

## Working alone: Make sure it's safe

We've all heard stories about workers who went out to take a reading or check on equipment and never returned. By the time someone missed them, it was too late. If you have employees who work alone, either after hours or in remote locations, it's a good idea to develop some method of routine monitoring to ensure their safety and well being.

### Assess the job

Assess every "work alone" situation to determine if there are hazardous conditions or circumstances that would compromise the safety of the employee. If you identify any dangerous situations, set up procedures to ensure that the individual is monitored and can get assistance if an accident occurs. Provide the necessary tools and equipment, provide information about the hazards that may be encountered, and train everyone involved, including workers, supervisors, and foremen.

### Categorize the job

When assessing the conditions under which an employee works alone, there will be some job functions that have inherent hazards associated with them. Categorize these job functions as high risk, low risk, or combinations of both.

#### High risk job hazards:

- Entering any confined space
- Working with:
  - o high energy materials (radioactive, high temperature)
  - o toxic gases, liquids, or solids
  - o cryogenic (low temperature) materials/processes
  - o high pressure systems and high voltage electrical systems
  - o moving equipment or machinery
  - o handling or transferring flammable liquids
- Working in:
  - o extreme weather conditions
  - o laboratory functions
  - o services industries where job functions may not be hazardous but where cash or goods handled may cause the situation to attract criminal victimization

#### Low risk job hazards:

- Maintenance functions other than on active processing equipment
- Security watchman's functions (except in hazardous locations)
- Janitorial or custodial functions (except in hazardous locations)
- Routine job functions that are part of a long-standing operating procedure where experience has shown them to be safe
- Desk work

### Control measures

After the assessment, develop control methods to minimize the risks identified, including a method to get emergency help for the worker if it is needed. The following examples provide such measures.

**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, vapors, or mists may accumulate. The buddy must be knowledgeable concerning the

activities of the worker being observed, be properly equipped with emergency equipment, and be capable of putting preplanned rescue or emergency operations into effect.

**Personal check** — Check on the worker by periodic visits at regular intervals. This should be done by the employer, another worker, or some other knowledgeable person designated by the employer. The length of time between checks should be determined by the hazards of the job.

**Periodic telephone contact** — Communicating via the telephone at regularly scheduled intervals may be adequate in low-risk work alone situations. Telephone numbers for routine calling and emergency situations should be prominently posted. Even office workers should be instructed about emergency procedures for working alone outside of regular office hours.

**Mechanical/electrical surveillance** — Workplace security systems can often be modified to monitor a particular worker who is working alone as well as the status of the workplace itself. You may want to 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 instance, if an employee is deaf, visible alarms should be provided in the workplace.

**Central monitoring** — The activities of those required to work alone are monitored by a person or outside facility designed for that purpose. If you decide to use a central monitoring system to relay an alarm, check federal, state, and local regulations regarding this system.

### **Plan for safety**

Working alone strategies should be an extension of routine safety and health planning. Even if no one is working alone right now, circumstances may occur some day that require an employee to do a job when others are not around. Whether it is a standard practice or an occasional necessity, work alone planning is essential for employee safety.