

Working safe when working alone

Introduction

Many voluntary organisations have workers or volunteers who may occasionally be required to work alone. This work can vary depending on the nature of the organisation. Working alone doesn't necessarily mean that there are no other people present, either – a caseworker can be visiting a client or attending an evening meeting on their own and there may be personal safety issues connected with these situations.

There is no legal prohibition on working alone, but the Health & Safety at Work Act and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations still apply to employers, or those using volunteers. These require the identification of the hazards of the work, assessment of any significant risks involved, and devising safe working arrangements to ensure that the risks are either eliminated or adequately controlled.

Some general principles

The Suzy Lamplugh Trust suggests the following guidelines for lone working:

- Always tell someone where you are going, who you are meeting and when you expect to return
- Prepare yourself for difficult meetings by finding out everything you need to know before arriving and planning in your mind how you are going to deal with it
- Do not meet aggression with aggression
- Do not enter a building, particularly someone else's home, if you don't feel comfortable or safe
- If driving, ensure you belong to a national breakdown service, and that you know where you are going and how to get there
- Always check the identity of people visiting you in your own office or home; where possible arrange not to be alone or instigate a "buddy" system where someone checks up on you
- Record the name and contact details of people you are meeting



Workers are considered to be working alone if they have no communication with someone who can summon assistance in the event of an accident or illness. Lone working must not be undertaken where there is a reasonable risk that the work might result in an accident which would be serious enough to require a second person to summon help. Any work which must not be performed by a lone worker under any circumstances must be laid down in the organisation's procedures.

Working alone in offices outside normal working hours is unlikely to be a significant risk, provided fire precautions are in place. In the evenings and at weekends, doors providing an exit during normal working hours are often locked for security reasons. Has the lone worker been made aware that their route out of the building in an emergency may

be different?

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Situations where 'Lone Working' is prohibited by law

The following are examples of work which, by law, requires more than one person.

- **Entry into confined spaces**
Confined spaces include tanks, manholes, pipes, flues, ducts, ceiling voids, enclosed basement rooms, and other spaces where there may be inadequate ventilation or a build-up of fumes. Someone could also become stuck in a tight place, out of sight or earshot of others.
- **Use of ladders which cannot be secured and erection of scaffolding**
- **Use of specified dangerous machines**
People are prohibited by law from working alone with a range of industrial cutting, slicing and pressing machines unless they have received formal training in working with them. These include lathes, woodworking machines,

bandsaws, mincers, guillotines, presses and even potato chippers or large commercial food mixers. Training must consist of one-to-one instruction on the hazards associated with them, and the measures required to minimise the risks. The use of guards, safety devices and protective clothing where appropriate must be demonstrated. A written record of the training must be kept.

Although it is unlikely the average voluntary organisation will come into contact with the above, don't forget things like drills, angle grinders, even powered garden tools. Even though it's not illegal to work alone with these, training should be given and it's always best if there's a second person there to switch off the power in the event of an accident.

Safe working arrangements for Lone Workers

Establishing safe working arrangements for lone workers is no different from organising the safety of other staff. The obvious question that has to be asked is whether the risks of the work can be adequately controlled by one person, or are more people necessary?

Can one person safely handle all the equipment needed?

It may be heavy, awkward, unstable, large, etc. More than one person may be necessary for the safe running of equipment. Even things like lugging a set of display boards or a projection screen up a staircase for a presentation need to be considered.

Can all the substances and materials involved in the work be handled safely by one person?

Hazardous substances, e.g. substances which are subject to the COSHH Regulations, must be considered carefully.

Will cash be handled and will there be a risk of violence?

A worker should not be left alone where cash is involved, such as counting the takings in a charity shop after hours, for example. If there is a risk of any situation turning violent for whatever reason, the

worker should try to ensure someone else is within earshot, for example in the next office. Many organisations whose work brings them into contact with emotive or potentially aggressive people use devices like panic buttons, as well as simple precautions, such as using interview rooms with two doors and a wide table separating the worker from the client. It is often better to hold evening meetings at your own premises rather than in a high-risk neighbourhood. If this is not possible, use a taxi or get someone else to drive you there and back.

Medical Fitness

Both routine work and emergencies should be considered when assessing whether a person is medically fit to work alone. Emergencies may impose additional physical and mental stress on the individual. Don't forget about sudden illness either. None of us likes to think about it but thousands of people collapse every day for all sorts of reasons, usually with little or no warning. If that happened in a lone working situation, how long would it be before the person was discovered?

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Supervision

Although lone workers cannot be constantly monitored, there is still a duty on the employer to provide appropriate supervision. Supervision, along with information, instruction and training ensures that staff and volunteers understand the risks involved and that the necessary safety precautions are carried out

The amount of supervision required should not be left to individuals to decide – it must be laid down by management in the form of procedures. Systems should be devised to monitor lone workers, such as

checking in at the end of the working period. It may be necessary to consider regular contact between the lone worker and a supervisor, using either a telephone or mobile phone at pre-arranged intervals.

Resources and further information

Courses and information on personal safety and lone working are provided by The Suzy Lamplugh Trust, National Centre for Personal Safety, Hampton House, 20 Albert Embankment, London, SE1 7TJ, tel 0207 091 0014

E.mail: infor:suzylamplugh.org

Website: www.suzylamplugh.org

The Health and Safety Executive have a free leaflet, "Working Alone in Safety" (IND73) which is also available on their website: www.hse.gov.uk and a DVD available called "Personal Safety at Work: Planning for Safety and Conflict Management"

This fact sheet is one of a series of fact sheets produced by High Peak CVS. **They can all be downloaded from our website www.highpeakcvs.org.uk/how**

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To find out how we can help your group, please contact us on 01663 735 350 or email hello@highpeakcvs.org.uk



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