

Can You Hear Me Now? Cell Phones in the Workplace

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At the gas station, while paying for a tank of liquid gold, the youngish clerk's cell phone rang. Naturally, he stopped in mid-transaction to take his personal call. Turning his back to me (and the open cash drawer) he asked his caller, "Can you hear me now?" Were I of a criminal persuasion and about a foot taller, I could have reached over the counter and helped myself to a handful of bills. Instead, I started laughing as he continued with his call until he remembered the cash drawer was open and he owed me \$3.16.

Cell phones have proliferated faster than farm cats in summer. It seems like everyone has one and some feel compelled to talk on it non-stop. If what I see at retail stores is any indication, most businesses must deal with this new technology. Unfortunately, even the giants of the retail industry seem hard-pressed to check this annoying employee behavior that not only alienates customers but can be, at its worst, dangerous.

Most people are not that good at "multi-tasking," especially when engrossed in a personal phone call. People in office positions really cannot do what you pay them to do if they are distracted. Those in your shop may pose a danger to themselves and others if they aren't concentrating on the job at hand. And little doubt remains that talking on the phone interferes with concentration. If you haven't noticed this with people driving and talking on the phone, then you just aren't getting out enough.

Employees who deal with your customers, like the gas station clerk, should never, ever be allowed to take personal cell phone calls when assisting someone. It's rude and insulting. Why does it appear to be tolerated when rudeness takes the form of talking on one's personal cell phone? My common sense tells me it's no different than any other form of rudeness for which most employees would be dismissed.

Fortunately, most of us are not "giants of the retail industry" so we have the luxury of using our common sense to deal with the problems created by new technology.

Let's begin with the assumption that the majority of those cell phone calls are personal, non-emergency calls. If you have a handbook, you have probably addressed personal phone calls in some fashion. Perhaps you have stated that employees are to make and receive personal calls only on breaks or lunch. Is there a difference between personal phone calls made or received on company phones as opposed to employees' cell phones? Common sense tells me there is not. Use your disciplinary process to address the problem.

You are not required to have a handbook or written policies to deal with unacceptable behavior.

You are in charge of your business and you make the rules. Use your common sense and tell the offending employee(s) to stop it. (Can you hear me now? The phrase is, "STOP IT!") You have every right to take disciplinary action when warranted.

Company issued cell phones pose other issues. You can assume those phones will be used, to some extent, for personal calls. It's up to you to draw the line between acceptable use and abuse. Many cellular service providers send detailed bills or other tools you can use to determine if an employee is abusing a company phone. Take time to examine those phone bills or assign the task to someone who is really good with numbers! Common sense will tell you when an employee's phone use is not proportionate to his/her position or production. Start by having a frank discussion and explain what you expect. In some cases, you may be due reimbursement. Handle it the same way you would if an employee made unauthorized long distance, personal calls on company land lines.

When you crack down on employee cell phone use, you will probably hear, "I need to keep my phone on for emergencies." Common sense tells you that an average employee doesn't have more than one emergency per day. Of course, that depends upon the definition of "emergency," which differs from one person to another nowadays. Real emergencies are about car wrecks, hospitals, fires, missing children – they are not about bringing home a gallon of milk. Ensure employees that emergency calls can be made to the company number and will be handled appropriately. Isn't that how it was done in the days before cell phones?

Several weeks ago, I was asked if I had any pre-written policies on employee cell phone use. At the time, I thought I should probably write one. Then, common sense kicked in. The issue of employee personal phone calls is already discussed in most handbooks. It's the same thing you have all had to deal with in the past. A phone is a phone, even the ones that have little cameras in them. Can you hear me now?

Have questions, comments or feedback? Call me at the HR Help Line (800-683-3440) to talk about this or any other HR topic on your mind. You can also e-mail me at lesley@taxfavoredbenefits.com.