

Pokémon NO! Protecting Your Workers from Digital Zombies

Fighting the digital zombie apocalypse is possible with collaboration between employers, workers and safety managers.

Have you seen the digital zombies - in the park, in front of churches and stores, in the street? These aren't your normal, flesh-eating zombies. Rather, it's their thirst for rare imaginary creatures called Pokémon that causes them to stumble around town.

Pokémon Go, which launched on July 6 in the United States, potentially is the start of a new era in the mobile gaming revolution. In the game, players are able to use their phone's GPS to catch imaginary creatures in real-life locations such as parks, on streets or in their households.

The franchise was first popularized in the late 90s, and after many iterations of the game, has circled back to include users both young and old. According to recent data, more than 7.5 million users downloaded Pokémon Go in its first six days. More than 60 percent of those people are daily users.

On multiple visits to my local park shortly after the game was released, I took mental note of how many people were playing the game and identified players by the way they used their phones – eyes fixated on their screens with slight body movement as the person jerked around to see if any Pokémon appear.

Normally, the park is empty, except for the occasional dog walker, biker or runner. However, there were high school students, 30-something couples and families who aren't regular visitors walking around – not paying attention to the goldfinch or butterflies or greenery or relishing the time spent with their family during the nice summer weather – but rather staring at their phones. They were completely oblivious to their surroundings (hence the term “digital zombies”).

One of the first things that came to my mind as I was observing this was the safety hazards associated with playing augmented reality games. Because Pokémon Go is becoming so widely adopted, the app not only should cause safety concerns among parents, law enforcement officials and businesses, it also should cause concern within companies and subsequently, safety managers.

From an employee standpoint, further reinforcement of company guidelines regarding personal cell phone usage and not only are critical to keeping productivity up, but safety hazards are reduced when an employee is being attentive and vigilant on the job. This is backed up by a 2009 National Safety Council survey of 469 members who had implemented total cell phone bans; only 1 percent reported a decrease in productivity.

Interactive games could make the job site more dangerous if employees are using GPS to explore unfamiliar areas and are not paying attention to their surroundings. There need to be strict recommendations about where or if personal phone use on the job site even is permitted.

However, two of the most concerning issues that arise with Pokémon Go don't involve employee usage but rather the general public and distracted driving as well as trespassing on job sites.

The National Safety Council estimates 23 percent of passenger vehicle crashes – 1.3 million crashes per year – can be attributed to cell phone talking and texting while driving. This number only is likely to increase with the rise in popularity of augmented reality games. The NSC has made multiple recommendations to make work zones safer. In addition, educating workers on the concept of teamwork in safety and providing adequate high-visibility PPE is key as job sites becoming increasingly dangerous due to outside factors.

While motorists already are not paying attention to their surroundings because of cell phone usage, injuries associated with the rise in popularity of these games are becoming the norm whether in the car or on foot, especially if they choose to trespass in places such as construction sites. The NSC says distracted walking has contributed to more than 11,000 injuries in the last decade.

The issue in particular with Pokémon Go is with the locations players can catch and battle these imaginary monsters. Pokémon can appear in front yards, in buildings or on the street. Police departments are warning the general public about the need to pay attention to where they are walking as well as the dangers of trespassing on private property, work zones and prohibited areas as players use the game's GPS.

Additional warning signage, lighting and fencing might be useful as users are tempted to access work zones. Unfortunately, people can read but getting them to actually listen is the bigger problem.

In the end, it's clear that technology rapidly is evolving and crossing over into real-world situations with the introduction of augmented reality games such as Pokémon Go. Employers, safety managers and workers alike will have to strategize new ways to prevent injuries from occurring with the increase in cell phone use. In addition, authorities need to enforce fines and sentences regarding distracted driving during motor vehicle operation as well as trespassing laws.

It also comes down to a need for the general public to recognize not only the risks associated with cell phone usage and augmented reality apps and also what value they are getting from constantly staring down at their phones. As for these digital zombies, they need to get some brains. **EHS**

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