Selective Attention at Work Meeting Kit

THE BRAIN IS A FILTER FOR MULTI – TASKING

Selective attention is an involuntary response in your brain that functions as a filter; rather than being incapable of multitasking, selective attention identifies which multitasking elements are most important and diverts its attention to those things. This filtration system is extremely fluid, and moves in and out of its tasks seamlessly. Your focus might be diverted to the sound of the lawn mower going, for instance, anticipating the clink and clatter of a twig or rock getting caught in the blades, before it moves to the plaintive “meow” of the neighborhood cat getting too close to the mower. Your attention is constantly multitasking and taking in information, and your brain’s selective attention mechanism filters which sound, sights, or tasks are the most important at any given time.

HOW DOES SELECTIVE ATTENTION WORK

Selective attention is (at least) a two-step process, whereby your brain takes in all of the information it sees and hears and sends it to a filtering system, which then identifies which stimuli are most important. The human brain is filled with trillions of synapses and billions of neurons, each of them able to perform multiple tasks. Selective attention is an example of these synapses and neurons performing multiple functions and filtering the information the brain receives.

Certain parts of the brain are responsible for recognizing sight, patterns, and up-close experiences, while others are responsible for auditory signals, and still, others are responsible for “big picture” things and can take in more background noise. Each of

these parts of the brain works in tandem to identify which aspects of the input your brain is receiving are important, and which are acceptable to stifle.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SELECTIVE ATTENTION

Selective attention is important because it allows the human brain to function more effectively. Just as a computer gets slower when numerous windows, tabs, and programs are open, the human brain would quickly and easily become overloaded without the advent of selective attention. Selective attention functions as a filter to keep the brain working optimally as it goes about its tasks.

EMPLOYEE AWARENESS OF SURROUNDINGS REDUCES SAFETY INCIDENTS

The notion that employees can be injured simply because they were not paying close enough attention to the machinery and objects in their work environment is unacceptable. These types of accidents are almost always preventable.

Lacking awareness of one’s surroundings places employees in high-risk exposure situations that can lead to safety incidents, such as:

- Being distracted by loud noises or coworkers
- Taking one’s eyes off the road while driving
- Multitasking
- Rushing to complete a task
- Working while fatigued or extremely tired
- Working at a new job site

It is critical that employees get in the habit of asking themselves these three questions before starting any task:

- Is there anything in my work area that poses a threat to my safety, and if so, to what extent?
- Is the threat great enough that I should stop working immediately?

- Is there anything I can do to reduce the risk exposure so that I can continue to work safely?

MORE RECOMMENDATIONS

Survey Your Work Area Before Performing Any Tasks:

- Ensure that you have enough space to do your work.
- Identify energy sources that require lockout/tagout procedures.
- Look for hazards in your work area such as: low-hanging overhead objects, sharp edges or surfaces, standing water, exposed wiring, unguarded equipment, general work environment conditions.
- Make sure that all safety devices on your equipment are in good working order before use.
- Discuss work status and potential hazards with coworkers in your area and/or the person you are replacing at shift change prior to starting any work.

Think Before You Act:

- Before starting any task, be sure that you know the correct procedure to complete the job, have the correct PPE, and understand the present hazards of performing the task.
- Be aware of your body position and hands in relation to machinery, equipment, and other objects. Adjust, minimize, or slow your movements as required by your work environment to avoid contact with objects. Always walk behind moving equipment when possible, never obstruct your vision by overloading moving equipment, and use extra caution around corners and doorways.
- When transporting materials, walk the route you will be taking prior to moving anything. Look for obstacles such as uneven surfaces, trip hazards, objects you will need to maneuver around, and foot traffic.
- Don’t create additional hazards – avoid running extension cords through high foot traffic areas, don’t block exits or regularly used pathways and clean up once you complete a

task or your shift (tools, debris, replace machine guards, electrical covers, etc.).
- Consider how many coworkers will be in your work area when you perform a task.
- Put up barriers and signage to warn others to avoid dangers in your work area.
- Don’t become complacent. Employees who are too comfortable with their work surroundings may begin to overlook potential hazards.

FINAL WORD

Most people realize they miss certain details from time to time, however, many individuals may not realize how much they are actually missing every single day. The selective attention test is a good way to convey how easy it is to miss critical details when our attention is elsewhere. When you go to do your work tasks today, evaluate what critical details or hazards you may not be paying attention to.