

## **Don't Get Distracted (from Safety)**

*By Judy Kerry*

*State Compensation Insurance Fund*

Although some workplace distractions and interruptions are unavoidable, many can be controlled or prevented. No matter what the distraction, your first concern should be to keep your mind and your focus on safety – your safety and that of others. Be aware of any distractions you may be causing and take responsibility for not interrupting others. Let your supervisor know about repeated and/or unsafe distractions.

Work interruptions are a distraction that can result in work errors or accidents. Before addressing or responding to another person, shut down or disengage any work tool, equipment, or processes. Your job training should include instructions not to interrupt others during a critical job phase or process. Instruction manuals and procedural guidebooks should be kept on site to answer frequently asked questions and thereby eliminate the need to interrupt or distract other workers.

External noise from tools, mobile equipment, and processes can be distracting in industrial and construction work environments. In work situations where loud or constant noise is unavoidable, hearing protection devices can eliminate or decrease unwanted and distracting noise. In other work environments even not-so-loud sounds can be a distracting annoyance. Constantly ringing phones, conversations, and loud faxes, copiers, and printers can distract workers from their job tasks or -- depending on the level or duration of the noise -- can contribute to workplace stress.

Electronic devices such as cell phones, IPODS, and PDAs can be the source of serious distractions in some work environments. Check with your supervisor to find out if these electronics are allowed where you work. If these devices are approved in your workplace, as a courtesy to your co-workers, make sure you keep your cell phone on a low volume or silent when you work. To maximize work safety and performance, turn email notifications off and disable instant messaging. Don't answer the phone or emails when you're in the middle of a task – let it ring to voicemail then check messages later -- preferably on your break time.

In some work environments wearing a headset with low volume music can be relaxing to workers and help them to safely focus on their work. However, wearing headphones on a construction or industrial site can be dangerous if it prevents workers from hearing warning signals, mobile equipment backup alarms, and safety instructions. Walking around while talking on the phone or wearing a headset distracts your attention from safety and could result in a slip or fall or cause you to run into or be struck by something or someone.

Some workplace distractions and interruptions are unavoidable but others – if not properly controlled or regulated -- could lead to injuries, lost productivity, and a decrease in worker morale.