Best Practices for a Lone Worker Safety Program

Scope

While it's common for workers to perform work alone, performing high hazard tasks alone presents an unacceptable risk. Lone Worker protocols are covered by OSHA's General Duty clause. In addition, some specific tasks are specifically prohibited or governed by regulations pertaining to confined space entry, HAZWOPER activities, and firefighting activities.

This best practice covers activities while working alone covered by the General Duty clause. See the section "Other Resources" for the lone worker activities that are specifically regulated. In addition, it's both a prerequisite and assumption that in using this best practice that effective emergency action plans are in place.

Key Points

- Have a documented Lone Worker policy for work not specifically regulated.
- Define situations when work cannot be done by a lone worker.
- Perform a risk analysis for lone work.
- Commensurate with risk, ensure monitoring, supervision, and other precautions are in place for the duration of the lone work.

Definition of Lone Worker

A lone worker is commonly defined as someone who 1) works alone at a work site in circumstances where assistance is not readily available when needed; and 2) cannot be seen or heard by another person. A lone worker can be any job classification and of any time duration. Examples include an operator permanently assigned to a remote operating area for their full shift, maintenance employee working by oneself during a task, and shipping employees performing activities alone.

Lone Worker Policy

Best practice is to have a documented Lone Worker policy that covers both employees and contractors. The policy shall include:

- Defining Lone Work.
- Defining restrictions to lone work.
- Evaluating the hazards and risks.
- Protective measures and equipment for the lone worker.
- Knowing when they should remove themselves from the workplace or situation.
- Training/retraining requirements.

Define the Hazards

The risk of working alone depends on the hazards present. These include, but aren't limited to:

- Employee medical conditions.

- Potential for a hazardous atmosphere.
- Routine vs. nonroutine work.
- Foreseeable emergencies that a lone worker may encounter. Can the lone employee execute the emergency action plan?

Define the Risks

Risks can be gleaned from JHA/JSA's, PHA's, past incidents, etc. For situations where an operator or maintenance employee routinely works in a remote area, ensure that the operating/maintenance procedures and emergency action plans are evaluated to ensure that the work can be done alone safely and to identify tasks which require additional help. Best practice is to perform an MOC (Management of Change) when there are personnel changes, including changes to staffing levels. This is especially important when evaluating a change that creates lone worker situations.

Mitigate the Risks - Restrict Certain Tasks

Consider restricting lone worker activities under certain circumstances, such as:

- When a permit is in use (hot work, line disconnecting, confined space).
- When lockout is involved.
- When working from scaffolding.
- When working near exposed live electrical conductors 50V or greater.
- Performing tasks for which the employee isn't fully trained.
- Performing non-routine work (e.g., startups from major turnarounds, trials) unless evaluated and approved first.
- Mobile crane work.

Mitigate the Risks - Monitor Lone Workers

Commensurate with risk, employers shall require employees to check-in on a periodic basis. This can be done by cell phone, landline, two-way radio, or intercom. Also consider video surveillance and how it will be monitored. There are wearable electronic devices that can be considered for check-in, fall detection, and panic buttons that could be considered. Also, some two-way radios can be equipped with a man down (tilt switch) sensor.

Mitigate the Risks – Other Precautions

Ensure fixed and wearable atmospheric monitors, such as for smoke, carbon monoxide, flammability, and hydrogen sulfide are in place and functional. Regarding use of fall protection equipment when working alone, there is a risk of an individual being suspended by their lanyard in mid-air for too long after a fall. Devices are commercially available to allow the individual to self-descend (self-rescue).

Training

Best practice is to conduct initial training and recurring training at least every three years, and when job positions or conditions change. Since every lone worker scenario cannot be defined,

it's important to train and empower employees to identify unacceptable risks when working alone and to ask for assistance when they feel it's necessary.

Other Resources

The following regulations include specific requirements for types of lone workers, not covered in this best practice:

- 29 CFR 1910.134 for firefighter respiratory protection
- 29 CFR 1910.120 for HAZWOPER operations
- 29 CFR 1910.146 for permit-required confined space entry