



Voice Commands Found to be Major Source of Distraction While Driving

A pair of recent studies conducted by University of Utah researchers found that it can take drivers up to 27 seconds to regain their full attention on driving after issuing voice commands.

In one of the studies, drivers were tested while using voice commands for smartphone personal assistants (Apple's Siri, Microsoft's Cortana and Google Now). The other study looked at using in-vehicle services, such as voice dialing, voice contact and music selection, in 10 2015 vehicles. Three were rated "moderately distracting," six as "highly distracting" and the 2015 Mazda 6's system was rated "very highly distracting."

The studies were conducted by the university for the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.

"Just because these systems are in the car doesn't mean it's a good idea to use them while you are driving," said University of Utah psychology professor David Strayer, senior author of the two new studies. "They are very distracting, very error prone and very frustrating to use. Far too many people are dying because of distraction on the roadway, and putting another source of distraction at the fingertips of drivers is not a good idea. It's better not to use them when you are driving."

The research found that older drivers were much more distracted than younger drivers, and that practice with the voice-recognition systems didn't seem to eliminate distraction.

"Most people think, 'I hang up and I'm good to go,'" Strayer said. "But that's just not the case. We see it takes a surprisingly long time to come back to full attention. Even sending a short text message can cause almost another 30 seconds of impaired attention."

In 2013, the U.S. Department of Transportation found that 3,154 people died and another 424,000 were injured in motor vehicle accidents involving driver distraction.

"If you are going to use these systems, use them to support the primary task of driving — like for navigation or to change the radio or temperature — and keep the interaction short," Strayer said.

Source: University of Utah

Federal Government Warns Nation's Railroads About New Safety Deadline

The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) has issued a warning stating that fines and other actions will be issued if railroads fail to meet safety requirements called for by recent congressional legislation.

That legislation, which came about after the May 2015 Amtrak derailment in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania — which killed eight people and injured more than 200 others — deals with the installation of a safety system known as Positive Train Control (PTC). The systems were originally supposed to be in place by the end of 2015. Railroad companies, however, said that schedule was unrealistic and that they would have to shut down if the December 31 deadline was not extended. Congress extended the deadline by three years, giving railroads until 2020 to put the systems in place.

In a letter sent out on November 19, 2015, FRA Administrator Sarah Feinberg called for railroads to submit revised PTC implementation plans by January 27, 2016. If a railroad fails to file its plan, the FRA could assess fines of at least \$5,000 per day.

Feinberg went on to say that the Philadelphia accident is a "stark reminder of both what can happen without PTC, and the sense of urgency required to prevent a similar accident in the future."

Feinberg's comments are seen as an effort to head off efforts by some railways to push back PTC implementation until 2020.

PTC employs GPS, radios and computers to determine a train's position and automatically slows or stops trains that are speeding or entering potentially dangerous situations. The Amtrak train in the Philadelphia derailment was traveling at 102 miles per hour in a 50 MPH zone of curved track.

PTC was originally mandated by Congress in 2008 in the wake of a collision between a Metrolink commuter train and a Union Pacific freight train in Chatsworth, California that killed 25 people. That mandate, however, was delayed because railroads said that the PTC system was too complex and expensive to install in the time allowed.

Source: Chicago Tribune