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When a virtual digital assistant is embedded in cars of the future, HR issues such as safety, liability, work/life balance and others will be part of this brave new world of expanded car-based office productivity.

By Maura C. Ciccarelli
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Legal and HR consultants perked up at the news earlier in this year that Microsoft is at the forefront of a new intelligent automobile trend. In addition to working with Volvo, Toyota, Nissan, Qoros of China, and other automakers and component manufacturers, Microsoft announced that it was introducing Office 365 connectivity to 2017 Mercedes-Benz production vehicles through the dashboard infotainment system created by Harman.

"With access to relevant Office 365 services through intelligent personal assistant software," Harman's release says, "drivers can complete tasks without compromising safety, including scheduling meetings, hearing and responding to emails, automatically joining conference calls without having to manually input the phone number and passcode, and seamlessly managing events and tasks throughout the day. Drivers will also be able to hold Skype calls and conferences when in park, or on the road with autonomous vehicles."

The future vision highlights how manufacturers are trying to balance driver convenience and productivity with safety. However, industry watchers say they are not sure that distractions from dashboard assistants will be any different than other mobile devices that are involved in about 26 percent of vehicle accidents, according to a 2014 National Safety Council report.

"Technically, the legal issues are the same, but it's the perception that will change the landscape," says Matthew Wride, an author, consultant and chief operating officer with DecisionWise, an HR and leadership consulting firm based in Springville, Utah. "By embedding the technology directly in the car, you are making it much more obvious to plaintiffs' lawyers that someone might have been on the employer's errand when they were in the car. In reality, they might have been responding to a work e-mail on their smartphone when the accident occurred in a car without this technology, but it's less obvious."



Because "smart" systems are subject to the legal discovery process, employers may find themselves pulled into the cases because of deeper pockets and another insurer to sue, Wride adds.

The productivity technology is outpacing safety, says attorney Marc Lamber of Phoenix-based Fennemore Craig, P.C., who specializes in plaintiff personal injury cases and spearheads the firm's [Stop Distracted Drivers](#) campaign.

"I can envision a time in 20 to 30 years when everyone will have self-driving cars and they are 100 percent safe; [it will be like] a taxi service to them. Then, the [office] technology makes sense," he says. "But, when you are talking about the time frame in between, this raises a lot of issues for HR."

For example, even if a car reads the email to the driver, the temptation to respond -- and become distracted -- is hard to resist, he says, noting that it's during those few seconds of inattention that accidents can and do happen.

Are there any plus sides to in-car productivity? According to Kevin J. Mulcahy, co-author of *The Future Workplace Experience* and partner at Future Workplace, a New York-based HR executive network and research firm, the kind of "work" that employees can do in a car will shift in coming years from output-oriented behaviors -- phone calls, replying to emails or texts -- to input-oriented activities.

"People are already using the commuting time to [listen to] music and talk radio," Mulcahy explains. "Now some of that content is being replaced by work content, which is listening to playbacks of [company developed] learning modules and listening to podcasts that help people develop professionally or think about the issues of the day."

Carol Sladek, a Chicago-based partner at Aon Hewitt and work/life consulting leader, says in-car technology will probably help the emerging trend of increased flexibility as to when and where an employee is productive.

"Nine-to-five jobs are going by the wayside," says Sladek, who notes that while some people still cling to the in-office 40-hour workweek with no work after hours or on the weekends, others are embracing the stress-reducing practice of ticking off some actions on their to-do list the night before or even while driving home.

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"There are some efficiencies in all this as well, if you think back 15 to 20 years ago when good old-fashioned folks like me were flying to another city, renting a car and looking through a map that the rental car agency gave us...and the number of times people got lost and got into bad neighborhoods," she says. "I do think that even the navigational piece of this is huge: to be able to just type in your client meeting or have [the system] pull it off of your calendar and have it get you there -- I speak for all of us with the bad sense of direction [when I say] that piece is huge."

Finally, what do HR professionals need to do to prepare for this trend?

Mulcahy has seen more and more HR policies outlining what employees should and shouldn't do while driving. However, he says, companies should develop a safety culture that encourages someone receiving a call from a commuting worker say they are not going to engage with them while they are driving.

"Employers should adopt and enforce policies that prevent employees from conducting work on the employer's behalf while driving," adds Wride. "They must always pull over to a safe spot. In the case of these new systems, HR should specifically mandate that it is against company policy for anyone to use a mobile-

office system while driving -- except possibly for navigation. Even voicemail support may not be a good idea since that can be distracting. The liability is not worth the productivity. The employee can always pull over and conduct their business. The only person who benefits from use while driving is the employee, since they are the ones thinking they are getting something done."

Still, it will be hard to enforce non-distracted driving practices when so many people are already using voice activations with intelligent assistants such as Alexis, Siri, Google Assistant or Microsoft's Cortana in their homes, on their smartphones and in their offices.

In the meantime, Lamber says, "There are a lot more pros than cons, but I refer to [them] as growing pains. In order for us to get to a better place, you have to deal with the challenges that we are dealing with. So long as there is discussion about it and we are aware of it, and there is a dialogue and people discuss best practices, then that is a positive and makes a difference."

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