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Working Alone

By SeaBright Insurance Loss Control

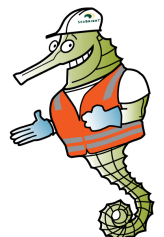
Do you have employees who work alone? Is this routine, periodically, occasionally, or all of the above? Maybe you have a late night warehouse worker, a punch list carpenter, a service employee, or a worker at a remote jobsite. What kind of hazards are these people exposed to, and what controls should be implemented?

Most employers should have a “Working Alone” policy in order to:

- Define tasks that are not acceptable for working alone. Check to ensure that OSHA or State regulatory agency does not prohibit employees working alone for the tasks you perform.
- Define steps taken -- such as communications required, reporting in periodically, or having someone check on workers periodically – when employees are allowed to work alone on highly hazardous jobs.
- Establish controls for emergency signaling and emergency response and rescue.

Unless prohibited, working alone is acceptable and in many cases the employees are not really alone. For example, delivery drivers and service technicians work among the public most of the day and usually have communication devices. Fixed sites in factories, warehouses, and buildings can expose employees to hazards when there may not be other people around. If this is the case, the “Working Alone” plan should be implemented. The plan should consider steps such as:

- Employee required to carry a radio, cell phone, man-down indicator, GPS device, or signing in and out on a log indicating that employee is working alone, etc.
- Specify how often and with whom employee must check in to say all is well. Depending on the level of hazard this may be every hour. If the hazard level indicates more frequent check ins, the employer should consider not allowing the employee to work alone.
- Specify when supervisor or security will visit employee. Many computer systems with video feeds can now be set up for very reasonable costs allowing constant observation of exposed employees.
- Emergency response and rescue procedures.



Before allowing employees to work alone the following steps should be considered:

- Assess the job. Do hazardous conditions or circumstances exist that will compromise the safety of the employee? If dangerous situations exist procedures must be set up to ensure the employee is monitored and can get assistance if an incident occurs. Provide the necessary tools and equipment, information about the hazards and train everyone involved including workers, supervisors, and foremen.
- Categorize the job. When assessing the job conditions there will be job functions with inherent hazards associated with them. Categorize these functions as high or low risk hazards.

1. High risk hazards include:

- Entering Confined Spaces;
- Working with high energy materials (radioactive, temperature);
- Toxic gases, liquids, or solids;
- Cryogenic (low temperature) materials or processes;
- High pressure systems;
- High voltage systems;
- Moving equipment or machinery;
- Handling or transferring flammable liquids;
- Extreme weather conditions;
- Industries where cash or goods handled may attract criminal victimization.

2. Low risk hazards include:

- Maintenance functions on nonactive processing equipment;
- Security watchman functions;
- Janitorial or custodial functions;
- Routine job functions where long standing operation experience demonstrates them to be safe;
- Desk work.

Based on the risk category you have assigned to the job, develop control methods including emergency help for the worker. Some common control methods include:

- **Buddy system.** Primarily used for working in confined spaces where entrance or exit is restricted such as manholes, pits, or tanks that may be oxygen-deficient or where hazardous gases may accumulate. The buddy must be knowledgeable about the job functions of the worker being observed, be properly equipped with emergency equipment, and be capable of putting preplanned rescue or emergency operations into effect. Please note that this control effectively eliminates employees working alone.
- **Personal check.** Have someone check on solo employees by periodic visits at regular intervals. This should be done by employer, another worker, or some other knowledgeable person designated by the employer. The interval between checks should be based on the risk category of the job.

- Periodic telephone check. Communicating via the telephone at regularly scheduled intervals may be adequate in low-risk work alone jobs. Contact numbers for both routine and emergency situations should be prominently posted. Office workers should be instructed about emergency procedures for working alone outside of regular office hours.
- Surveillance. Workplace security systems can be modified to monitor a particular worker who is working alone as well as the status of the workplace itself. You can use personal pagers, two-way radios, emergency sounding devices, visual monitoring systems, and similar equipment. Consider the suitability of safety measures and systems to worker's needs. For example, if an employee is deaf, visible alarms should be provided in the workplace.

Working alone strategies should be an extension of existing health and safety planning. Even if an employer does not have any solo workers currently, a basic plan should be considered as a contingency. Whether it is a standard practice or an occasional exposure, work alone planning is needed for employee safety.

The following is a list of OSHA codes that prohibit, restrict, place conditions on, or provide recommendations for working alone.

- 1910.146. Confined space entry specific rules.
- 1910.268(m)(7)(ii). Telecommunications and cable industry.
- 1910.268(n)(5)(ii). Telecommunications and cable industry.
- 1910.268(o)(1)(ii). Telecommunications and cable industry.
- 1910.268(o)(3). Telecommunications and cable industry.
- 1910.269(I)(1)(i). Electric power generation and distribution.
- 1910.1450 Appendix A. Laboratory recommendations.
- 1918.83(c). Checks on employees working alone in cargo boxes.
- 1926.501(b)(10). Roofing safety requirements for low slope roofs.
- 1926.550(a)(15)(iv). Observer requirements for high voltage powerlines.
- 1926.800(a)(3). Underground work requiring designated person above ground.
- 1926.800(c). Underground construction check in – check out procedures.
- 1926.956(b)(1). Working alone restrictions when working in manholes.

