

Watch for others while using mobile devices

In 1991, I was a 28 year old computing networking consultant billing under our company Paranet at several major oil companies in Houston.

I was the first billable employee in our consulting firm to purchase and use a cellular phone after which I quickly discovered that I could troubleshoot client technical problems to and from work talking on that new cellular phone.

This meant I could bill my substantial hourly rate while I was driving and since my commute was sometimes 30 minutes or more each way that really added up. I also found that I really had to be careful and pay even closer attention to the wretched Houston traffic to keep from running into someone or something while yapping on the phone.

Fast forward 17 years. I'm still resolving computer problems over the mobile phone while driving on U.S. 290 around Brenham rather than Loop 610 in Houston. Thank goodness our Texas Legislature has not banned talking on cell phones while driving like many other states have, though it can be risky for those who cannot multi-task safely.

Just to be clear, I am NOT endorsing using a cellular phone while driving and I recommend you keep your eyes and mind on the road at all times. But in the real world most of us talk and



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drive at the same time on a daily basis so be darn careful to remember that your first focus should be your driving and not your conversation.

Bluetooth headsets and hands-free ear pieces help the distraction factor of cell phone driving a good deal by freeing up your hand and thereby also increasing your head movement freedom.

Dialing the keypad and glances at the phone to see who is calling still takes eyes of the road which induces risk.

Now there's a whole new and worse element to cellular usage that is becoming a big problem worldwide. Text messaging while moving in any way can be hazardous to your health. The big difference in severity is that the audio aspect of this communications media is removed since it is all visual since you have to read and type each message.

According to CTIA, a wireless association, there were 363 billion text messages sent last year. Just this last weekend the announcement about Obama's vice presidential pick was exclusively released via text message to a huge list of cellular users that signed up on their Web site for that privilege.

Last month there was a flurry of articles documenting the dangers of text messaging while driving a car, riding a bike and even just walking down the street. In London they have resorted to

wrapping lamp posts with thick white pads to prevent injuries. I recently watched a YouTube video of British chaps smashing right into them while texting away.

Large American cities have also seen this problem but on a more severe scale with yahoos walking right out into the street while text messaging in front of cars and getting hit.

The American College of Emergency Physicians recently warned of the danger of serious accidents involving oblivious text messengers and emergency room doctors are reporting rising incidents around the country of injuries involving text-messaging pedestrians, bicyclists, even Roller-bladers and equestrians.

Texting while driving is the worst since it take both your eyes and at least one hand to perform the task.

In June 2005 the NRMA Insurance Co. out of Sydney, Australia conducted a serious study titled "The Effects of Text Messaging On the Driving Performance of Young Novice Drivers." Since the young text message the most and have the least experience driving, they focused on the potentially deadly combination.

That was the case in June of last year in New Jersey when five young girls were all killed while texting and driving on their way to a cheerleader camp when they crashed and were burned to death. Can you imagine what other

youths feel like that were texting them remotely that night?

The NRMA study published the following findings:

The amount of time drivers spent with their eyes off the road increased by up to 400 percent when retrieving and sending text messages.

Drivers made 28 percent and 63 percent more lane excursions when retrieving and sending texts, respectively.

Number of incorrect lanes changes made increased by 140 percent when retrieving and sending texts.

Retrieving and, in particular, sending text messages has a detrimental effect on driving performance.

Text messaging affected drivers' lane keeping ability, ability to detect signs and hazards and increases the amount of time spent not looking at the road.

Drivers did attempt to compensate for this degradation in driving performance by increasing following distance, but not by reducing speed.

These degradations are likely to greatly increase crash risk.

I pride myself on being very good at multi-tasking, but texting and driving pushes the limit. Whenever I have to focus on a cellular conversation or troubleshooting a client's networking problem in the car over the cell phone I now pull over and stop. It is just too risky to carry on an extended text messaging session while driving.

If you must operate your cellular

phone by hand then hold the phone up in front of you in the windshield in the direction of your travel so your view can still include the traffic activity. DO NOT look down and away while driving.

Better yet, keep the cellular chats short and to the point while focus your eyes on the road and just pull over on the shoulder to complete a text message exchange.

Bottom line: Mobile technology and cellular communications are great but do not let wireless conversations and especially text messaging endanger you or others on the roadway.

Next week's column: Organizing your software.

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