



Personal Phone Use at Work – A Blessing or a Curse?

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QUESTION: Smart phones are everywhere, and I must admit they are helpful in the operation of my company. The problem I am facing is the wasted time employees spend on their phones on non-job-related activities. I know that members of my staff spend work time on social media, playing games, and texting because I've caught them doing it. I have even caught my colleague playing a game on his phone between appointments. What can I do to stop this from happening?

ANSWER: Technology is a blessing, but it can also be a curse. What we gain in efficiency we can lose in control. This is an area that may certainly cause problems with your staff. In order to assert any type of control, you will need a policy on the use of personal phones and mobile devices in the workplace. Before you write this policy, you need to ask yourself this question: How much do we **need** to control the use of personal phones verses how much do we **want** to control the use of personal phones? This will help you decide how this policy should be written and, more importantly, how it is administered.

Here are some policy options and the pros and cons that can result.

Option 1: Do nothing.

- Pro: You don't have to do anything.
- Con: The problem continues and possibly escalates.

Option 2: Write a simple policy that explains the concern and discourages employees from using their personal phone for non-work-related activities – without any real consequences for failure to comply.

- Pro: You have formally expressed your concerns.
- Cons: You don't have any mandates that require formal action to be taken, nor any consequences for those who fail to comply.

Option 3: Write a policy that discourages the personal use of personal phones during working hours and indicate the consequences for failure to comply.

- Pros: It lays out your expectation clearly and indicates the consequences. It allows you to address employees who are misusing their work time without punishing everyone else in the process.
- Cons: It will be difficult to administer, and you will find yourself violating your own policy, rendering it useless.

Option 4: Write a policy that forbids the use of personal phones during work hours for any reason. Instruct all communication to be done through the office phones and email system.

- Pros: Easy to administer. Employees will have to sneak around if they want to use their phone because you can require that they keep it in their car or in their locker during work hours.
- Cons: You will likely have a revolt. Personal phones have become an extension of our bodies and your employees will want to have access to theirs, especially for emergency purposes. This 'one size fits all' policy will be viewed as a punishment by those staff who have not been misusing their work time on their personal phones.

When writing the policy, you must make sure it can be administered. Think first about how you are going to actually find out if the employee is violating the policy. This will be especially difficult since you use your personal phone for the company. How will you know when an employee is using it for the benefit of the business and when are they not? You are not going to be able to check the phones of your employees without some concerns over privacy rights.

This is a problem that will be a challenge to resolve. If you choose to write a policy, you will need to consider if are you willing to actually terminate an employee for violating the policy. My bet is that the answer is no. And if not, you should not write a policy that indicates termination as a consequence for violations.

I recommend that you start small and see how your staff reacts. Make it a culture change for the benefit of the customers rather than a mandate from above.