“I’m driving right now; can I call you back later?“

By Annie Avis and Robert Lynam

Our fleet management clients are increasingly concerned with how to create and promote a cultural shift among their employees towards not using hands-free phones while driving. To help, we have written this blog to summarise the most recent evidence and arguments in support of such a shift.

Consider which of the following tasks you think people could do properly if they were having a conversation at the same time. If you have time, pause after each, and note down either yes or no for each one.

1. A family member poaching you an egg while chatting to you about their day
2. A surgeon performing your keyhole surgery while asking their colleague about their weekend
3. A traffic officer directing the flow of road traffic while taking a phone call
4. A pilot landing a plane while planning a stag do with their co-pilot
5. A dentist pulling out your wisdom tooth while asking their assistant what they thought about last night’s football game

It is most likely that you will have said no to the majority of these[1].

Another question for you: Why did you respond in the way you did? Was there a criterion you were using to answer each question, consciously or not? Was it because of the level of risk or complexity of the task? The scenarios above are examples of multi-tasking, or the endeavour of trying to give two tasks the same focused attention. The thing about multi-tasking is, that it's a myth. While some people might be good at switching attention between tasks, the idea of dividing your attention equally across two tasks is biologically impossible to do, so says the science[2].

Driving is a task that requires a withdrawal of attention from other things so that it can be handled effectively. If attention is diverted away from the driving task, performance and safety will suffer. It might not be the end of the world if your family member over-poaches your egg, but it might be the end of someone else's world if drivers try to speak on the phone while behind the wheel (for instance getting directions to find a customer's address). In 2020, 55 deaths and 3,119 injuries occurred where 'distraction in vehicle' was recorded as a contributory factor. Given the difficulty of assessing crash causation accurately, we believe that these figures are underestimates[3].

There are four types of distraction – manual, visual, auditory, and cognitive. When a driver is talking via a hands-free device, they are distracted in all four ways. For this blog we will zoom in on cognitive distraction. This type of distraction, typically caused by engaging in a conversation, diverts the driver's attention from the road, compromising their ability to perceive and respond to potential hazards effectively. Cognitive distraction can still have a dangerous effect even after the call has ended, with research suggesting that the effects of cognitive distraction can linger for up to half a minute before regaining full attention[4] .

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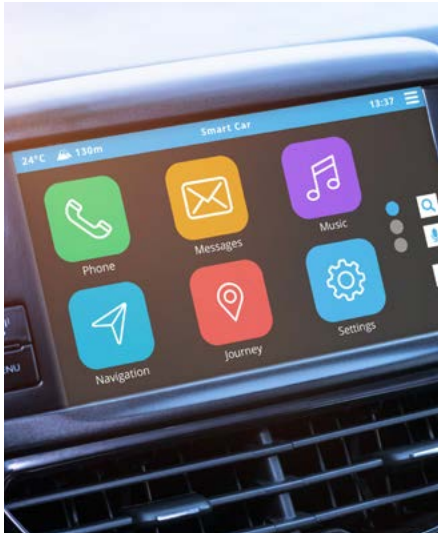
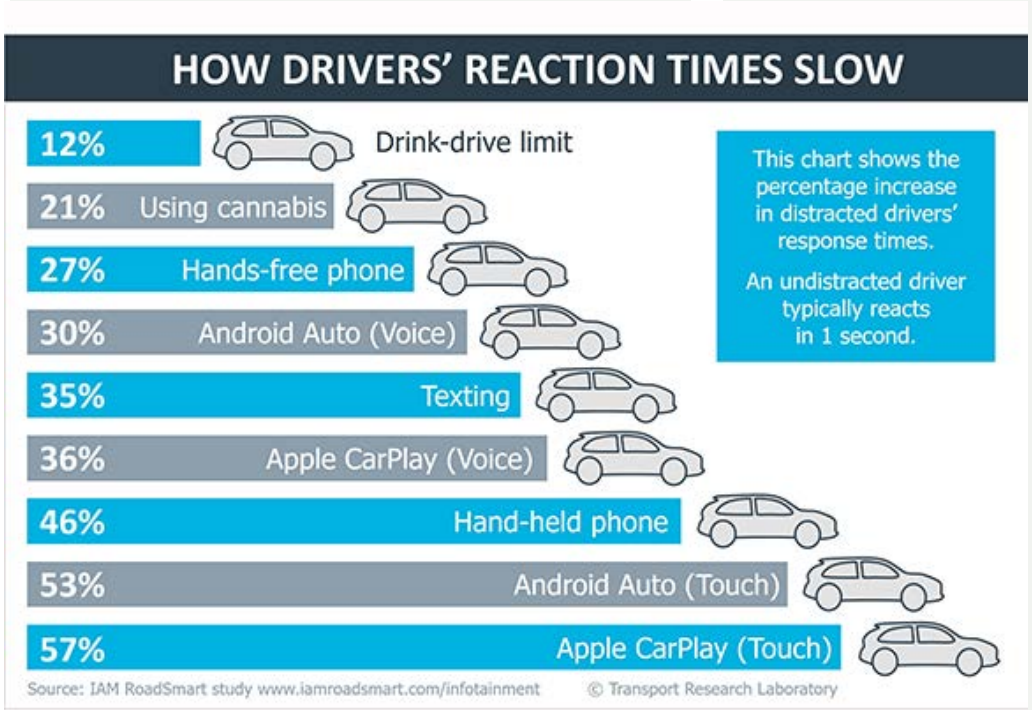
In recent years, there has been rapid evolution of technological features in vehicles such as large infotainment screen sizes, curved screens and voice recognition. On top of this we have also seen significant changes in the role of mobile phones across society. In particular, the integration of mobile phones with calendars has created a seamless shift towards using a mobile phone device when on the move. While these changes improve our ability to connect with others, they raise significant dangers for road safety.



A common counter to the evidence is that talking on the phone is no different to talking to a passenger. However, experimental studies[5] have been conducted which demonstrate that passengers tend to go quiet when their drivers are encountering a situation which requires more concentration. Given that those on the other end of the call (and the blindfolded controls) can't see such hazards developing, they fail to behave in the same way, and fail to give the driver the space to focus their attention on the hazards.

The truth is, we humans aren't very good at thinking statistically; we're prone to heuristic biases, which in English means that we tend to use our own experiences to estimate what we think the average experience is[6]. While drivers may use their collision-free anecdotal experience of using a hands-free device while driving to inform an opinion that it's safe to do so, they might not be aware that they're still four times more likely to crash[7], and their reaction time is 30% slower than if they were drink driving[8]. Another thing we're pretty rubbish at is intuitively judging how speed impacts distance and stopping distance. Drivers might well have lightning-fast reactions and be able to slam on the brakes, but they generally fail to take into account that in the time it takes to glance at their phone to answer an incoming call alert for 2.3 seconds, their car is going to travel the length of a Boeing 737-500 aeroplane (100 feet) at 30pmh[9].

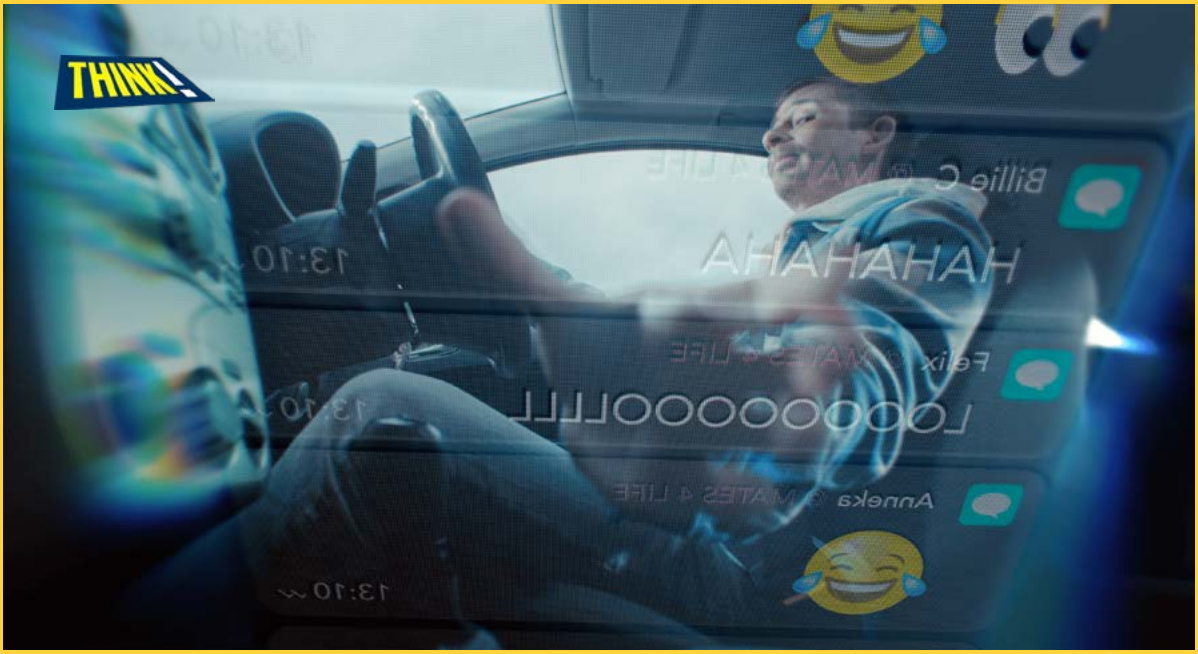


The legal position

In the UK, it is illegal for a driver of a vehicle to "hold and use a phone, sat nav, tablet, or any other device that can send or receive data", with penalties of 6 points and a £200 fine if caught[10]. However, the rules around hands-free devices are lax, with the law stating that drivers can "use devices with hands-free access, as long as you do not hold them at any time during usage". Despite a substantial body of literature demonstrating that cognitive distraction is detrimental to driving performance, it is still legal, and acceptable, to many to use a hands-free device to chat to a friend or colleague while being responsible for moving tons of metal through space at a high rate of speed (ie. driving). In 2019, the Government were advised to explore options for extending the ban to include the use of hands-free devices while driving, but the suggestion was rejected[11]. The Transport Select Committee reported back that "the evidence shows that using a hands-free device creates the same risks of a collision as using a hand-held device, and it is therefore inappropriate for the law to condone it by omission". But nothing has changed. A take-home message here is that just because something is legal doesn't mean it's safe. Sometimes it takes time for regulations to catch up with public attitudes. We have seen instances of things that posed significant risk to humans like smoking indoors and lack of seat belts, permitted by omission and then subsequently made illegal. We are hopeful that this will also happen to hands-free mobile phone use.

Changing perceptions of what's safe

Numerous public awareness campaigns have been implemented with an aim of mitigating the risks associated with mobile phone use while driving, and striving for legislative change. One familiar example is 'THINK!'[12], which has been delivering road safety campaigns since 2000 – prominent examples including 'Travel like you know them', 'Party car' and most recently, 'Is pushing it worth it?'. 'THINK!' has also launched a campaign focussing on reducing handheld phone use amongst young drivers, called 'Hands on the wheel? Hands off your phone'. Their campaigns use powerful and thought-provoking messaging, aiming to hit home to help shift behaviour towards safer driving practices. If you haven't watched them already, these are good to share with employees. Road safety charities like Brake are also heavily involved in striving for policy change around banning hands-free phone use[13], highlighting and spreading awareness about the risks associated with using hands-free while driving.



In conclusion, the evidence is clear: driving while talking on the phone is a hazardous behaviour that significantly increases the likelihood of accidents and injuries. Drivers and fleet managers alike have a personal and corporate responsibility to recognise the risks and take responsible actions to prevent distracted driving, to ensure the safety of all individuals on the road.

A cultural shift isn't going to happen overnight, but our behavioural scientists and road safety experts at TRL are equipped to help fleet managers work towards a safer driving environment and reduce the tragic consequences associated with phone use behind the wheel.

If you are responsible for a fleet, explore your fleet users' attitudes towards hands-free mobile phone use while driving. What safety messages can you send? What barriers can be targeted to break down resistance to a change of behaviour?

> "Just because something is legal doesn't mean it's safe

If you are talking on the phone with a friend or family member who is driving, think about how you would feel if the driver was involved in a fatal collision.

> "Could the conversation have waited?

Taking action at work

Using decades of experience in the field of safety and a deep understanding of behavioural science, TRL can tailor a bespoke action plan for your workplace including:

- Analysis of data from telematics systems
- Drafting of mobile phone policies and creation of mobile phone guidance packs to support training activities
- Design of training and behavioural change interventions targeting fatigue, distraction, speeding behaviours
- Reviews of all work-related driving policies and procedures, including on-boarding processes
- Reviews of current driver training process and ongoing support, incorporating the latest best practice in hazard perception training
- Delivery of a Risk Profiling tool to understand risk across different types of drivers and driving tasks across different operations, or different countries, to guide the ongoing development of training.

Please get in touch to talk to us about how we can help support you to manage road safety in your workplace.

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Robert is also a member of the Behavioural Sciences Team and holds a master's degree in social research. His interests lie in understanding attitudes and behaviours surrounding active travel and new mobility. He has been involved in work-related road safety projects and is currently helping to monitor and evaluate behaviour change interventions.

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