

Out of Sight, but Still at Risk: Do Your Employees Work Alone?

Topic: **EHS Management**

Working alone can be dangerous, even for the most mundane jobs. In July 2015, James Flannery was just doing his job—delivering pizza to an East Columbus, Ohio, address—when things went wrong. His "customers" shot the 59-year-old delivery man in the chest and robbed him before he was able to flee in his van. He didn't make it far before succumbing to his wound and crashing the van.

Do your employees work alone? If so, they may be at increased risk of work-related injury or death. Take some time to identify the risks they may face.

Defining 'Alone'

When a worker is unaccompanied in a remote location, it's obvious that he or she is "alone." But, there are other circumstances in which a worker could be considered alone even if other people are around. For example:

- If the worker is the only representative of the employer who is present. Home health workers, residential installation and repair workers, insurance adjusters, utility meter-readers, and many other workers go into the community—where there are other people around—but essentially work "alone."
- If the worker cannot be seen or heard by other workers. A building receptionist or maintenance worker may not technically be "alone" in the building, but the maintenance worker who is alone in a corner of the basement or the roof, the receptionist who is alone in the front of the building, or the security guard who is alone in the guard shack at the entrance to the parking lot may be exposed to some of the same hazards as a worker in a remote area, like having no one available to respond in the event of a medical emergency.



Robbery-Related Violence

Workers who handle money and work alone are at increased risk of robbery-related violence. This includes:

- Delivery drivers and taxi drivers, who can be drawn to remote areas without surveillance;
- Utility workers and postal workers, who may be required to go alone, on foot, into high-crime areas; *and*
- Workers at a fixed location like pharmacies, gas stations, and convenience stores, who may have access to larger amounts of money or to controlled substances, making them attractive targets even if surveillance is present.

Customer/Client-Related Violence

Not all assaults are robbery-related. Some workers may find themselves in danger from the people they serve or from others in the area. Home health workers, parole officers, police officers, and others who work alone in the community may find themselves vulnerable to assault by their patients, clients, or others. Don't forget to assess the risk posed by third parties—for example, a hospice worker may not be at risk of assault by a patient, but a distraught family member in the home may pose a risk.

Accidental Injury and Medical Emergencies

Another category of risk for solo workers is the risk that they will be injured or will suffer a medical emergency while on the job without anyone available to assist. If a lone worker falls off a ladder or roof, has a heart attack, runs off the road in a remote area, suffers heat illness, is bitten by a venomous snake while at a remote location, or steps in a hole and breaks his or her ankle, help might not be on the way until he or she misses the next check-in.

Tomorrow, we'll look at some ways to minimize the risks of working alone.

