



DISTRACTIONS

Are you easily distracted? I am; in fact, I often seek distractions that please me. What is wrong with seeking distractions? Read the news about driver distractions: phoning, texting, eating, and personal grooming. These distractions are causing injuries and deaths. Laws have been and are being passed to ban distracting tasks while driving a car, or a train, or a truck, or a bus. *What are your company policies about driving and doing other tasks?*

How do **distractions** affect operational performance in a control room or other pipeline work place? A distraction is an interruption, something that takes our attention away from the task at hand. Think of various things that might cause you to be momentarily distracted.

- Ringing phone
- Someone talking or walking by
- A sounding alarm or many sounding alarms
- Music playing
- Television picture or sound
- E-mail “ping” when a new message, notification, or tweet is received
- Internet surfing or searching
- Reading company or personal material
- Video game or other application on the computer or device
- A necessary or unnecessary work conversation
- A necessary or unnecessary personal conversation
- Thinking about what you will do when you have time away from work



We sometimes seek distractions because we are bored by our repetitive tasks. Some companies ban some of these possible distractions; others leave it to the personal discretion of the employee. *What are your company policies and practices?*

The fact is that we cannot do one thing while paying attention to another thing at the same time. Whether I am reading a required company bulletin or *Sports Illustrated*, my brain is attending to the reading. That does not mean I will miss something important on the pipeline system. It means that I will need to switch tasks from reading to the pipeline system, if something happens. A problem occurs when I do not recognize something on the pipeline system requires my attention. *The question is whether I should be reading a company bulletin or a magazine at the console.*

A few actual job postings for pipeline controllers state:

- Must maintain a high level of mental alertness and be capable of quickly processing and reacting to incoming information. Response time is critical.
- Maintain a high level of attention to detail for extended periods of time.
- Remain seated and focused on color monitors for extended periods.
- Perform detailed, regimented tasks and sustain concentration under stressful situations.
- Perform a variety of tasks at once.

What might cause a person not to be able to do those things during a 12 hour day or 12 hour night shift? Fatigue and stress affect our ability to concentrate. The desire to get up, walk around, and do something more interesting (or anything different) can become a distraction. It is impossible for most people to maintain a high level of attention to any one thing for an extended period of time. Multitasking or doing several tasks at once is impossible. A person has to mentally prioritize and then perform the tasks one at a time. It is possible to perform them quickly, but not simultaneously. *What do you do so that you are able to avoid distractions and perform all required tasks?*

Notice how the first four “Dirty Dozen” of the year—Stress, Fatigue, Complacency, and Distractions—are related. Do not think of these causes of errors and accidents as isolated and separate; everything is connected. The effects of stress and fatigue make us more susceptible to distractions and complacency.