



# OHS GUIDANCE NOTE - No. 14

## “WORKING ALONE”

August 2009

### ***Working alone – identifying and addressing risks***

#### **Background**

People who work alone face different levels of risks to others and WorkSafe receives regular enquiries from both workers and employers in office and industrial environments about their responsibilities and the implications of having employees working alone.

#### **What does the law say?**

The *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* requires employers to eliminate or reduce risks to health and safety, so far as is reasonably practicable.

#### **What is working alone?**

‘Working alone’ is working anywhere a person is unable to get immediate assistance from colleagues or other people. In some cases other people may be close by, such as a cleaner working by themselves in a city office building. In other cases the employee could be in a remote location, such as a researcher undertaking field work by themselves in a national park.

There are many scenarios in many occupations where these circumstances could apply, e.g;

- Sales representatives, including real estate agents;
- All night convenience store and service station attendants;
- Transport freight and public transport drivers;
- Doctors, health and community workers;
- Rural and agricultural workers; or
- Scientists, park rangers or others undertaking field work.

#### **What are the risks?**

*Violence* and *poor access to emergency assistance* are the two main hazards of working alone. However these hazards can also be faced by people who work with colleagues.

***Because there are no hazards which are exclusive to working alone, the hazards and risks of the particular job need to be dealt with first. Working alone does however exacerbate the risks of any given job.***

Working alone can *increase the likelihood* of the hazard or risk, e.g., an attendant working alone late at night in a 24 hour convenience store may be a greater target for robbery.

Working alone can also *increase the severity* of workplace injuries. A park ranger who is bitten by a snake has a greater chance of severe consequences if they are working alone rather than with colleagues who can help.

### **What should employers do?**

After assessing the risks of the particular job, employers should assess the risks of working alone, which may apply to any employees who spend periods of working time isolated from direct contact with colleagues or other immediate support.

### **What are appropriate solutions for the risks of working alone?**

Employers can put in place a number of measures which may reduce the hazards and risks of working alone.

- **'Buddy' System** – some occupations present such a high level of risk that employees should not be required to do the work alone. Occupations with a high risk of violence fall in this category.
- **Communication or location systems** – systems which can quickly locate employees or enable quick communication will help in directing assistance. OHS regulations (3.4.16) require employers to maintain continuous communication with employees working in the isolated environment of a confined space. Mine operators must also have means for constant communication with an employee who is working alone at an isolated location at a mine. Some examples of communication or location systems are mobile or radio communications and GPSs (global positioning systems). The technology selected must always be supported by the infrastructure (e.g. not all rural areas have adequate coverage for some mobile phone technologies).
- **Alarms** such as panic buttons can also notify authorities of workplace emergencies.
- **Movement records** – knowing where employees are expected to be can assist in managing risks. Examples are call in systems with supervisors or colleagues or using whiteboards at base.
- **Training** – employees who deal with potentially violent clients alone need appropriate training. Employees in remote locations also need training in first aid.
- **Knowledge sharing** – local, industry or client specific knowledge on where hazards and risks may arise assists with good OHS planning. Databases, briefings and log books can all help in making sure that knowledge is shared between employers and employees.

***In most workplaces it is unlikely that one solution by itself will be sufficient to deal with the risks of working alone and more than one solution will be required (e.g. combine using a mobile phone to stay in contact with base with training in dealing with aggressive clients).***

### **Other sources of information**

#### **WorkSafe Guidance:**

<http://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/WorkSafe/Home/Safety+and+Prevention/Health+And+Safety+Topics/Working+Alone/>

#### **On working alone**

<http://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/WorkSafe/Home/Forms+and+Publications/Tools/Working+Alone+-+Identifying+and+addressing+risks>

The TWU Vic/Tas Branch (OH&S section) formulated this code. It is offered as a broad guide to assist with members. Further information regarding "GPS & tracking devices", "Consultation and Employees obligations" in the workplace is available for Members who can contact the *TWU Health and Safety Section* or the TWU Member Assist Officer for a copy the Union's Policy.

Contact your local TWU Organiser -

Or call TWU Information Officer / OHS Section

Phone: 1300-727614  
Fax: 03-9646 1792  
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