Unlike its levitating namesake from the 1989 film *Back to the Future Part II*, this year’s much-talked-about new toy, the hoverboard, does not actually hover. Instead, much like a smaller version of the Segway personal transport, today’s hoverboards are actually self-balancing scooters on two wheels. While these toys have become extremely sought-after items in their brief time on the market, recently reported incidents associating hoverboard battery packs with a potential fire hazard bring to light the need for heightened safety awareness surrounding their use.
Since their introduction to the American market in June 2015, there have been approximately one dozen incidents reported in which the hoverboards’ lithium-ion batteries—the same kind of batteries that power our laptops and cell phones, only much larger—have exploded or caught fire. Experts say that the risk of fire is increased in the most inexpensive hoverboards (those generally sold for less than $500), possibly due in part to some manufacturers using lesser-quality batteries that may have higher rates of defects. It is recommended to keep a close eye on the toy while it charges, taking care not to overcharge the battery, and to only charge the hoverboard outdoors in order to minimize damage in the event that a cell does fail.

In addition to the risk posed by faulty batteries, social media has been awash with videos of hoverboard users, including celebrities as varied as Mike Tyson and Justin Bieber, falling off of their hoverboards. While usually presented as a joke, these kind of spills can lead to serious injuries like broken bones or concussions. Young children should be closely monitored when using hoverboards, and all users should wear protective gear like helmets, kneepads, and elbow pads.

In the wake of a January 20, 2015 house fire in Santa Rosa, California that killed two dogs, Amazon.com, one of the internet’s largest retailers, is allowing any parties who purchased hoverboards to return them for a refund, regardless of whether they have personally had issues with the devices. While Amazon is still selling certain models, the retailer hopes to avoid further tragedy linked to the toys. Just as important as the decision to purchase a hoverboard is whether to keep one in the face of mounting evidence of their risks. To learn more about hoverboard safety, visit the United States Consumer Product Safety Commission at https://www.cpsc.gov.
SLOW DOWN

Adjust speed to road and weather conditions

Safety & Risk Management

New York State Insurance Fund
www.nysif.com
While a safety coordinator’s safety-related duties are absolutely critical, they are very seldom his or her only duties. Safety personnel tend to wear many hats, and usually stay very busy. That is one reason it is so important that agencies have appropriate backup for their safety personnel. State of Florida safety coordinators are designated by an agency head or university president, but they receive crucial support from their alternate safety coordinators and other members of their organization’s safety team. Unfortunately, turnover is a fact of life in the workplace, and the departure of an employee often creates a vacuum in an agency’s safety program as resources are diverted to carry out mission-critical job duties.

When a key safety position needs to be filled, choosing the right person can be essential. Erika Gwilt from global consulting firm DEKRA highlights a number of important attributes for which to look.

- Positive and proactive leadership style
- Worker engagement
- Focus on culture
- Curious/continuous learning
- Consequence management
- Exposure reduction and mitigation

Gwilt observes, “A great safety leader is simply a great leader. So we look first at leadership skills in general.”

In addition, making sure that your candidates have the bandwidth to take on safety responsibilities is vital. The most competent, committed, and safety-minded worker is not an ideal candidate if he or she has too many other duties to perform and cannot devote his or her best efforts to your safety program. Confer with management for input on candidates, as supervisors will need to sign off on their employees’ appointments to safety positions, and will have a better idea of an employee’s preexisting responsibilities.

Finally, interview your candidates, and let them meet the other members of the team. Learn their philosophies on safety, and any safety experience they have in their backgrounds. Make sure that they understand the duties and responsibilities of the position, and that they are comfortable performing them. Employee safety is of paramount importance, and it is vital that your team members make it a priority.

For more information on creating a strong safety team at your agency, visit the Industrial Safety and Hygiene News website at http://www.ishn.com/articles/83711-positive-safety-cultures-developing-your-safety-team
On Thursday, December 21, 2015, an individual called in a bomb threat to Florida State University, giving a false name, and claiming that he had placed a bomb in one of the rooms of FSU’s Office of Telecommunication. While the threat was determined not to be viable and was intended to intimidate the university as opposed to actually identifying a bomb, this event still acts as a prompt to make sure that employees are properly informed on what to do in the event of a bomb threat.

First, and most importantly, make sure that each employee has a copy of your agency’s or university’s telephone bomb threat checklist by the telephone or in a visible place in his or her workspace. Secondly, if an employee receives a bomb threat by phone, he or she should make sure to follow five steps:

1) Attract the attention of a co-worker, and have the co-worker call 911 and request that the call be traced.
2) Get as much information as possible from the caller about the bomb.
3) Ask the caller to repeat parts of the message, and make note of any identifying information about the caller as possible, such as age, gender, and emotional state.
4) Once the caller hangs up, call the police bomb squad by dialing 911, and relay the information you gathered.
5) Call your building’s management and inform them of the threat.

While the threat of violence is a frightening reality, informed employees can assist in effectively dealing with the situation. For more information on bomb threats, contact your agency safety coordinator and/or your building manager.

The American Burn Association has designated February 1-7 as Burn Awareness Week, with a focus on the prevention of scald injuries. Each year, nearly half a million Americans are burned badly enough to require treatment. To stay safe, keep the following in mind:

- Set your water heater at 120 degrees F.
- Use back burners when cooking, and turn pot handles toward the back of the stove to protect children from hot stovetop spills.
- Open heated containers away from you, and from back to front.
- Never hold or carry a child and a hot drink at the same time.
- Use a travel mug with a tight lid if transporting a hot beverage while driving.
- On the worksite, always use personal protective equipment (PPE) when dealing with materials that have the potential to cause burns.

For more burn prevention tips, as well as fact sheets, news, and infographics, visit the American Burn Association Website at www.flashsplash.org.
Radon is an odorless, colorless, tasteless gas, and is the second leading cause of lung cancer in humans due to its highly radioactive nature. In fact, 21,000 American deaths are attributed annually to radon. Because of this health risk, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has designated January as National Radon Action Month, but the topic is an important one to consider all year long.

Radon is produced by the radioactive decay of radium-226, which naturally occurs in, among other compounds, limestone. As Florida has a high concentration of limestone, it is imperative for Floridians to be aware of the dangers of radon. The EPA suggests several steps you can take to minimize your risk.

First, and most importantly, test your home for radon. Radon testing is inexpensive, and can be done with a simple test kit. Certain organizations, such as the National Radon Program Services at Kansas State University, offer discounted test kits for purchase online for as little as $15 to $25. Additionally, some home improvement stores sell radon test kits. However you choose to obtain a kit, they are simple to use and offer fast, accurate information on your home’s radon levels. Alternatively, you may wish to hire a professional to test the radon concentration in your home. Florida is one of sixteen states that regulate radon measurement services, and a list of certified service providers is available on the Florida Department of Health’s website at http://www.floridahealth.gov/environmental-health/radon/. If it turns out that your home has an elevated level of radon, the providers listed here can assist with correcting the issue, as well.

Workplace safety officials can play an important role in informing employees of the dangers of radon. The EPA recommends attending one of the National Radon Action Month events in your area if possible, but just sharing the information on the EPA website, ordering and distributing their free radon publications, or planning an activity to increase awareness can all be helpful in getting the message out.

Finally, if you are in the market for a new home, keep radon in mind. Building techniques have come a long way, and new homes can easily be built with simple and inexpensive techniques that prevent radon from entering. While radon is a serious concern, the threat can be mitigated with education and communication. For more information on radon, including downloadable publications, visit the EPA website at http://www.epa.gov/radon/national-radon-action-month-consumer-information.
2016 is here, and though the presidential elections will not be held until November, the campaigns are already in full swing. Primary and caucus voting is imminent, with Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, and South Carolina holding their events in February, and many more states following suit in the months to come. While America has always prided itself on a healthy political discourse, it is incredibly important to remember to keep political talk and actions work appropriate. 

The Federal Hatch Act and Florida law restrict certain political activities by employees. Specifically:

- No State employee may hold or be a candidate for public or political office while employed by the State without authorization and written approval.
- No employee can take an active part in a political campaign during any period of time during which the employee receives compensation for services.
- No employee can use the authority of his or her position to secure support for, or oppose any candidate, party or issue in a partisan election or affect the result of that election. No employee can use any promise of reward or threat of loss to encourage or coerce any employee to support or contribute to any political issue, candidate, or party.

In addition to these prohibitions, it is generally a best practice to discourage political discussion among employees until after work hours. This includes the display or distribution of campaign items such as posters, placards, and leaflets. Along with money and religion, politics is among the most controversial topics discussed in society, and can sow discord in the workplace. In extreme cases, employers have found themselves in court when employees have alleged that political talk went too far and created a hostile work environment.

Employers should let employees know that their first amendment rights are respected, but remind them of what their agency’s employee handbook requires with regard to politics in the workplace. Be sure to lead by example, and make your voice heard in the voting booth as opposed to the office. Florida’s primary voting will be held on Tuesday, March 15, 2016. For more information on politics in the office, consult your agency’s policies, employee handbook, or the Florida Division of Elections at www.dos.myflorida.com/elections.
References


The Safety and Loss Prevention Outlook newsletter is for informational purposes only. The Department of Financial Services does not endorse or support any websites, products, brands, or services referenced herein.