



## TenStep Supplemental Paper

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### **Excuse Me...!**

Cell phones have been in the news for many reasons, right and wrong, ever since their introduction. They have traversed many phases, from being a great technological advancement, a luxury, and one of the best ways of connecting people, to gradually becoming a necessity! They have captured school children who carry cell phones and discuss various issues ranging from studies (most unusually), friends and movies, to the latest ring tones to download.

Across the world, people have become personally and professionally dependent on their cell phones. Little wonder that many organizations provide their employees cell phones to facilitate easy and quick communication and enhance their overall productivity. Strangely though, they have become a workplace nuisance more than a business convenience.

### **Workplace nuisance**

Most organizations today prefer closely spaced and wall-free workstations that encourage interpersonal communication. Such arrangements though, hinder the peace of the environment, what with the constant ringing of the ubiquitous cell phone. Users seldom talk softly! A study shows that ninety-nine percent of cell phone conversations at workplaces are personal and loudly showy.

A typical workplace episode: Sheena is preparing for an official presentation but is disturbed by the insistent ringing of her neighbor's cell phone and the ensuing chat. The conversation does not end for ten minutes. *"Hi Aruna, how are you? I heard about your sister. Has the wedding been fixed for this month? Where will it take place? Did you finish shopping..."* This conversation could sound normal, but at workplace it is indubitably a nuisance.

In a survey conducted by TMP Worldwide, a recruitment company, cell phone ringing has been voted as the top workplace irritants, followed by faulty photocopiers, printers and fax machines.

### **Cell phone etiquette**

Interruptions due to ringing cell phones in business meetings, seminars or conferences are common. A desirable option though would be to turn off the cell phone or setting it in the discreet mode to avoid disturbance to others around. Cell phones are therefore being banned in many public places.

Not many organizations though, have rules or policies preventing use of personal cell phones at work. This is probably one of the reasons why employees misuse cell phones. It is advisable therefore, that:

- Top management make employees aware about the impact of cell phones on workplace productivity



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- Employees are instructed to talk softly when using phones especially cell phones
- Employees are instructed to turn off their cell phones before attending meetings
- Cell phone-free zones are introduced.

A verbal warning for the first offence followed by a written reprimand and suitable suspension for the subsequent ones, could be a disciplinary measure for misuse of cell phones at workplace.

### **Employer's liability**

Apart from performance related problems, employers also have to worry about health issues. Reports of radioactive rays emitted from cell phones being hazardous to health are not unfounded. Employee medical claims over the same have been on a constant increase.

Using cell phones while driving is a prime reason for the increasing road accidents. Under the theory of respondent behavior, an employer may not only be held responsible but also sued for such accidents, if the incident happens during his work hours.

A law firm in Virginia was sued for thirty million dollars by the father of a 15 year-old girl. The allegation – an employee had knocked down the girl while driving and transacting business over the cell phone immediately after a client meeting.

### **Employer concerns...**

Regulating cell phone use at workplaces by framing appropriate policies is advisable for providing an employee friendly environment. Employees need to understand the pros and cons of being provided cell phones for business. Certain precautions to ensure that employee performance and productivity remain unaffected:

- *Limiting the use:* Employers should strictly instruct employees not to attend calls while driving. In case of inevitability, hands-free equipment can be provided. There is however, proposed legislation against this too
- *Laws and Training:* Short-training sessions can be conducted. Emphasis should be on national and organizational laws and policies regarding cell phones and statistics on cell phone related accidents.

### **Clicking the problem!**

The emergence of camera cell phones has proved to be a nightmare for employers. Employees could misuse camera cell phones for:

- *Smuggling confidential information:* Capturing confidential information on camera cell phone and passing it to a third party takes little time. Business strategy, product information, financial data, etc., are some vulnerable areas.
- *Sexual harassment:* Embarrassing and obscene photos of employees could be circulated amongst colleagues. Such instances could cause intense emotional distress



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for the photographed employee. Besides, capturing and circulating such images also leads to loss of time and productivity.

- Employee changing rooms, restrooms, R&D areas, security plans and locker rooms, are some of the areas where camera cell phones could be misused.

### **Words of wisdom**

Introducing appropriate policies to restrict the use of cell phones at workplace is imperative. Alternatively, employees maybe asked not to bring in their cell phones or leave them outside the workplace, in a secure place provided by the company. However, it is left to the employer's discretion to decide the policies depending on the need to protect confidential information, monitor employee performance and safeguard employee morale.