

Before you begin:

Review or develop a lone worker policy. Identify and list all instances where an employee would be working alone and the worst-case scenarios that could happen to that employee.



Introduction

Keeping lone workers safe is a difficult problem that many employers face. Many lone workers find themselves working extended hours, off shifts, on holidays, or in adverse weather conditions with no supervision and no one watching their back. These conditions present unique hazards and puts the lone worker into challenging unsafe situations. It's the employer's responsibility to ensure all their employees that work alone have a safe work environment and receive appropriate safety training, and that lone worker policies and procedures are developed.

Definitions

Lone worker – an employee who performs an activity that is carried out in isolation from other workers without close or direct supervision.

Risk assessment – a thorough look at your workplace to identify those things, situations, processes, etc. that may cause harm, particularly to people. After identification is made, you analyze and evaluate how likely and severe the risk is. When this determination is made, you can next decide what measures should be in place to effectively eliminate or control the harm from happening.

Real time monitoring systems - a system used to monitor a lone worker which delivers continuously updated information. Systems may include phone based, global positioning, or monitoring devices worn by an employee.

Discussion

Employers must ensure their lone workers are prepared for all dangerous scenarios that could arise on the job. If the worker isn't properly prepared for a unique situation, you can't expect them to remain calm and make the right decisions. The rest of this safety talk discusses what the employer can do to keep their lone workers safe.

Conduct risk assessments

Risk assessments should determine whether it's safe for a lone worker to do the job or if arrangements need to be made to provide back-up or help. Some high-risk jobs require more than one person be present due to safety regulations. Other questions to consider: Can equipment, tools, goods, etc. be safely handled or lifted by one person? Is the worker physically and mentally capable to perform the job alone? Is there a risk of violence? All aspects of the job must be reviewed when performing a risk assessment.

Provide adequate training

Training is an important aspect for keeping lone workers safe. With little to no supervision, there's no one to guide and help the worker or hold them accountable. It's up to the worker to follow all safety procedures and know what to do in emergency situations. Training may be critical to avoid panic reactions in unusual situations. Lone workers should also be trained in first aid. Depending on location, it may be some time before emergency personnel can arrive. Rendering first aid on oneself such as controlling bleeding or immobilizing a broken bone, can be the difference between life and death. First-aid kits should be in all worker vehicles and checked periodically to restock or replace expired supplies.

Create an emergency action plan

Having a thorough emergency action plan for all lone worker jobs is critical. By laying out the steps a lone worker and the employer should take in a variety of emergency situations, the worker will have the best chance to survive an accident or stay out of harm's way all together. Ensure contact information for emergency phone numbers are checked and updated frequently.

Establish regular communications systems between lone workers and supervisors

Regular communication between a lone worker and supervisor is crucial to ensure the worker is always safe. By establishing periodic check-in procedures, it alerts the supervisor that something is wrong when a check-in is missed. Also, have supervisors make periodic visits to lone workers. This increases accountability and lets the lone worker know their safety is a priority.

Use real time monitoring systems

Technology continues to advance in real-time monitoring. Systems are available that track your location, detects sudden falls and periods of inactivity, and automatically alert your employer and emergency services. These systems are being integrated into devices such as air monitors and cell phones. Relying solely on cell service can be problematic especially in more rural job locations.

Develop a lone-worker policy

A lone worker policy should be developed and reviewed periodically. Lone workers should be trained on the policy including the employer's expectations to be notified of safety hazards in the field. The policy may also outline the activities acceptable to complete while working alone and those that require requesting assistance in the field. Activities that may require assistance include: entering a confined space, working on electrical systems over 600 Volts, or evaluation of a site by a competent person. The policy should also include the employer having up-to-date contact information for lone workers in case of an emergency. When was the last time you provided your supervisor or employer with the latest cell phone numbers for your next of kin?

Conclusion

It's not uncommon to hear stories about workers succumbing to a serious injury while working alone. It's also not uncommon to hear someone had to discover them and summon emergency assistance. Employers must take steps to address the hazard and minimize employees' exposure to it. Solutions may include: conducting risk assessments, providing training, having an emergency action plan, establishing regular communication systems, using real time monitoring systems, and developing a lone worker policy. However, the solutions are only viable if the employees use them and embrace them as part of the safety culture.

Group Activity

Get with a partner and discuss the last three on-the-job incidents you remember whether on this job or a previous job. Regardless of if it was a near miss, first aid incident, or something more serious, discuss the potential and worst-case scenario. Discuss how the incident would have been more challenging if this had happened to a lone worker. Discuss how the worker would possibly render first aid to themselves. Discuss how the incident should be specifically prevented for lone workers. Describe worst-case scenarios of lone workers getting injured to the group and have them come up with ideas and solutions to ensure the injured workers have the best chances of survival.

Resources

[The Ohio State University, Lone worker program.](#)

[Canadian Center for Occupational Health and Safety, Working alone.](#)

[United Kingdom Health and Safety Executive, Lone worker toolbox.](#)