GOING SOLO

Don Cameron *reports on the dangers of lone working and what employers can do to keep staff safe*

F or many organisations, lone working can increase productivity, flexibility and allows businesses to operate on a wider scale. According to the latest HSE statistics, it is estimated that there now are up to 8-million lone workers in the UK, with the NHS alone estimated to employ 100,000 staff who work alone every day.

There are a number of risks that pose a threat to lone working staff, for example they do not have access to immediate help should an accident occur, which often makes their roles more dangerous than office-based jobs. If a lone worker suffers a fall, is attacked by an assailant or has a medical accident and is unable to call for help, they could be seriously harmed. So how can you ensure that your lone working staff are protected while at work?

GOING IT ALONE

To begin, it's more helpful to understand who qualifies as a lone worker. A lone worker is anyone who carries out work activities without the direct and immediate support of supervisors or colleagues. To put it simply, if an employee cannot be seen or heard by a colleague, they are lone working, whether that is for all or part of their working day. Arguments can also be made for employees who are training apprentices or new starters, who may not fully understand what to do in the event of an emergency.

Certain environments increase risk to employees where customers or the public are more likely to become upset, aggressive or take advantage of a lone worker. Environments where alcohol, gambling and/or money are involved as well as sensitive social work, can cause sudden mood changes. It is often the lone worker who faces the backlash and is left dealing with the customer or patient on their own.

Employers are responsible for the health, safety and welfare of all their workers whilst at work, yet a recent lone worker report from StaySafe showed that one-in-five lone workers are not aware of the company policies in place for their safety. The report also highlighted that 68 percent of companies surveyed have had a lone worker incident in the past three years. In some environments, no matter how stringent the risk assessment or safety measures put in place, the risk is too great to allow for lone working.

Lone workers face a range of hazards and risks on a daily basis that can differ from those based in a fixed or office environment. If you have more than five employees, you are legally required to carry out a lone working risk assessment. This will help you identify what needs to be done to control health and safety risks for your lone workers.

Carrying out a thorough risk assessment for each employee and environment (as appropriate) is the first and most important step to determining whether your employees are safe to work alone. If the risks identified through the process are too high or uncontrollable you must not let your employees work alone under any circumstance. If, however, steps can be taken to reduce risk to a controllable level, in line with legislation it may be safe to allow your employees to work alone, following the implementation of a strong lone worker policy.

As an employer, you have a legal duty of care to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all employees, including lone workers. Under most lone working regulations around the world, the employer's responsibilities include: conducting thorough lone worker risk assessments; producing a written health and safety policy and ensuring all employees understand it; taking steps to reduce or eliminate risk in order to create a safe working environment; providing information, instruction, lone worker

EMPLOYERS HAVE A LEGAL DUTY OF CARE TO ENSURE THE SAFETY OF ALL EMPLOYEES

training and supervision where appropriate; and regularly reviewing and improving upon lone worker risk assessments and policies

A lone worker policy is a guide that will set out your companies' rules on working alone and help your employees to understand the risks of their role. It should also provide them with practical advice and instruction on how to safely carry out their jobs.

A regular review of both your risk assessments and lone worker policies will help you to know if your lone workers are safe. You may also wish to

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carry out inspections to ensure safe work practices are being followed. StaySafe also offers a free guide to lone worker policies to help you structure your company policies for lone workers.

Risk assessments and lone worker policies are vital, and not just from a legal perspective, but StaySafe's lone worker research report found that 61 percent of lone workers do not feel they have a good understanding of the regulatory requirements in relation to lone working. This suggests that the messages employers are issuing around regulations are not getting through, so there is more work to do to improve the safety culture within your company, and one of these is through leadership.

Leadership style is key in bringing about change in the workplace. While leadership styles differ depending on each individual's skills and experiences, you may find that taking a transformational approach could have a positive impact in your workplace.

Transformational leadership refers to the idea of transforming employees' ways of thinking through inspiration, support and leading by example. A transformational leader will involve the entire workforce and coach them towards a new way of thinking and behaving. Some ways of adopting a transformational leadership style include: coaching employees instead of instructing them; appealing to the interests of the group rather than self-interest; praising safe behaviours rather than criticising unsafe ones; celebrating successes over focusing on failures; building trust between managers and teams, and creating a sense of community in the workplace; listening to employees and encouraging open communication; and involving workers in health and safety discussions, risk assessments, reviews *etc.*

Humans by nature are highly influenced by the environment and people around them. When entering a new workplace, workers are likely to adapt to their surroundings rather than go against the flow, even if it means ignoring the company's rules.

Implementing rules and procedures is not enough to meet legal requirements, you must also ensure that these rules are being followed. Creating a strong, positive culture and encouraging your employees to actively participate in health and safety will help you to meet your duty of care, and that will quickly become self-sustaining. New employees are more likely to adopt safe ways of working, especially when

it is modelled by your existing employees and your own management style.

Training is a key way to create a positive safety culture and improve employee safety across the entire company, not just with your lone workers. Recent research on lone workers from StaySafe showed that industries which carried out the most training also recorded the lowest numbers of lone worker incidents.

ONE-IN-FIVE LONE WORKERS ARE NOT AWARE OF THE POLICIES IN PLACE FOR THEIR SAFETY

A strong health and safety culture achieves more than just lower injury rates. If a workplace feels safe and secure, productivity and employee wellbeing are also going to be high. Employees have also proven to be more committed to company goals and work well together as a team in workplaces where a positive culture exists.

Transforming the workplace safety culture takes time and will come more naturally if you frequently work alongside your employees. However, if your employees work remotely, alone or across several sites, changing the culture could prove to be a longer process, as there is less influence from colleagues and less chance to learn by example. In order to change behaviour, you will need to ensure that all other managers and supervisors are committed to creating a positive safety culture.

While interaction with your employees may be virtual, each of the principles above should still be put into practice. Coaching, training and encouragement can be provided over the phone, and meetings can be arranged virtually with other colleagues to initiate discussion and in order to talk through any serious concerns.

Due to the associated risks and difficulty in receiving nearby assistance or raising an alarm, a lone worker app, such as the solution from StaySafe, is a simple way to protect your lone workers. An app should supplement your regular communication with lone working staff and any procedures put in place, while ensuring employees can quickly communicate with you and raise an alarm if needed.
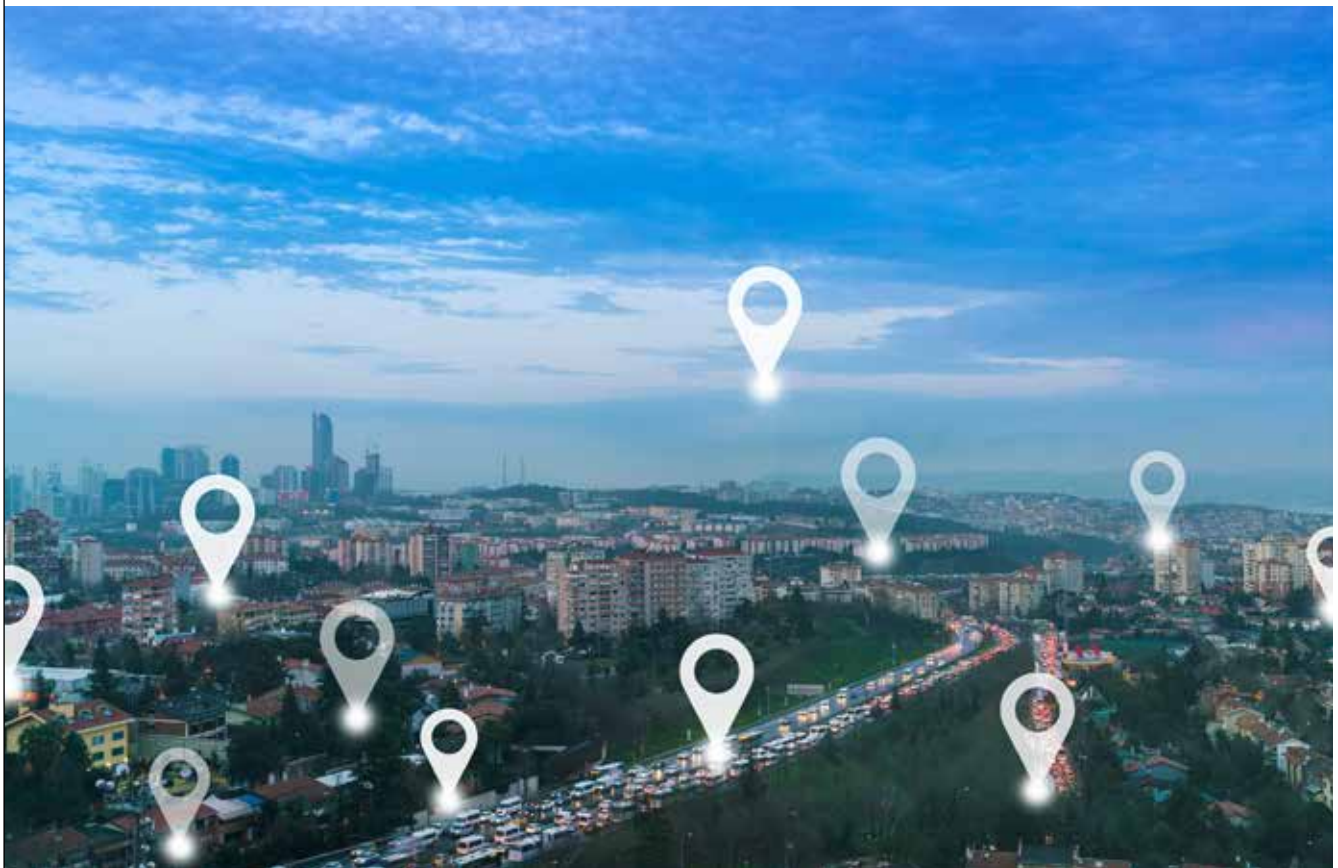
Apps are beneficial over manual methods, such as buddy systems and call check-ins which can be incredibly time consuming and unreliable. When searching for a lone worker solution, use the below as a functionality guide, the app you select should include: missed check-in alerts; panic alerts; man down alarms; discreet panic alerts; a duress pin; wearable technology/integration; live GPS monitoring; and low signal modes and satellite options for no-signal areas

Lone worker apps are particularly suitable in the current climate because of how well they lend themselves to being trailed, rolled out and utilised by staff remotely. Apps can be downloaded directly onto employees' phones without the need for any additional equipment being delivered.

If employees are encouraged to use the app daily, health and safety will be at the forefront of their minds whenever they begin work. Lone working apps enable you to fulfil your duty of care to your employees and enhance your reputation as a responsible employer. Implementing health and safety procedures will also communicate a positive message to staff that the company is looking out for their safety ●

Don Cameron, CEO of Stay Safe, has been leading the growth of StaySafe since 2014, and they are now the leading, global, app-based lone worker solution. Before coming over to StaySafe, Don built up over 25 years of experience developing successful business in the IT, telecoms and service industries.

Lone worker apps allow companies to fulfil duty of care to their employees

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