Weighing the Risks and Benefits of Using a Cell Phone While Driving

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Do the benefits of using a cell phone while driving outweigh the potentially fatal costs of traffic accidents? With in-vehicle cell phone use on the rise, many people take their work on the road. Indeed, because the business community constantly searches for ways to increase productivity, the pressure is high to make "good use" of the "down time" while driving. Unfortunately, the killing of two birds with one stone/strategy might also end up deadly for anyone who crosses the path of a driver who is continuing to do "business as usual" over the phone. Strayer and Johnston (2001, p. 466) suggest that using a cell phone disrupts a driver's performance by diverting attention to an engaging cognitive context other than the one immediately associated with driving. Moreover, epidemiological studies have found that the accident rates for cell phone drivers are 4 times higher than for drivers not using their cell phone (Redelmeier & Tibshirani, 1997).

Cost-benefit analyses attempt to strike a balance between the risks of increased accidents and the benefits of increased productivity while using a cell phone while driving. Whereas the risks are now well established, the benefits have often not been fully scrutinized. Do people make quality business decisions when they drive and talk on the cell phone? For this study, the authors administered an operation span task (Turner & Engle, 1989) to 30 undergraduates from the University of Utah when they were driving in a high-fidelity driving simulator. The preliminary findings of this study show that performance on the operation span task suffers when the participants are driving. These data imply that the benefits often attributed to using a cell phone on the road (i.e., increased productivity) are in many circumstances overestimated.

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