

# Managing THE Skies

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TURN  OFF  
TUNE IN

COURTESY OF ATO

# TURN OFF

# TUNE IN

Together the FAA and NATCA Take Aim at Distractions

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**DISTRACTIONS FROM ELECTRONIC DEVICES CAUSE A 10-POINT DROP IN IQ...**

**... EQUAL TO LOSING A NIGHT OF SLEEP,**

**... MORE THAN TWICE THE EFFECT OF DRUGS OR ALCOHOL.**

SOURCE: WORKPLACEPSYCHOLOGY.NET

**DISTRACTIONS FROM CELL PHONES CONSTRICT PERIPHERAL AWARENESS OF THE VISUAL FIELD... THEY CAUSE "TUNNEL VISION."**

SOURCE: JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN OPTOMETRIC ASSOCIATION

**USING CELL PHONES REDUCES OUR ABILITY TO SEE INFORMATION IN OUR ENVIRONMENT BY 50%.**

SOURCE: TRAFFIC SAFETY COALITION

**D**istractions in the transportation operational environment can be deadly. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) has linked use of electronic devices to a boating accident that killed two tourists in Philadelphia and a medical helicopter crash that killed four in Missouri after the pilot skipped pre-flight safety checks due to distractions, the board found. Texting while driving is now the leading cause of death for teenage drivers, killing more than 3,000 every year.

In fact, the NTSB included "eliminating distraction in transportation" on its "2013 Most Wanted List." But even before that, the FAA and NATCA began a collaborative effort in a proactive safety campaign to stamp out distractions in the control room.

The campaign is called "Turn Off, Tune In," and it's designed to help all of us understand the impact of distractions in our workplace. Our goal is to get out in front of this issue before it can create a problem.

With "Turn Off, Tune In," we are turning to managers and controllers to continue to keep distractions out of control rooms across the country.

The campaign aims to raise awareness of distractions among FAA employees. We hope that by sharing the impacts

the use of electronic devices can have on your job performance, we can help all those entering the operational environment to recognize the risks of such distractions and refuse to let them negatively impact our professionalism.

There are rules in place to prevent distractions like the use of electronic devices in the operation. But rules can only go so far. Ultimately, it is up to each and every one of us to make a decision not to text, check a sports score or look at Facebook while in the operating environment. And we can all encourage our peers to do the same.

The shift in attitude we're working toward is similar to the shift in attitude toward drunk driving that has taken place during the past 20 or 30 years. Drunk driving has been illegal for years (the first law was adopted in 1910). Three decades ago many people shrugged it off as something regular people did occasionally. If you didn't get caught, it wasn't a problem.

Now most of us would never consider driving while intoxicated. Society's view has shifted and we view it as an unacceptable risk. It is simply no longer an acceptable part of our culture.

That's the attitude we're hoping to create toward electronic devices. We know the use of electronic devices is a

**EVEN SMALL AMOUNTS OF TIME SPENT SWITCHING FOCUS LEADS TO DELAYED REACTION TIME.**

SOURCE: NATIONAL SAFETY COUNCIL

**IN CONTRAST TO ALMOST EVERYTHING ELSE IN YOUR LIFE, THE MORE YOU MULTITASK, THE WORSE YOU ARE AT IT.**

**PRACTICE, IN THIS CASE, WORKS AGAINST YOU.**

SOURCE: NASA

problem throughout our society, and we can all work to change that, just as we are making sure electronic devices are never an issue for us as professionals.

The NTSB identified pilot texting as a contributing factor to a 2011 medical helicopter crash in Mosby, Mo., which killed a patient, a flight nurse, a paramedic and the pilot. *USA Today* reported that, "Although the pilot was not texting at the time of the crash, it's possible the messaging took his mind off his duties and caused him to skip safety steps he might have otherwise performed," said experts on human performance and cognitive distraction. "People can't concentrate on two things at once; they can only shift their attention rapidly back and forth, the experts said. But as they do that, the sharpness of their focus begins to erode."

The incident should serve as a stark lesson for all of us, and it's especially illustrative because it does not adhere to the way most of us imagine distractions can cause accidents. The pilot did not simply lose control of his aircraft and crash while reading a text. The texting was likely taking place in the background of his duties as a pilot – during lulls in the action.

Studies on distractions reinforce these facts. The human brain is not capable of multitasking, according to the National Safety Council. It takes on tasks sequentially, switching attention between one and then the other. Several studies have shown IQ actually drops when we are distracted.

To spread awareness of distractions, we're using "Turn Off, Tune In" in a number of different ways. Promotional materials will be sent to FAA facilities to remind us to eliminate distractions.

We're also conducting a number of outreach efforts. We've partnered to bring the campaign to students at the FAA Academy. We hope to instill in them the importance of avoiding distractions and being professional at the very beginning of their careers. It's a key point in their development – the first time they'll be around other air traffic controllers, discussing issues and challenges.

If we can encourage them to take on a negative view of distractions during their initial training, that view should stick with them for the rest of their careers. To make sure we reach every incoming controller, we're developing a course for the Mike Moroney Aeronautical Center that will cover distractions and professionalism. It will be similar to the ethics course doctors take early in medical school.

We're reaching out to current controllers and managers as well. We travel as often as possible to nearby facilities to discuss the impact of distractions, and NATCA is briefing at all the NATCA regional conferences on an ongoing basis to continue to discuss with controllers how best to manage and avoid distractions.

We've already reached a significant amount of the workforce. When we launched the campaign at this year's NATCA Communicating for Safety

**WHEN ATTENTION IS DIVERTED TO ANOTHER TASK, PEOPLE FAIL TO SEE AN UNEXPECTED OBJECT, KNOWN AS "INATTENTION BLINDNESS."**

SOURCE: MIT

**BEING DISTRACTED BY A TEXT TAKES A DRIVER'S EYES FROM THE ROAD FOR AN AVERAGE OF 4.6 SECONDS...**

**THE EQUIVALENT, AT 55 MPH, OF DRIVING THE LENGTH OF AN AN ENTIRE FOOTBALL FIELD BLIND.**

SOURCE: VIRGINIA TECH TRANSPORTATION INSTITUTE

**HUMAN BRAINS DO NOT PERFORM TWO TASKS AT THE SAME TIME.**

**THE BRAIN HANDLES TASKS SEQUENTIALLY.**

**SWITCHING ATTENTION BETWEEN ONE, THEN ANOTHER.**

SOURCE: NATIONAL SAFETY COUNCIL



conference, eliminating distractions was a recurring theme and was highly praised and supported. We spoke to attendees in our “Turn Off, Tune In” exhibit about distractions and gave out “Turn Off, Tune In” buttons (See buttons, above) as they made the commitment to eliminate distractions. Our employees are aware of distractions. We all need to work together to increase awareness and education.

It’s not enough to remind someone just once that distractions are a threat to safety. It’s something we need to be aware of every day. So in your crew briefings and talks with your employees, make sure to reinforce that electronic devices put safety at risk.

Share the statistics on distractions. Share examples of serious situations caused by distractions. Help your team members learn that it’s their responsibility to avoid distractions. Only they can make the choice to be the professionals the flying public expects us to be.

Our leadership is fully committed to this campaign. At the Communicating for Safety conference, NATCA President Paul Rinaldi made it clear it’s up to all of us to eliminate distractions.

“We have enough distractions that we can’t control; this one we can,” he said. “It is time to remove that distraction – no text, no call, no update is worth your career or the safety of the flying public. One by one we can change this distraction – one person at a time, one facility at a time, one region at a time. In a profession where you need to be 100 percent, 100 percent of the time, there is little room for distractions.”

Air Traffic Organization (ATO) Chief Operating Officer David Grizzle echoed that sentiment in a recent message to employees. “Maintaining operational focus is about adhering to a professionalism that’s based on principle,” he said. “This kind of professionalism is 24/7. We’re guardians of the airspace system, and nothing should distract us from fulfilling that role.”

And David Conley, President of FAAMA, is very supportive of the campaign. “This is a great effort that will capture the attention of everyone in the operation and draw them into the effort to reduce and eliminate distractions,” said Conley. ““Turn Off, Tune In’ will stick with people and remind them to develop good habits and behaviors when it comes to distractions in the workplace.”

The flying public needs you to join our leaders in that attitude toward distractions. The flying public expects us to “Turn Off and Tune In” and encourage others to do the same. ○

## ✕ About the Authors



**Robert Vaughan** has been a Front Line Manager at Philadelphia since 2009. He joined the FAA in 1989, first as an Air Traffic Assistant at Atlantic City ATCT and then becoming a controller in 1990. While at Atlantic City, Vaughan was also a Quality Assurance

and Training Specialist and a Plans and Programs Specialist. He transferred to Philadelphia International Airport TRACON/Tower as a Certified Performance Controller-In Training (CPC-IT) in 2004.

Prior to joining the FAA, Vaughan served in the U.S. Coast Guard, including as a Navigator on a C-130 in Kodiak, Alaska, before spending several years on drug interdiction operations in the Bahamas.



**Garth Koleszar** is a member of the NATCA/FAA professional standards committee and is serving as NATCA’s national representative for professional standards and workplace distractions. Koleszar has been nationally recognized for his contributions

as an on-the-job training instructor, and he is an arbitration advocate who has served as a national legislative advocate for air traffic controllers.

For the past 15 years, he has served in a leadership position for NATCA and has held nearly every locally elected post for the organization. Koleszar is a 20-year veteran controller at Los Angeles Air Route Traffic Control Center.

## ABOUT THE IMAGES

As part of their joint *Turn Off Tune In* campaign, the FAA and NATCA have created artwork that is used on websites, posters, presentations and other materials to promote the importance of eliminating distractions in the operational environment. This “retro” styling reinforces the *Turn Off Tune In* theme and has been very popular with managers and controllers.