Managing increasing numbers of lone workers

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The number of lone workers in the UK has increased by about 2 million since 2019 (before the pandemic). It used to be the case that lone working was only prevalent in highly volatile industries such as engineering and security. But now lone working spans nearly every sector as more people choose to work from home, or in a hybrid way.

How have those sectors that are familiar with lone working adapted to new technology? And how can employers adapt to ever rising numbers of lone workers in their workforce?

New technology

In the past, regulations for lone workers were devised with more dangerous environments in mind, such as engineers in confined spaces. These lone workers would take a form of secondary device into their working environment for their own protection. It might look like a clunky walkie-talkie or a radio. It would have the ability for a constant communications check, and a man-down alert.

But these devices are unsuitable for many industries. They are not practical for customer-facing roles, in which lone working is becoming more common..

Nowadays, in the same way that most processes have migrated towards smart phones, lone working safety can be monitored through an app. Workers rarely forget to bring their phone with them. And if they do find themselves in need of assistance, they have everything they need on their phone to call or text for

assistance, and video anything they think would be helpful.

If the lone worker finds themself in a situation in which discretion is sensible, then apps often provide functionality to give one-way communication. The control centre can monitor what's going on, without alerting the perpetrators and potentially putting the worker in greater danger.

At it's most basic functionality, the app will ask the worker to check in on a regular basis. If the worker does not respond to the request, someone in the employer's control centre will call them to check that everything is OK. If there's no response to the call, the situation is escalated to a line manager, who may have an alternative means of reaching the worker. If communication back-up options are still fruitless, then the employer may alert the blue light services.

But it's not just the ease of communication that makes these apps successful. As it's GPS tracked, it's much quicker and easier to locate a lone worker in trouble. Overall, it's a much cheaper, safer option than anything we've had before.

Fixing the problem of under-reporting

Under-reporting has long since been a problem in lone working. Workers are usually asked to contact someone when they are in need of physical help. That means that many lone workers ignore their instincts for danger and wait too long to raise an alarm for an evolving situation.

But if there's a function on the app to alert somebody before it gets to that stage, a worker feels justified in notifying the control centre of an emerging problem. There's no longer any risk that they are raising a false alarm and they can be reassured that reporting is expected in these situations.

Accommodating higher numbers of lone workers

Some industries are getting used to lone working for the first time. Since more workers are choosing to work from home, employers face a greater burden in lone working compliance. While they once only had to consider the health and safety of their employees in the office, now they have to consider their health and safety as they work in remote locations and while they travel between sites.

The way to deal with an increasing number of home workers is to:

- Provide training (more on this below)
- Plan frequent check-ins. A quick 15 minute call once a day may be sufficient
- Ask them to use an app
- Ask them to install a panic button on their phone

The importance of training

In those industries where lone working has been the norm for many years (cleaning, security, engineering), most workers understand why there are special measures in place. They know that it is for their own safety, and they feel supported and looked after when they know that their employer takes their safety seriously.

However, switching to a new system can feel like a compromise to their safety if they don't feel confident with the new process. Providing comprehensive training before you roll out a new system is paramount to it being applied correctly, and keeping your workers happy and protected.

For other industries, lone working feels like a privilege. For all those home workers that no longer have to attend the office every day since covid-19 changed the way we work, they may not feel unsafe in their own home, or remote workspace. Instead, it may feel like an intrusion on their privacy if the employer introduces lone working measures.

That could lead to pushback from employees. That's where training becomes essential. People tend to be more amenable to change if they know why they are being asked to do something. And especially when they know that it's for their own benefit. Explain that it is part of the employer's duty of care towards their employees, and the measures are in place for the worker's own safety. That will help to placate any workers that feel like they are being 'checked up on'.

Conclusion

While the nature of lone working is changing, the regulations to keep employees safe is not. One of the most effective ways to comply with the duty of care is to invest in an app for lone working that all your employees can download and use when they are working alone.