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What precautions do employers have to take for staff who work alone?

Question: When is an employer under a statutory duty to take measures or precautions regarding a worker who works alone?

Answer: Working alone can expose a worker to any number of hazards and risks. The nature, scope and potential severity depends on the specific workplace and the occupation. A security guard working the night-shift in a commercial building is exposed to hazards different from those encountered by a painter working atop tall ladders or scaffolding.

In some provinces, health and safety legislation prohibits a worker from working alone in certain circumstances. These prohibitions are uncommon and typically apply to highly dangerous jobs. For example, in Manitoba, an employee working with explosives must not work alone while carrying out a blasting operation. Likewise, in New Brunswick, a worker who operates a chainsaw, brush saw or clearing saw may not work alone.

Aside from an outright prohibition on working alone, health and safety legislation may require an employer to implement safety measures and precautions that reflect a worker's isolated state. In British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island and Saskatchewan, an employer is required to develop policies and procedures to address any situation where a worker may be required to work alone. This may include policies and procedures that address risk identification, access to first-aid and ability to communicate



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with others.

Some jurisdictions provide a specific code of practice an employer is required to implement. In British Columbia, a person working alone who is exposed to the risk of drowning must wear a life-jacket. In Quebec, an employer of a construction worker who works in an isolated location must provide "efficient intermittent or continuous watch."

Finally, in jurisdictions where legislation does not specifically require the development of policies and practices, an employer should still be conscious of its broad duty to take reasonable precautions to ensure the safety of its workers. This "catch-all" obligation has particular application where a health and safety risk is identifiable and attributable to the fact an employee works alone.

So, what measures might an employer take to meet statutory obligations to ensure the safety of an employee who works alone?

Complete a detailed assessment of hazards or risks. Every employer should conduct a thorough audit to

identify and understand all workplace hazards and risks. In so doing, an employer should avail itself of internal resources, such as its joint occupational health and safety committee, legal counsel and skilled occupational safety consultants.

Develop policies and procedures to reduce or eliminate identified hazards or risks. Once risks and hazards have been identified, an employer should develop policies and procedures to address them. This may include protocols regarding training, work schedules, modes and frequency of communication and the use of technology and safety equipment. The following are commonly used as safety measures for workers who work alone:

- Training:** Workers who work alone should be trained to identify the risks they face and how to react in the event of danger or injury. Regular safety training and retraining should be a staple in every workplace.

- Develop a check-in system:** A check-in system is a straight-forward way to keep tabs on employees who work alone. The employee would be required to check in with a designated person at regular intervals, failing which the employer knows to take proactive steps to confirm the employee is well.

A number of jurisdictions contemplate a check-in system as a general precautionary measure. In P.E.I., Nunavut and the Northwest Territo-

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