



Cell Phone Use in the Workplace

I love electronics. We are always just a “send button” away from contacting a relative on a different continent either through email, Skype, or instant messaging. We can have instant access to our children and grandchildren through texting a birthday message or receiving a picture of the party.

Professionally speaking, the efficiency level is huge when I need to fax a contract or a W-9—or text a quick message before a heavy meeting with a facilitator so we can be on the same page.

What about the time when we need to respond to a quick text from a client needing immediate advice rather than a 20-minute conversation on the phone or we need a phone number or address because our navigator isn’t working?

There are so many benefits in our digital/electronic age. But for the workplace, what has been intended to help us to be a more technically advanced culture has also opened the door to great frustrations for management when cell phone usage is not balanced with good sense, integrity, and discipline.

Before I get into specific suggestions for establishing the need for a policy or guidelines, let me point out a couple of suggestions that can help us avoid a cascade of problems.

1. *If you have a policy, enforce it and be consistent with all employees:* Believe me, once you implement boundaries for texting and interoffice cell phone use and do not apply it across the board to everyone, you will not only create your own chaos, but will open the door to petty discussions and adolescent behavior. When there isn’t consistency regarding a cell phone policy, staff will start feeling like certain employees are favored and there is no equity in the ranks. And, believe me, they will eagle eye each other in the office to make sure everyone is complying. It either applies to all, or not at all!



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Once I was speaking at a convention for Cosmetology Instructors. When I asked what the number one problem was for them in their classes, their forceful reply was cell phones! When I asked if they had a policy to manage cell phone and texting use, they said yes. Hmm. When I challenged them to enforce their policy, they looked at me like a calf at a new gate. Consistency with everyone is important. Enforcing the policy is essential. My favorite one liner about workplace expectations is, "a boundary without a consequence is only a suggestion."

2. Overuse of texting and cell phones that are not directly related to work, eventually causes a work performance problem: Listen to the words of a friend of mine:

"I helped one of our clients with a cell phone issue where "call center" staff members who were supposed to be answering land line phone calls were using their cell phones for everything from social media to texting, etc. When a supervisor would walk through, cell phones were slammed into desk drawers, thrown into purses, or slipped into pockets.

The reason it became an issue was because of the number of rings it would take for a customer's call to be answered due to the fact that everyone was busy on their cell phones for personal use. The outcome led to a plethora of policies and procedures for an issue that had become out of control. Had everyone acted like adults and 'used responsibly' their cell phones, this would have never ended up as such an extreme situation."

The biggest concern or complaint supervisors and management have is that overuse impacts the performance level of the individual and violates the company's standards for customer service and professionalism.

Where is the Balance for Usage at Work?

On one hand, employers do not pay employees to converse with friends and family on the time clock. On the other hand, a cell phone policy should not be so restrictive as to prohibit all uses of a personal cell phone. What about emergencies, children's cries at school, pharmacists or doctor's appointments, etc.? So where is the happy medium? Below I've listed a variety of ideas from different organizations that could be helpful if you need to establish a reasonable policy:



Communicate Your Expectations

Employers should take the time to communicate their expectations. Workplace expectations should be communicated clearly, fairly, and specifically. The policy or expectations can be incorporated into an employee handbook or may be communicated in other ways such as:

- A written statement as a part of the initial orientation to new employees
- An email "blast" to all employees
- Written notices distributed to all employees
- Postings in lunch rooms and break rooms
- Providing an acknowledgement of receipt each employee can sign

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Create an Effective Cell Phone Policy

The ideas listed below should be congruent with the type of culture or organization that will benefit from such policies. For example, businesses that rarely have clients, customers, or patients at the worksite may choose to have more lenient policies than those who have a constant flow of visitors.

The smaller the organization the more specialized the policy can be. Some larger organizations, however, have put a ban on cell phone use and have had some negative responses, affecting morale, especially among the millennial and younger generations. A survey was done in 2011 that suggested that employees 18-29 years of age received 88 messages a day by text compared to 17 phone calls.



Those of us from the older generation category should understand that the millennial culture's way and entire mode of communication has been through social media and text. They have been completely dependent on it for their communication.

They also have come to rely on texting and social media for encouragement when necessary and access to loved ones that might need their attention and response. So creating a policy should be done carefully with every generation that is employed in mind.

For those needing to craft a balanced policy for cell phone/texting, I've listed 7 ideas used by a variety of companies to manage and regulate cell phone use:

7 Tips for a Cell Phone Policy

1. Employees should make personal cell phone calls and text during break or lunch times to the maximum extent possible. Even as I write this at Starbucks, I just asked a long time manager what the policy is and he stated that staff is only to use their phone at break time "in the back" or lunchtime unless it is a legitimate emergency. And come to think of it, I don't know if I have ever spotted a cell phone within reach of a Starbucks employee while working. By the way, in my opinion, as long as a cell phone is in visible reach, we are going to pick it up and check it whether it's on vibrate or not. So, as they say, out of sight out of mind.
2. Frequent or lengthy phone calls or texting strings are not acceptable as they may adversely affect the employee's productivity and disturb others. I've heard complaints from management that an employee "texts on and off several times a day" or that they've seen employees "bring their phone in the bathroom and take forever to come out." I think it's actually an integrity issue to siphon time off the clock that we are contracted paid for. So fulfill your responsibilities in the hours allotted.
3. Employees should use common sense when making or receiving personal phone calls at work. For example, employees should speak quietly and reserve personal and intimate details for non-work hours. Awareness is key here. It's not only unprofessional to open the door to your personal life for others who are trying to focus on their tasks, but it also opens the door for gossip opportunities as well. Use good judgment.

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4. Personal cell phone use, even when permitted, must never include obscene language, or prejudicial remarks. I do training on managing gossip in the workplace. One of the best ways to avoid or reduce gossip is to not allow others to know your personal business or be privy to drama in your personal life.

5. Employees should turn off ringers or change ringers to mute or vibrate during training, conferences, and staff meetings; when meeting with clients or serving customers; and if an employee shares a workspace with others. One of the biggest complaints from leadership about texting and cell phones is that it not only impacts the individual performance by reducing their productivity, but that it becomes a huge distraction to those they work with as well. In addition, management should be careful about using their cell phones in staff meeting, on call, because it can send an unintended “I don’t care” or “I’m not invested in my staff message” to others present and negatively impact your image.

6. Please inform family and friends of the new policy. Let them know that in situations where you are needed and can’t be reached by cell phone, they can feel free to contact the front desk or alert them to when you are able to return their text and/or calls throughout the day. Some apps have an “at work/unavailable” message you can write to inform family and friends of your unavailability.

7. The use of cameras on cell phones during work hours is prohibited to protect the privacy of the employer as well as the employee. I believe this is actually an enforceable regulation if violated for the protection of the entire company.

Conclusion

So, like with anything else, what could be originally designed for a good purpose, if abused and not managed correctly, can end up causing huge problems. Balance is necessary, leadership is responsible, and employees are accountable. If done right, everybody benefits!



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Bill formed TeamWorks in 2001 to help organizations achieve their goals for establishing high morale and client satisfaction. TeamWorks currently specializes in offering one-on-one surveys and evaluations for management and staff to assess the current culture’s needs and recommended trainings going forward.

In addition to conducting a variety of workshops and in-services on workplace issues, Bill mediates conflict among partnerships and staff relationships, speaks at conventions, facilitates management retreats, and offers personal consultation and counseling for staff.

Bill’s strengths are in public speaking, mediation, and understanding the complexities of relational dynamics in the workplace. He lives in Medford, Oregon, with his wife Jenny, and enjoys spending time with their five children and five granddaughters.