

NEAR MISS

Mobile phones on farm – The distraction risk in your pocket

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Technology has made our lives easier in many ways. Beyond the obvious benefit of being able to communicate quickly, mobile phones give farmers access to business information, herd and financial records, weather and an array of decision-making tools at the touch of a button.

For many farms, the mobile phone has become an essential part of the day-to-day running of the business. But these small devices also come with risks. Like every other hazard on farm, mobile phone use needs to be recognised, discussed and managed.

Jack runs a busy dairy business with nearly a dozen staff. He is used to having his mobile phone being switched on and available most of the time. On this particular day, things were even busier than usual. Jack had been away at a workshop for two days, which meant the rest of the week was compressed. He needed to catch up on what had happened while he was away, respond to staff, make decisions and plan the next few days efficiently.

The farm itself is mostly flat, with straight, well-constructed laneways. Jack was using a two-wheel bike to head down the paddock. He had just finished speaking with the milking crew and had sent off several text messages – both responding to questions and asking his own about where things were up to.

This was not unusual behaviour. In fact, it was something Jack did all the time. It felt normal, practical and productive.

As he rode along the laneway, the ping of an incoming text prompted him to take his phone out of his shirt pocket and look down. Jack later estimated that the bike was travelling so slowly he could probably have walked faster.

But while he was reading and processing the message, the bike continued moving. It drifted straight into the barbed-wire fence running

alongside the laneway. The impact itself was not dramatic. In fact, Jack described it as almost gentle.

The outcome, however, was anything but.

Barbed wire is unforgiving. Even at very low speed, it can do serious damage. Jack's hand was badly torn and he suffered a deep gash across his calf. He needed a trip to the local emergency department and many stitches to repair the injuries.

The incident left him sore, restricted and unable to work properly for some time. It also placed extra pressure on the rest of the team, who had to pick up the slack while he recovered.

Jack's incident is not the only way mobile phones can create risk on farm. In most cases, the phone itself is not the hazard. The risk comes from distraction, rushing, poor timing, or using the phone in the wrong place.



Examples might include:

- Checking a message while operating a side-by-side, quad bike or two-wheel bike and failing to notice a washout, gate, animal, person or piece of machinery ahead.
- Answering a call while driving a tractor, loader or feed-out wagon and losing concentration while reversing, turning, attaching equipment or working near other people.
- Walking through the dairy, yard or laneway while looking down at a phone and slipping, tripping, stepping into a drain, walking into a rail or failing to see an animal move unexpectedly.
- Using a phone while working around cattle and missing the early warning signs that an animal is becoming unsettled, protective, agitated or about to kick.
- Taking a call while opening or closing gates and becoming distracted, leaving a gate unsecured or allowing cattle to move into the wrong area.
- Checking a phone while climbing on or off machinery, over a fence, through a gateway or across uneven ground and falling because attention is not on hand placement, footing or maintaining three points of contact.
- Stopping in an unsafe location to read or send a message – in a laneway, near a blind corner, beside operating machinery, or in an area where vehicles or livestock are moving.
- Wearing earbuds or using hands-free calling and failing to hear a reversing

vehicle, shouted warning, approaching bike, machinery alarm, or animal movement nearby.

- Becoming distracted while using a farm app or taking photos and stepping too close to a moving PTO shaft, auger, crush, chemical area, effluent pond, dam or other high-risk area.
- Looking at a phone while handling chemicals, treatments or animal health products and misreading a label, missing an instruction, or losing track of what has already been measured or administered.
- Dropping a phone near water, effluent, mud or machinery and instinctively reaching into an unsafe area to retrieve it.
- Receiving an upsetting or stressful personal message during the workday and continuing to work with machinery, vehicles or livestock while distracted or emotionally unsettled.
- Sending urgent messages to staff when they are likely to be driving, riding bikes, operating equipment or working with cattle, unintentionally encouraging them to respond at an unsafe time.
- Using a phone late in the day when fatigue and time pressure are already increasing the chance of distraction or poor decision-making.

The common thread in all these examples is not that mobile phones are bad. It is that they can take our eyes, ears, hands or attention away from the job at exactly the wrong moment. If these examples ring true for you, then they are almost certainly ringing true for your staff as well.

The way phones are used on farm sets the standard for the whole team, so it is important to treat mobile phone use as a real workplace safety issue that needs to be talked about, agreed on and managed. It's not just a matter of personal choice.

Managing mobile phone risk on farm does not need to mean banning phones. The aim is to put some clear expectations around how and when phones are used, particularly around machinery, vehicles, livestock and other high-risk tasks.

Some practical steps could include:

Set a clear "stop before you use it" rule

If a message, call or notification needs attention, stop the bike, vehicle or task first. Move to a safe location, secure the machinery or vehicle if needed, and then check the phone.

This simple rule can apply to bikes, side-by-sides, tractors, loaders, feed-out wagons and walking through the dairy, yards and laneways.

Identify no-phone tasks and areas

Some jobs and locations should be treated as phone-free, unless there is an emergency. This might include operating machinery, handling cattle, working in the dairy pit, climbing on or off equipment, working around chemicals, using augers or PTOs, reversing vehicles, opening gates, or moving through busy laneways.

Identify the tasks on your farm where distraction could quickly lead to injury.

Think about how messages are sent

Supervisors and managers should also think about when they are sending messages. If a staff member is likely to be milking, riding a bike, operating machinery or moving cattle, consider whether the message is genuinely urgent.

Not every message needs an immediate response. Where possible, make it clear when something can wait.

Use hands-free carefully

Hands-free does not remove the risk. A conversation can still take attention away from the job, especially when operating machinery, working with livestock or making decisions under pressure.

Hands-free may reduce the need to hold the phone, but it does not remove the distraction.

Manage earbuds and headphones

Earbuds can stop workers from hearing approaching vehicles, reversing alarms, other staff calling out, animals moving behind them, or machinery changing sound.

Be clear about where earbuds are not appropriate, particularly around machinery, vehicles, livestock and shared work areas. In some workplaces, banning earbuds in operational areas may be the safest option.

Make phones secure

Phones should be carried or mounted in a way that does not create extra risk. A phone falling out of a pocket while riding, climbing or working around machinery can create a sudden distraction and an instinctive urge to retrieve it.

Where phones are needed in vehicles or machinery, a proper mount or safe storage spot is better than having the phone loose.

Use voicemail or call-back expectations

One simple approach is to agree that staff are not expected to answer calls or respond to messages while doing high-risk work. They can let the call go to voicemail or return the call once they are safely stopped. This reduces the pressure to respond immediately.

Lead by example

If farm owners and managers check messages while riding bikes, operating equipment or walking through cattle, staff will see that as normal behaviour. The standard set by the people in charge is often the standard followed by the rest of the team.

If the rule is "stop before you use it", that rule needs to apply to everyone.

Include mobile phone use in your farm safety system

Mobile phone use can be included in farm policies, inductions and safe work procedures. New staff should understand the farm's expectations from the beginning.

This does not need to be complicated. It can be as simple as a short policy that says phones are useful tools; however, must not be used in a way that distracts from high-risk work.

Talk about expectations with the team

Mobile phone use should be discussed openly with staff. This is not about catching people out or banning normal communication. It is about agreeing on what safe use looks like.

A simple Toolbox Talk could cover when phones are useful, when they create risk, and what everyone agrees to do differently.

Review any near misses

If someone has a close call involving a phone, talk about it. Was the person driving, walking, working with cattle, using machinery, or rushing? Was there pressure to respond straight away? Was the phone being used for work?

Near misses are a good opportunity to improve expectations before someone is seriously hurt.

At the end of the day, mobile phones are part of modern farming. The goal is not to remove them from the workplace, but to make sure they are used at the right time, in the right place, and in a way that does not put people at unnecessary risk.

