls before you drive, and enter the numbers into speed-dial. Avoid placing calls while moving. If possible, ask a passenger to make the call or at least dial.
- **Conversations:** Tell the person called you are driving and on a headset. Suspend the call in hazardous circumstances. Keep conversations short. Let your voicemail pick up calls when it's unsafe for you to answer.
- **Emergencies:** The best use of a cell phone may be to obtain roadside assistance or to report emergencies. Use 911 and give exact location, nature of emergency, name, and number.
- **Electrical hazards:** Turn off your cell phone while using jumper cables or pumping gas. Both situations present a potential hazard of fire or electrocution.

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