

# Digital Distraction in The Workplace

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A National Survey  
of  
Full-Time U.S. Employees

May, 2019



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# Researchers

**Screen Education** addresses issues at the intersection of information technology and human wellness through research, seminars, and consulting. Screen Education is based in Cincinnati, OH. Visit [www.ScreenEducation.org](http://www.ScreenEducation.org).

**EMI Research Solutions** is a leading online sample provider to the market research industry. They leverage more than 150 partners in over 95 countries to provide the B2B or consumer sample that best fits their client's project. EMI is based in Cincinnati, OH. Visit [www.EMI-RS.com](http://www.EMI-RS.com).

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# Definition of Terms

**Non-Work Digital Content:** Digital content an employee accesses that is unrelated to his or her job.

**Digital Distraction:** The state of being distracted from the task at hand by the content one is accessing through a digital device.

**Workplace Digital Distraction:** The state of digital distraction while at work.

**Digital Distraction Policies:** Any policy an employer puts in place to deter, curb, or prevent digital distraction among employees.

# Survey Details

## Objective

The objective of the *Digital Distraction In The Workplace* survey is to better understand the impact of digital distraction on the workplace. The survey specifically seeks to better understand the following: the impact of digital distraction on workplace productivity, safety, and the climate; employees' views on whether employers should address digital distraction; and ways in which employers can address digital distraction.

## Method

We fielded an online survey January 16-26, 2019, using EMI Research Solutions' proprietary online survey platform.

## Recruitment

EMI Research Solutions recruited respondents via double-opt-in panel to a quantitative, online survey. EMI's proprietary SWIFT (Sampling with Integrated Fingerprinting Technology) dashboard was used to identify and remove bots and duplicate respondents to ensure the respondents are unique, human respondents.

## Confidence

The survey sample of 1,769 respondents has a confidence level of + or - 3%.

## Sample Profile

All 1,760 respondents are full-time US employees.

Forty-nine percent (49%) of respondents are male, 51% are female.

Respondents range in age from 18-64, with 8% 18-24 years old, 27% 25-34 years old, 28% 35-44 years old, 23% 45-54 years old, and 14% 55-64 years old.

Ten percent (10%) of respondents identify as Hispanic, while 90% identify as non-Hispanic

The racial composition of the sample generally mirrors the racial composition of the United States as indicated by the US census, with 81% Caucasian/White, 10% African-American/Black, 6% Asian or Pacific Islander, 1% Native American, and 2% other.

The geographic distribution of the sample generally mirrors the geographic distribution of the US population, with 44% residing in the South, 23% residing in the Midwest, 18% residing in the West, and 15% residing in the Northeast.

Participants hold a variety of roles in their workplace, with 18% holding white collar professional positions, 13% holding skilled labor positions, 11% holding support staff positions, 41% holding management positions, and 13% holding administrative positions.

# Summary of Findings

Employees say their co-workers spend far too much time digitally distracted at work. Social media by far is the greatest digital distraction, with other distractions --- games, shopping, streaming video, etc. --- playing a relatively minor role.

Employees nearly unanimously say digital distraction reduces productivity at their workplace. This reduction in productivity takes numerous forms, including missing deadlines, ignoring customers, failing to complete a task altogether, or making mistakes that require work to be redone.

Digital distraction in industrial settings, such as warehousing and manufacturing, increases the risk of accidents that can cause injury and damage property. Respondents provided numerous examples of accidents, or near accidents, that occurred as a result of workplace digital distraction.

Digital distraction in retail and telephone customer service settings compromises the quality of customer support. Digitally distracted employees are ignoring customers, delaying or prolonging customer interactions, or failing to follow through on promised problem resolutions. This generates dissatisfaction and frustration among customers.

Digital distraction in healthcare settings creates patient safety risks. Respondents say digital distraction has compromised patient care at their workplace, or has resulted in errors in care.

Digital distraction has a corrosive effect on the work environment. Digitally distracted employees are not bearing their full workload, which breeds frustration among employees who must pick up the slack.

Employees witness their co-workers openly expressing frustration about workplace digital distraction. Many also witness open conflict resulting from digital distraction. This conflict takes two possible forms --- conflict between two frontline employees, or conflict between a frontline employee and their supervisor.

A strong majority of respondents say the problem of workplace digital distraction is serious enough that employers should address it. They say employers should address digital distraction by implementing policies that restrict the use of non-work digital content during work hours.

Some respondents say their employer already has digital distraction policies in place. Many say their employer has terminated employees for violating their digital distraction policies. At the same time, a significant number of respondents whose employer has digital distraction policies in place say their employer doesn't effectively enforce those policies.

Some employees say digital distraction is not a problem at their workplace. These employees attribute this to their workplace culture, essentially saying that people at their workplace are too busy, focused, or professional to use non-work digital content at work.

A strong majority of employees say they are willing to have a company-provided app placed on their smartphone that restricts their use of non-work digital content during work hours. Many employees would *gladly* use such an app, which suggests they welcome assistance in conquering their digital distraction.

# Findings

## Employees spend too much time digitally distracted at work.

Digital distraction at work is widespread. Respondents estimate that over 1/3 of the employees at their workplace --- 35% --- spend an unacceptable amount of time using non-work digital content.

## Social media is by far the greatest digital distraction.

A very strong majority of respondents --- 74.4% --- say employees in their workplace are most distracted by social media. Other distractions pale in comparison, with only 6% citing shopping, 4% citing videos, 3% citing news, and 4% citing "other activities".

Examples of the non-work digital content employees use during work include the following:

*"Illustrator was fighting via text with his partner"*

*"An employee was...viewing pornography."*

*"An employee was taking surveys."*

*"An IT guy was on Facebook too much."*

*"Our office assistant was on Facebook!!!"*

*"Watching movie on their cell phones."*

## Employees nearly unanimously say digital distraction hurts their organization's productivity.

Eighty-seven percent (87%) of respondents say digital distraction hurts their organization's overall productivity.

Does the personal use of technology cause a loss in productivity at your workplace?

Yes: 87%

No: 13%

Examples of lost productivity include the following:

*"A project was not completed by the deadline."*

*"Grill operator failed to cook product requested."*

*"A person was spending too much time on the web to the detriment of not interacting with consumers."*

*"A group project was late because the illustrator was fighting via text with his partner and not doing his part. This cost us a large fine."*

## Digital distraction in an industrial setting increases the risk of accidents.

Digitally-distracted employees are less aware of their surroundings. In industrial settings this increases the risk of accidents that cause injury and damage property. The following examples illustrate these risks:

*"A person was texting on their phone and almost walked out in front of a Hyster (a type of forklift)."*

*"A guy was on his phone and a machine crashed, and (he) blamed someone else."*

*"Prep supervisor was on his phone and as a result 2000 pounds of a product spilled everywhere costing the company \$100,000."*

*"Person playing games on phone. Big manufacturing machine went awry and..part flew...into a different area....person was not watching gauges. Big expense to fix machine and the flying part could have hurt someone or damaged another piece of machinery."*

# Findings

## Digital Distraction in a retail environment compromises customer service.

Numerous respondents detailed how digital distraction in a retail environment compromises the quality of customer service. Examples include the following:

*“Being on the phone while talking to a customer.”*

*“Cashier texting while customer waited to check out.”*

*“Cashiers texting while they have customers in...line.”*

*“People using phones and not paying attention to customers and they walk out.”*

*“Customers not getting taken care of or having to wait because employees are on their phones.”*

*“Because everyone’s on their phones, one time there was a customer and the girl took out her phone and said ‘One minute, I have to text my hubby.’”*

*“Constantly texting their boyfriend and arguing on the phone when there are customers around, and she’s getting aggravated because she is upset.”*

*“I was working at spring and my team would all be on their cell phones watching movies and playing games. It would distract them from helping customers that walked into the store.”*

## Digital Distraction in a telephone customer service environment compromises customer service.

Numerous respondents detailed how digital distraction in a telephone customer service environment compromises the quality of customer service. Examples include the following:

*“Complaints about Customer Service Rep not passing on messages.”*

*“Customer Service Rep slow to answer calls while on personal phone and not delivering messages.”*

*“Person put customer on hold while they finished with their messaging and then finally waited on customer...(the employee) heard an earful from (the) customer who then requested...(the) manager...(the)...camera (footage proved the)...customer was truthful.”*

## Digital Distraction in a healthcare setting compromises the quality of care.

Digital distraction can pose health risks in a healthcare setting. Numerous respondents provided examples of the ways in which digital distraction increases the risk of medical error, and generally compromises the quality of care.

*“Some patients’ needs aren’t met in a timely fashion.”*

*“Certified Nursing Assistant on their phone not doing their rounds.”*

*“Staff being on their phone and not tending to a patient’s needs.”*

*“Improper patient care because someone was on their personal device instead of making the patient the priority.”*

*“A patient needed to be transferred to another facility, but the nurse was so distracted talking with a friend on the phone that took the patient to the wrong facility.”*

*“I was in a meeting with physician office managers. They described that employees responsible for scanning documents into the electronic record system frequently take breaks to surf the internet, which impacts productivity for the entire unit.”*



# Findings

## Digital distraction corrodes workplace climate by triggering frustration and conflict.

Digitally distracted employees breed frustration among those who must complete their unfinished work. A strong majority of respondents --- 59.5% --- say people at their workplace openly express frustration at the productivity lost to digital distraction.

Do people at your workplace express frustration over the productivity lost by the personal use of technology?

Yes: 60%

No: 40%

Digital distraction also triggers open conflict. Nearly 1/3 of respondents --- 31% --- say open conflict has erupted at their workplace because of the lost productivity resulting from digital distraction.

Do conflicts ever arise at your workplace as a result of people spending too much time using technology for personal reasons?

Yes: 31%

No: 69%

Such conflicts fall into two basic categories: conflicts between frontline employees, and conflicts between a frontline employee and their supervisor.

## Excessive digital distraction at work results in employees being terminated.

Respondents provided numerous examples of frontline employees being terminated because of their excessive digital distraction. Examples include the following:

*"An employee was fired for viewing pornography."*

*An employee got fired for getting caught using her phone during work hours."*

*"Person continually played on their phone and did no work. Ended up getting fired."*

*"...one employee yelled at another to get off of their phone because they were watching inappropriate videos. The boss fired him."*

*"Boss had a pretty strong discussion with a colleague because he was spending too much time on the phone instead of doing his work. He got fired after that."*

*"Goals were unmet by an individual who spent a good portion of his day on social media on the work computer. He lost time and lost the company money because he was more dedicated to social media and texting than his job. They gave him 3 months to change before eventually letting him go."*

## A strong majority of employees say employers should address digital distraction.

Employees realize digital distraction reduces workplace productivity, increases the risk of workplace accidents that injure people and damage property, and corrodes the workplace environment. But do employees feel that digital distraction is so bad that employers must address it?

A strong majority of respondents -- 61.6% --- indeed believe employers must take action to address digital distraction at work.

Do you believe that the personal use of technology during work hours is something that employers generally need to address?

Yes: 61%

No: 39%

It's remarkable that 62% of respondents believe employers should address digital distraction, as it seems to suggest they are saying they would like assistance in addressing their own digital distraction.

# Findings

## An organization's culture can effectively deter workplace digital distraction.

Among employees who say digital distraction isn't a problem at their workplace, some say their organization's culture is the reason. These respondents characterize their workplace as having a professional culture where people do their jobs and don't have time to play with their phones. Specific comments include the following:

*"People are pretty responsible, where I work."*

*"I'm an adult and work with responsible people."*

*"It is really not a relevant issue at my workplace. Our people are professional and have integrity."*

*"My employer doesn't really have to...(impose) a restriction...It's common sense...in my industry. Everyone is respectful towards our boss. No one really goes on their phone unless they're on break."*

## A strong majority of respondents say employers should implement digital distraction policies.

A very strong majority of employees --- 65.0% --- believe employers should restrict the amount of time employees may spend using non-work digital content during work hours.

Do you feel that employers should restrict the amount of time employees can spend using technology for personal reasons during work hours?

Yes: 65%

No: 35%

## Fewer than half of respondents say their employer currently has digital distraction policies.

Only 39.5% of respondents say their employer currently has policies that restrict the amount of time

employees may spend using non-work digital content during work hours.

Does your employer restrict the amount of time employees may spend using technology for personal reasons during work hours?

Yes: 39%

No: 61%

## Digital distraction policies vary across employers.

Digital distraction policies take a variety of forms. Some employers allow their employees to use non-work digital content, but have restrictions on some particular types of content:

*"Social sites."*

*"No social media."*

*"No social media when clocked in."*

*"Employees are allowed to do it as long as it doesn't interfere with their work but no streaming or data rich activity is allowed."*

Some employers try to deter the use of non-work digital content by letting employees know they have systems in place to monitor and track their Internet use:

*"Everything is monitored and tracked."*

*"We...(track) all employee Internet access and go from there."*

Some employers allow employees to use non-work digital content only when they are on breaks or during lunch:

*"Use only on breaks and lunch times."*

*"We...(must) leave our phone in our purse/coat and not...have it out with the exception of breaks."*

# Findings

*“The only time phone usage is allowed is during break periods. If an employee is caught using phone while working, first they are issued a warning. Second offense they are terminated.”*

*“Only to be used on breaks. If caught with phones it’s a warning, second write up, third write up, fourth final. If you keep getting caught using it when not on designated break, you get fired. We are paid to work, not play.”*

Some employers do not allow phones in a physical work area, such as a production floor, warehouse, or sales floor:

*“No phones on floor.”*

*“Can't have phones on the production floor.”*

*“Does not permit cell phones on the sales floor.”*

*“We have to put our cell phones in our locker. They are not allowed in the warehouse at any time.”*

*“Phones are not supposed to be out on the work floor, if you need to use your phone you have to step outside or into the break room.”*

Some employers block access to certain types of non-work digital content:

*“Blocks sites.”*

*“Blocking certain websites.”*

*“Unable to get on some sites due to the computer being locked.”*

Other employers allow employees to use phones only in the case of emergency:

*“You are not supposed to do anything personal.”*

*“They tell us to use it when it’s an emergency.”*

*“We are only allowed to use phones in case of family emergencies, or on break.”*

## One third of employers with digital distraction policies don’t adequately enforce them.

Of the employers that already have digital distraction policies in place, many aren’t adequately enforcing them. A full 1/3 of the respondents --- 33.1% --- who say their employer currently has digital distraction policies in place say their employer does not adequately enforce those policies.

Do you feel that your employer adequately enforces its policies limiting the personal use of technology at work?

Yes: 67%

No: 33%

## A strong majority of respondents would be willing to use a phone app that prevented access to non-work digital content.

For any employer that wishes to create a policy that addresses digital distraction a key question is, “How do I effectively *enforce* my digital distraction policies?” An ideal enforcement solution would be to provide employees with a phone app that restricted their ability to access non-work digital content at work.

However, some employees could find an app like this to be intrusive --- they might fear that an app like this could allow their employer to access their private data.

So we asked participants --- if your employer were going to require you to use a phone app that restricted your access to non-work digital content while you were at work, would you be willing to use it?

# Findings

A strong majority of respondents --- 65.3% --- said that they would be willing to use such an app, while 35% would refuse to use it.

Remarkably, 25% of respondents would *gladly* use

such an app. This suggests that employees are troubled by their digital distraction, and that they would like restrictions placed on them as a form of assistance in addressing it --- that to some degree they want to be rescued.

# Recommendations

## **Employers should immediately address workplace digital distraction.**

This survey indicates that workplace digital distraction is common, and that exacts a tremendous cost on employers --- it reduces productivity, increases safety risks, and corrodes the workplace climate. It's difficult to argue that the benefit an employee derives from, say, checking the number of likes they've received on a photo they posted to Facebook is worth the cost to their employer. Employers simply can't continue to bear these costs. It's therefore imperative that employers take immediate action to address digital distraction.

## **The fact that employees want digital distraction policies in place should embolden employers to act.**

This survey finds that 65% of full-time employees say employers should create policies to address digital distraction. The fact that those who would be effected by digital distraction policies are the ones suggesting them indicates just how serious and widespread the problem is. It also suggests employees want their employer to help them overcome their digital distraction. This should inspire, motivate, and embolden employers to take immediate action to address digital distraction.

## **Employers should engineer their organizational culture to deter workplace digital distraction.**

This survey suggests an organization's culture alone -- - wholly separate and independent from its policies -- - can deter workplace digital distraction. Some respondents attributed their organization's lack of digital distraction to a culture in which employees view themselves as busy, productive, work-focused professionals. Employers therefore should consider organizational change initiatives that foster a similar workplace culture, and that thereby deter digital distraction.

## **Employers should impose robust mechanisms to enforce their digital distraction policies.**

This survey indicates that many of the employers that already have digital distraction policies in place do not adequately enforce them. This implies two things. First, employers that already have digital distraction policies in place should ensure their enforcement policies are robust enough to be effective. Second, organizations that plan to implement digital distraction policies in the future should ensure that their plan includes bold, effective enforcement mechanisms.