



How do you tackle distraction in the workplace?

You can always find a distraction if you are looking for one, but sometimes in modern life and the modern workplace, it feels like distractions come looking for us.

We are increasingly suffering from a lack of concentration, focus, short attention spans, which all make distraction an increasingly common feature of our lives. Significantly in some shape or form, distraction is often a feature of workplace incidents. Whatever the nature of your workplace or work activities, reducing distraction and increasing concentration and focus will help to enhance efficiency, effectiveness and health and safety standards as well as the wellbeing of your workforce.

Failing to see hazards

Research suggests that the average human attention span is as little as 8 seconds!

This is not entirely surprising given that demands for our attention now come at us from all directions and pretty relentlessly enticing us to become distracted. Think about how many phone alerts or emails you receive each day or the numerous and continuous sources of distraction in your working environment. But how many tasks can be done meaningfully in 8 second bursts given all of these distractions?

In a workplace context, distraction and competing demands can have serious consequences including failing to identify hazards and respond to them appropriately, which lead to an increased possibility of an incident or injury.

Our experience is that a lack of concentration, distraction or proper engagement with a task almost certainly always has a significant part to play in incidents. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) also recognises human factors like distraction as significant to nearly all incidents, with many large scale disasters being attributed to human error, for example Texas City, Piper Alpha and Chernobyl. An inability to focus and concentrate also presents a wellbeing issue, potentially causing stress and anxiety and reducing the opportunity to think creatively.

How do you reduce the impact of distraction?

1. Assess possible sources of distraction

The HSE recommends managing potential human errors proactively as part of the risk assessment process. Consider both the potential human factor issues presented by the work environment and how the work activity is done. For example, consider whether noise, lighting or changes in temperature might present a distraction. Consider whether distraction could be caused by the instinct to respond to mobile telephone calls during a task and how tasks could be structured to stave off monotony and the propensity to become distracted. Consideration of human failures should also form part of the process of learning lessons following an incident or near miss including those which led to the incident.

2. Stop multi-tasking

The reality is that very few people can multi-task, we simply move between different tasks each time having to re-focus and re-engage our concentration. Consider making a commitment to doing one task at a time or allocating blocks of time to different tasks. It may also be helpful to split work into shorter chunks instead of one long task where distraction and complacency is more likely to creep in.

3. Use technology more intelligently

When used intelligently technology can be helpful but it too can also present a distraction and adversely impact on wellbeing. Consider how to reduce the sources of distraction from technology by instituting protocols around the use of mobile phones and email, turning off alerts, holding mobile phone and email-free meetings and allocating times

of day to batch check messages and emails. Increase the opportunities to talk rather than emailing colleagues. Create a cut off time for dealing with non-urgent and non-time sensitive emails.

4. Make use of breaks

A short break to take a walk, stretch or simply focus on something other than the current task can awaken and refresh the body and mind. Consider how your breaks and those of co-workers or employees are structured in the working day and maybe give workers permission to take "micro" breaks. It can be useful to encourage activities like using a free app (just watch that use of tech....) for short breathing exercises or stretching even when sitting at a desk. In longer breaks encourage people to leave the workplace and go for a walk, introduce a "step challenge", yoga or mindful meditation classes. It is even better if a break can be spent outside fully immersed in nature.

5. Address causes of tiredness and fatigue

Make tiredness and fatigue a recognised and valid reason to stop work on safety grounds and regularly discuss how it can be managed to avoid it adversely affecting how work is done and presenting a cause of distraction.

As part of a risk assessment process, identify and consider the possible sources of tiredness and fatigue, for example, the structure of working hours, the time of day work is done, the number of consecutive days worked and where a significant part of the working day is with little or no human interaction. Also consider the fatiguing effect that physical work or work requiring the use of machinery or equipment has on the body.



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