



PLAY IT SAFE

Craig Swallow wonders how, in an age of hybrid working, organisations can ensure employees are safe

Every employer organisation has risks and a duty of care to ensure its employees are safe within the workplace. Many employees do not work in one fixed place and this situation can change day to day, a factor that organisations need to consider when assessing the risk to staff and how to reduce it. Do employers need to consider the potential risks to changing working environments?

The concept of what comprises a workplace has changed significantly. Research shows that since the pandemic began, some 60 percent of people in the UK began working from home. Many have now adapted to this working style and are likely to continue this way. Some organisations might

incorporate a mixed model of home and office working or using hot-desking at work or in shared workspaces away from the office. When a working environment changes, new risks to employees need to be assessed. Where the workplace is not fixed, employers need to consider the potential risks in the various workplaces, as well as in any travel environments.

Risk assessments are a historic way of helping to ensure health and safety regulations are met or, where desired, exceeded. They are useful to management for identifying any patterns of risks, allowing security or HR/H&S personnel to investigate ways to reduce and better manage potential hazards to employees. Where employees work in various places, at different times, it is crucial for employers to ensure management can

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communicate effectively with staff when required. This is particularly important in cases of emergencies or expected emergencies (a weather storm or terrorist incident, for example), where staff might not be checking their emails and/or SMS or WhatsApp messages on a regular basis.

An increasing number of employees spend more time on their own than before the pandemic. Whether they are working from home on their own or visiting clients in the community alone, employees can feel more isolated. Organisations should ensure measures are in place to check on their well-being. Involving employees in this process can help organisations understand how they can ensure the process will work effectively.

Working from home or remotely as a lone worker is a two-way street as it can be beneficial to both employers and employees. One well-noted advantage to the employee is increased productivity, since workers don't have to spend a considerable amount of time commuting to and from the office. Another advantage is that employees can enjoy flexible working hours, giving themselves a sense of freedom as well as trust from their employer.

On the flip side, and focusing on the employer, by having workers at home and not in the office, companies can save on costs if they don't have to maintain a large office. Another perk for employers is that a remote working structure can help companies expand their presence in strategic locations by having more workers in numerous locations at one given time. This does have its downside, however, for remote employees because working at home can make them feel isolated from their colleagues; and, of course, they have no direct supervision unless virtual one-to-one or group meetings are held.

In all working environments, the employer is responsible for the health, safety and welfare of its employees and this applies to any contractors, volunteers, or self-employed workers. It's often perfectly safe to work alone. However, the law requires employers to think about and deal with any health and safety risks before employees are allowed to do so. Establishing a healthy and safe working environment for lone workers can be different from organising the health and safety of other in-house workers. One thing to consider when ensuring the safety of a lone worker is assessing areas of risk. Assessment could cover such issues as is the employee fit, do they have the medical suitability to work on their own and does their workplace present a risk to them?

Another consideration is having systems in place to always keep in touch with staff and respond to any incident. Employees and some self-employed workers also have responsibilities to take reasonable care of themselves and other people affected by their work activities, and to co-operate with their employers in meeting their legal obligations.

An employer must protect the health, safety, and welfare of their employees and other people who might be affected by their business. Employers must do whatever is reasonably practicable to meet health, safety and welfare obligations to achieve this. This means making sure that workers and others are protected from anything that may cause harm, effectively by controlling any risks to injury or health that could arise in any of the workplaces. Employers have duties under health and safety laws to assess risks in the workplace. Risk assessments should be carried out that address all risks that might cause harm in your workplace.

Employers must give staff information about the risks in the workplace and how they are protected, as well as instructing and training them on how to deal with the risks. Employers are also obligated to consult employees on health and safety issues. Consultation can be done directly by management/line managers or via a safety representative who is either elected by the workforce or appointed by a trade union.

To recap, lone working can negatively impact employees' work-related stress levels and their mental health. Management standards for work-related stress exist and include such factors as relationships with, and support from, other workers and managers. Being away from managers and colleagues could mean a good level of support is more difficult to achieve. Therefore, putting procedures in place that allow direct contact between

SINCE THE PANDEMIC BEGAN 60% OF PEOPLE IN THE UK STARTED WORKING FROM HOME

the lone worker and their manager should be the first step and will definitely be helpful.

Managing work-related stress relies on understanding, by management, what comprises 'normal' employee behaviour and therefore being able to recognise abnormal behaviour or symptoms at an early point. If contact between management and the lone worker is poor, employees may feel disconnected, isolated or abandoned. The best way for management to keep in contact with lone workers is to agree on a time to keep in touch, whether that is by one-to-one meetings using Microsoft Teams, Zoom etc. or meeting face-to-face.

In the meetings, the lone worker can be updated with all the latest office news and invited to social team events and activities. Moreover, it's vital to ensure lone workers are included in any consultation about changes that may have implications unique to them. Consultation could include training courses that are essential for improving the employee's standard of work, and/or it changing.

Feeling overwhelmed, poorly managed or mistreated in the workplace can aggravate pre-existing mental health conditions. Problems at work can bring on symptoms or make their effects worse, even in best-performing staff. Whether work is causing the health issue or aggravating it, employers still have a legal responsibility to help where reasonably possible. Interventions can include those required by the Equality Act 2010. Mental health issues are on the rise in the workplace, as exemplified by the following information from mental health charity, Mind UK: more than one in five (21 percent) of employees admitted they called in sick to avoid work when asked how workplace stress had affected them; 14 percent agreed they had resigned and 42 percent had considered resigning when asked how workplace stress had affected them; 30 percent of staff disagreed with the statement: "I would feel able to talk openly with my line manager if I was feeling stressed"; and 56 percent of employers said they would like to do more to improve staff well-being, but don't feel they have the right training or guidance.

The reality of budgeting pressures is not new to companies when it comes to their employee safety departments, which often must handle the duty of care obligations within a dwindling budget. Employee health and safety budgets have reduced even more during the Covid-19 pandemic, making it vital for safety professionals, HR and middle management to showcase and justify their activities. One of the best

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ways to highlight the activities to senior management is to make invisible success... visible.

Subjects including employee turnover, absenteeism and well-being questionnaire results are great starting points to assess how safe the workforce feels, and should be completely transparent to the business owners, CEOs and other executives without necessarily giving away the personal identities of the participants. If senior management can be shown success achieved on the current budget, it might remain intact. Note the "might". More research is required to showcase true ROI, which leads nicely onto the second variable – financial analysis.

What are the financial aspects – including cost outcome analysis, cost-benefit analysis or cost-effective analysis – of health and safety programmes? All these analyses work the same way, but one may be more appropriate to use than the others. First, management should estimate the net cost of a programme by determining how much it costs to

implement, before subtracting the cost savings that are associated with it. Determining cost savings can be challenging, so it's crucial to be able to demonstrate quantitatively that the programme is having a direct positive impact. Matching visibility, that is built on solid foundations, with financial clarity and accuracy, is key.

Introducing and reinforcing risk reduction and associated health and safety programmes nationwide or internationally can be made easier by modern technology. Examples include app-based tools linked to a server-based 'dashboard' at head office, enabling the employer to build and maintain better communications with employees regardless of where they are. Communications can include mass-mailouts to staff of messages alerting them to actual or anticipated risk to well-being (including risk to life) incidents. At a more mundane, but still important level, mass communications can be about new health and safety guidelines or simply psychologically supportive messages designed to optimise employee mental well-being.

Employees can proactively use such apps at any time, wherever they are, to alert their employer – eg the HR or security department – about a risk-to-health-or-life situation they find themselves in or expect to find themselves in. Staff can also use an app to communicate with their line manager or the HR department about levels of stress or unhappiness they are experiencing.

To summarise, in an age of hybrid working organisations can take steps to ensure – as much as is reasonably possible – that employee well-being is optimised to the maximum. For a comprehensive end-to-end approach, the steps can start with risk assessments and move on to GPS, app-based tools that address all employee – senior executives included, let's not forget! – possible eventualities ●

Craig Swallow is Vismo CEO and has over 18 years direct experience of developing and delivering lone worker solutions to clients across the globe. He has a passionate focus on achieving valued solutions that deliver meaningful benefits to both employer and employee. Craig has always been an active member of standards boards, with a focus on worker safety solutions, alarm receiving centres and body-worn video

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