



Paying Attention Leads to Better Safety, Productivity

By ROBERT F. PATER

"You need to pay attention." That's a phrase many safety professionals have used in discussions about accident prevention. It seems an easy edict to follow, but people can be easily distracted by noise, surrounding activities and personal issues. And, when attention wanes, safety and productivity can decline.

What most people don't realize is that they can control their attention—and consequently become safer, more-productive employees. A person's attention span is just another part of the body; it can consciously be changed and controlled with practice and training.

Attention is a crucial and often hidden element in performance, productivity and safety. When well-controlled, it is an instrument for effectiveness in every realm of life. The first step in this process is to understand the different attentional patterns that exist. Highly successful people control these patterns, flexibly shifting between styles.

•**Narrow external.** You can concentrate on a task without being distracted by your own thoughts or outside noises. You can easily tune in to and listen for a single instrument playing in an orchestra. However, you have difficulty seeing the many risk factors changing around you or detecting tension in your own body.

•**Wide external.** You can see many things going on around you (e.g., know what everyone is doing in a room filled with people). As a result, however, you may become externally overloaded. For example, you may become distracted by sights and sounds when talking to others or become confused when trying to watch activities where many things are happening simultaneously.

•**Wide internal.** You feel forces transferring in the body, which enables significant improvements in strength and coordination. You are able to learn from the general to the specific—recognizing principles that can apply to a wide range of jobs. However, you may become distracted by your own thoughts and ideas when talking to others (e.g., not listening well) or internally overloaded—so many things on your mind that you become confused and forgetful.

Preventing injuries and enhancing productivity demand that employees develop a versatile attention span.

•**Narrow internal.** You concentrate effectively and can keep thoughts from interfering with what you are watching or listening to; you can also keep sights and sounds from distracting you. On the downside, you may become mentally fixated (like having the same song run through your head) and have difficulty clearing your mind of a single thought; in addition, you may not see important changes transpiring right in front of you.

A good example of controlling and changing attention pattern is a quarterback who is able to plan his strategy (narrow internal); call a play in such a way as to motivate teammates (wide external); take a snap and search for multiple receivers and defensive backs (wide external); hone in on one receiver while "ignoring" a rushing lineman (narrow external); and, after being hit, scan his body for potential injury (wide internal).

Various techniques and exercises can be used to develop greater attentional "versatility." Workers who feel at the mercy of high-paced processes can learn and develop the ability to better control their attention, which leads to greater safety and productivity. Some examples:

•*Assess which pattern you fall into.* For example, if you are a wide external, you may be overwhelmed when you walk into an office with significant noise and activity. As a result, you become overloaded externally and shut down, which leads to bad decisions or places you at greater risk of being injured. In this case, you need to shift attentional focus internally to regain control. To achieve this, you can focus on your peripheral vision—not what is right

in front of you. You could also begin to focus on your body: How do your feet feel at that very moment? How about your neck and shoulders? By doing this, you shift focus from all the overwhelming activity (broad external) and concentrate on your body or something specific (narrow internal).

•*Assess what everyday factors contribute to your attentional spans.* What are the strengths and weaknesses of each attention pattern in living your everyday life? What internal and external forces cause your attention to shift? Learn to notice what precipitates a shift and you can learn how to actively shift it on your own.

•*Decide which pattern you need to focus on and determine when and where is a good time to practice a shift in attention.* Don't practice when under deadline; wait until you are in a low-risk, less-stress environment. For example, try shifting attention patterns while enjoying a sport, instead of while preparing for an important presentation.

Once you know which pattern comes naturally, you can begin to understand why you might get overwhelmed in certain situations at work or why you may make errors in certain areas of your job—be it in making decisions or taking proper safety precautions. If you are stuck in one pattern, you may be effective in certain situations, yet mismatched in others, which can be limiting—and dangerous.

Due to workload demands, fast-paced technology, time demands, work repetition, lack of involvement and stress, people's attention spans are affected positively and negatively throughout the day. The key is to first realize that each attention style has strengths and limitations and that each is effective in a different situation. Preventing injuries and enhancing productivity demand that employees develop a versatile attention span.

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