

Set rules for workplace smartphone use

BY PETER GREDIG

Employees are going to have smartphones. That's a given. I talk a lot about the benefits these devices bring for communication, access to the Internet, and apps that make us all more efficient. But there is a line where too much or inappropriate smartphone use is a problem on the job. Every employer now needs to think about laying some ground rules.

Let's start with the road. Distracted driving laws target drivers who are texting or using their smartphones. There can be no ambiguity about this among your staff: zero tolerance must be the standard. Make sure employees know that if they do not have hands-free capability, they must pull off the road to use the phone.

More thought is required for smartphone use in the field. Some of the calamity photos we see showing mangled combines and sprayers are the result of auto-steer equipment combined with a distracted driver. Power line towers, ditches and other obstacles not tagged in the GPS guidance system mean even hands-free operators must be alert and paying attention – especially at night. Legitimate smartphone use relating to the job is one thing. Using your smartphone for entertainment is another.

Safety is the primary driver here, but it's also about efficiency and being properly engaged with the task at hand. While general rules help, employers will have to address specific situations on an ongoing basis and say it's not acceptable to be on the phone when doing certain jobs.

Our growing involvement with social media is one of the reasons people overuse smartphones, even on the job. For some, it's an addiction. I think it's fair for employers to ban participation in social media during work time. It goes beyond the loss



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of productivity and focus. It's also about pictures or videos employees may take on the job and post to Twitter, Facebook or other social media channels. A clear policy that regulates taking pictures and video, and gathering other workplace information via smartphone, should be considered and discussed.

Employers can be proactive in guiding smartphone use on the job so it enhances productivity rather than being a time-waster or safety concern. Apps like Voxer make it easier to communicate as a team, and providing employees with the best possible hands-free Bluetooth devices is a good place to start. And be consistent in following your own rules and setting a good example for staff to follow – if employees see you texting while driving, which is illegal in most jurisdictions, it will surely undermine your policy. ■

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