Working Alone

Working Alone - General

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What is meant by working alone?

A person is "alone" at work when they are on their own; when they cannot be seen or heard by another person.

It is important to consider all situations carefully. Working alone includes all workers who may go for a period of time where they do not have direct contact with a co-worker. For example, the receptionist in a large office building may be considered a "lone" worker if their station is located away from others. Alternatively, a construction worker who is doing work in a bathroom or other location that cannot be seen by co-workers may also be considered a lone worker. Other examples are gas station attendants, convenience store clerks, food outlet workers, taxi drivers, home care workers, social service workers, security guards, farmers, field workers (e.g., geologists, arborists, forestry workers, etc.), cleaners, or custodians.

Is working alone a problem?

While it is not always hazardous to work alone, it can be when other circumstances are present. Whether a situation is a high or low risk will depend on the location, type of work, interaction with the public, or the consequences of an emergency, incident, injury, etc. This wide variety of circumstances makes it important to assess each situation individually.

What is covered in this document?

This OSH Answers document covers the administrative details needed for lone workers in general (check-in procedures and hazard assessment). Please see the related OSH Answers documents for more specific information on:

- Handling money
- Off-site
- Working with patients

For more information on how to set up a violence prevention program, please see Violence and Harassment in the Workplace.

What are examples of high-risk activities?

High-risk activities can involve risks from a variety of sources, such as when working:

- At heights.
- In confined spaces (such as tanks, grain bins or elevators, culverts, etc.).
- With electricity or other forms of hazardous energy.
- With hazardous products.
- With hazardous equipment such as chainsaws or firearms.
- With the public, where there is a potential for violence.

What can be done to help a lone worker stay safe?

Check the regulations in your area. Some jurisdictions have specific laws concerning working alone.

There are many steps that can be taken to help ensure the safety of the lone worker:

- Avoid having a lone worker whenever possible, especially for jobs with a recognized risk.
- Assess the hazards of your workplace.
- Talk to workers about their work. Get their input about the work they do and possible solutions.
- Investigate incidents at your workplace, and learn from incidents in similar workplaces.
- Take corrective action to prevent or minimize the potential risks of working alone.

- Provide appropriate training and education to both the lone worker and the person tasked to respond if there is concern.
- Report all situations, incidents or 'near misses' where being alone increased the severity of the situation. Analyze this information and make changes to the company policy where necessary.
- Establish a check-in procedure. Make sure that regular contact is kept with all workers. Establish ways to account for people (visually or verbally) while they are working.
- Schedule higher risk tasks to be done during normal business hours, or when another worker capable of helping in an emergency is present.

What is an example of a check-in procedure?

It is important that a check-in procedure be in place. Decide if a verbal or real-time (e.g., texting)check-in is adequate, or if the worker must be accounted for by a visual check. Make sure your plan is appropriate for both regular business hours as well as outside core hours.

For most lone workers, the telephone will be the main source of contact. When using cell phones, always be sure that it is close by and charged. If cell phone service is unreliable in your area, be sure to have alternative methods of communication available (such as the use of cameras, automated warning/duress devices, global positioning systems (GPSs), two-way radio, site visits, or satellite technology).

When travelling out of the main location, the main contact person should know the following details:

- Destination and intended route.
- Estimated time of arrival.
- Return time or date.
- Contact information.
- Mode of travel (public transit, car, plane, etc.).
- Alternate plans in the event of bad weather, traffic problems, etc.

An example of a check-in procedure is:

- Prepare a daily work plan so it is known where the lone worker will be and when.
- Identify one main person to be the contact at the office, plus a backup.
- Define under what circumstances the lone worker will check in and how often.
- Stick to the visual check or call-in schedule. You may wish to have a written log of contact.

- Have the contact person call or visit the lone worker periodically to make sure they are okay, where possible
- Pick out a code word to be used to identify or confirm that help is needed.
- Develop an emergency plan to be followed if the lone worker does not check in when they are supposed to.
- The contact person must know when and how to activate the emergency plan.

(Adapted from CCOHS Violence in the Workplace Prevention Guide)

What are some factors to consider when assessing the workplace or situations?

The following are some points to consider. Each circumstance will be different, so be sure to adapt the questions to suit your situation.

Length of time the person will be working alone:

- What is a reasonable length of time for the person to be alone?
- Is it reasonable for the person to be alone at all?
- How long will the person be alone to finish the job?
- Is it legal for the person to be alone while doing certain activities? (For example: some jurisdictions may restrict working alone in a confined space, or during lock-out / tag-out operations).
- What time of the day will the person be alone?

Communication:

- What forms of communication are available?
- Is it necessary to "see" the person, or is voice or text communication adequate?
- Will emergency communication systems work properly in all situations?
- If the communication systems are located in a vehicle, do you need alternative arrangements to cover the person when they are away from the vehicle?

Location of the work:

- Is the work in a remote or isolated location? (Remember that a remote location does not have to be far away. Storage rooms that are rarely used can be considered remote or isolated.)

- Is transportation necessary to get there? What kind of transportation is needed? What route will be used?
- Is the area or vehicle equipped with emergency supplies such as food and drinking water, as well as a first aid kit?
- Will the person need to carry some or all of the emergency supplies with them when they leave the vehicle?
- Does the person need training to be able to use the first aid equipment?
- What are the consequences if the vehicle breaks down?
- Will the person have to leave the vehicle for long periods of time?

Type or nature of work:

- Is there adequate education and training provided for the person to be able to work alone safely?
- Is there adequate education and training provided for the person who is responding?
- Is there adequate personal protective equipment available, if needed? Is it in good working order?
- What machinery, tools or equipment will be used?
- Is there a high-risk activity involved?
- Is fatigue likely to be a factor?
- Are there extremes of temperature?
- Is there a risk of an animal attack, insect bite (poisonous or allergic reaction), etc.?
- If the person is working inside a locked building, how will emergency services be able to get in? (For example: a night cleaner in a secure office building)
- Does the work involve working with money or other valuables?
- Does the work involve seizing property or goods (such as repossession, recovering stolen property, etc)?

Characteristics required by the individual who is working alone

- Are there any pre-existing medical conditions that may increase the risk?
- Does the person have adequate levels of experience and training? (For example: first aid, communication systems repair, vehicle breakdowns, relevant administrative procedures, or outdoor survival?)

(questions adapted from: Government of Western Australia, 2024 "Guidance Note: Working Alone")

Fact sheet last revised: 2025-07-31

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