

This guide supports government organisations to identify and manage people who primarily work alone or in isolated conditions. It provides some practical and written guidance on how to go about taking some basic steps to eliminate challenges and risks.

Overview

Increasingly people are working remotely away from their office and are instead working out in the field or from a satellite office, home or a vehicle. A worker may be considered remote or isolated even if other people may be close by. Work can be remote because of the nature of the work, location, and time, such as visiting clients, inspecting workplaces, working in remote sites, or responding to calls after hours at home. In some situations, a worker may be alone for a short period of time, while in other situations they may be on their own for days or weeks in a remote location. Working remotely can be either a large or small part of the job but it can be hazardous when assistance is not readily available to an employee in the event of an injury, ill health or an emergency.

These guidelines provide a brief overview of some of the key health and safety issues as well as suggesting ways to eliminate or minimise the risks associated with working remotely.¹

Who is a Lone Worker?

In some cases workers who work remotely are also working alone. Lone workers are those who work by themselves without close or direct supervision; for example, people who work away from their fixed base, (such as maintenance workers); or people who service clients (such as social workers), or those people who work out in the field, (such as inspectors or rangers).² Whether a situation is a high or low risk will depend on the location, type of work, interaction with the public, or the consequences of an emergency, accident, injury, etc. Given that there are a wide variety of situations where people can be working alone, it is important to assess each situation individually.

¹ WorkSafe New Zealand (2017) Risk Management. Risk management. <https://worksafe.govt.nz/topic-and-industry/hazardous-substances/managing/risk-management/>

² WorkSafe New Zealand (2017). *General Risk and Workplace Management*. <https://worksafe.govt.nz/dmsdocument/886-general-risk-and-workplace-management-part-2>

Potential risks when working remotely

When managing the risks associated with working remotely, managers need to know the requirements set out in the [Health and Safety at Work \(General Risk and Workplace Management\) Regulations, 2016](#), and how these apply to work activities. A remote location does not have to be far away, it can be a storage room that is rarely used. Key risk areas that should be considered when working remotely or in isolation are:

- the work environment
- work equipment
- working alone
- travelling
- physical and mental wellbeing, and
- responding to emergencies and natural disasters.

While each circumstance will be different, it is also important to consider a range of factors when assessing the situation of working remotely and to apply the hierarchy of controls. That is, eliminate or minimise the need to work remotely. Examples of the factors that need to be considered are:

Ascertain if the worker or workers need to work remotely at all? Managers should first consider whether the remote work is necessary or whether or not technology, such as skype or drones, would be a good substitute.

What forms of communication are available and will emergency communication systems work properly in all situations? Also if the communication systems are located in a vehicle, will the worker need alternative arrangements to cover them when they are away from the vehicle?

What support systems are available?: Are there adequate radio telephones, man-down alarms, emergency procedures and first aid kits, and safety checks that may help to reduce the risk?

Are there any pre-existing medical conditions that may increase the risk of working remotely? Also do workers have adequate levels of experience and training in first aid and/or outdoor survival techniques?

Is there adequate training and information provided for the worker to be able to work remotely away from the office safely? In particular, are the workers and managers trained to cope with a range of situations, such as emergencies, hostile/aggressive encounters or equipment failure?

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Establishing a safe working environment for those people working remotely is no different from organising the safety of other workers. However, it is important to recognise that in challenging working environments outside the office or workshop, health and safety implications need to be considered when the job is designed and tasks are undertaken.

Organisational and individual risks

It is also important to look the risks from the perspective of both the organisation and the individual worker³. It is best to start at the organisational level by asking some basic questions:

- How many staff are working remotely and how many are likely to do so in the future?
- What is the geographical spread of remote workers?
- What types of activity are involved?
- Are remote workers working from home, from other work locations, or travelling from place to place?

The main risk assessment issues that need to be considered from the perspective of the individual worker are:

Security: working remotely in isolated areas may put a worker at increased risk from verbal or physical abuse from other people that they interact with.

Social isolation: workers working remotely, particularly if they are operating alone, are at risk of social isolation. Managers should endeavour to ensure that there are regular opportunities to keep in touch and to bring the person together with the rest of the team (even if this is by email, telephone conferences, video conferences etc.).

Organisation isolation: workers working remotely should receive the same information, level of consultation and training and development opportunities as other workers. Managers should invite these workers to attend when there are events, both social and work-related.

Technological isolation: workers working in remote or isolated areas should have access to the same or more advanced technology as other workers (depending on the job requirements).

Safety: the workers' physical safety will depend on their job tasks. For example, an inspector working in the field may have different risks compared to an administrator working remotely but both situations present risks. However, if something goes wrong or there is an accident or an emergency etc. assistance should be readily available irrespective of the type of job being undertaken.

Transport: key issues that need to be considered are: is transportation necessary to get there? What kind of transportation is needed? Is the vehicle equipped with emergency supplies such as food and drinking water, as well as a first aid kit? Will the employee need to carry some or all of the emergency supplies with them when they leave the vehicle? What are the consequences if the vehicle breaks down? Will the employee have to leave the vehicle for long periods of time?

What can be done to stay safe and healthy?

There are a number of steps that can be taken to help ensure the health and safety of staff working remotely, for example:

Wherever possible, avoid the practice of working alone in remote or isolated situations, especially for jobs with a recognised risk. Schedule higher risk tasks to be done during normal business hours or when another worker is able to be present if an emergency should occur.

Assess the hazards involved in working remotely and take corrective action to prevent or minimize the potential risks. Report all situations, incidents or 'near misses' when working remotely. Analyse this information and make changes to the organisation's policy where necessary. Learn from similar incidents in comparable organisations and workplaces. Provide appropriate training and education.

Establish a check-in procedure. Make sure that regular contact is kept with all staff at all times. Establish ways to account for people (visually or verbally) while they are working remotely, especially if they are working alone. If an emergency should occur, such as a natural disaster, alternative and robust check-in procedures should be in place to ensure that all staff working remotely are accounted for. Talk to staff about their work and get their input about what they do and possible solutions.

³ United Kingdom Institute of Occupational Health and Safety, (2014). *Home Office, Mobile Office: Managing remote working*, www.iosh.co.uk/homeworking

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Supervision and training

Although staff working remotely cannot be subject to constant supervision, it is still a manager's duty to ensure the health and safety of the workers at all times. Supervision can help to ensure that workers understand the risks associated with their work and that the necessary precautions are carried out. The extent of supervision required depends on the risks involved and the ability of the workers to identify and handle health and safety issues. Workers new to a job, undergoing training, doing a job which presents specific risks, or dealing with new situations may need to be accompanied at first by an experienced person. The level of supervision required is a management decision which should be based on the findings of a risk assessment. The higher the risk, the greater the level of supervision required. It should not be left to individuals to decide whether they require assistance.

Procedures will need to be put in place to monitor staff working remotely and/or alone to ensure that they remain safe. These may include:

- supervisors periodically visiting the workers on site
- regular contact between workers and supervisor using either a telephone or radio
- automatic warning devices which operate if specific signals are not received periodically from staff working remotely and/or alone
- devices designed to raise the alarm in the event of an emergency which are operated manually or automatically by the absence of activity, and
- Ascertaining when remote workers have returned to their base or home on completion of a task.

Training is particularly important where there is limited supervision to control, guide and help in situations of uncertainty. Training and experience can provide workers with sufficient understanding of the risks and precautions that should be taken when working remotely and/or alone. It can also avoid panic and adverse reactions in unusual situations. Managers should also ensure that employees are competent to deal with circumstances that are new, unusual or beyond the scope of training, for example, when to stop work and seek advice from a supervisor, how to handle aggression and what to do during and after a nature disaster.

Check-in procedures

It is important that check-in procedures be in place (see appendix 2). Decide if a verbal check-in is adequate or if the worker or workers must be accounted for by a visual check. Make sure that the plan is appropriate for both regular business hours as well as after regular office hours. For most workers, a mobile phone will be the main source of contact. However, if a mobile phone does not have adequate coverage and is unreliable then there must be alternative methods of communication available (such as use of landline telephones, satellite technology, site visits, etc.).

When travelling out of the office, the main contact person should know the travel route, the mode of transport (public transport, car, plane, etc.) and destination as well as the estimated time of arrival and the return time and date. A good practice is to make a note of who the worker or workers are visiting. Alternative plans should be developed in advance in the event of bad weather, traffic problems, etc.

An example of a check-in procedure is:

- Prepare a daily work plan so it is known where the workers will be and when.
- Identify one main person to be the contact at the office together with a couple of other people who can act as "back up".
- Define under what circumstances the worker or workers will check in and how often.
- Stick to the visual check or call-in schedule. You may wish to have a written log of contact.
- Have the contact person call or visit the workers periodically to make sure they are okay.
- Pick out a code word to be used to identify or confirm that help is needed.
- Develop an emergency action plan to be followed if the workers do not check in when they are supposed to.

A number of organisations have begun to implement safety monitoring systems for those people working remotely. The technology systems most frequently used are:

- A smart wristband paired with a mobile phone app to send an SOS;
- The mobile phone app which can also send regular updates over a cellular network;

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- A pendant, when connected to a modem within a vehicle, can also be used to broadcast an SOS;
- When out of mobile phone contact, a satellite device can be used to check in and send notifications to the control centre.
- WorkSafe BC (2012) *Working Alone: Handbook for Small Businesses*. www.worksafebc.com
- WorkSafe New Zealand (2017). *Protecting Workers who work alone*. https://www.employment.govt.nz/assets/generated_pdfs/protecting-employees-who-work-alone-478.pdf

As technology becomes more sophisticated and is able to cover workers located in hard-to-reach areas, it is now possible to tailor systems to the specific requirements of an organisation. However, it is important to ensure that there can be *no security breaches* when using the technology, including the security risks around information stored on web-based portals, such as personal information being stored in the digital cloud.

- WorkSafe New Zealand (2017). *General Risk and Workplace Management: Requirements for remote or isolated work, atmospheres with potential for fire or explosion, raised and falling objects, loose material in enclosed spaces and substances hazardous to health*, <https://worksafe.govt.nz/dmsdocument/886-general-risk-and-workplace-management-part-2>.

Sources of information

Below is a list of useful sources of information:

- Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (2014) *Working Alone* <http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/workingalone.html>
- DIVERSITAS (2017) *Flexible Work Toolkit*. <https://www.employment.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/tools-and-resources/publications/flexible-work-toolkit.pdf>
- Employment New Zealand (2018) *Protecting employees who work alone*. <https://www.employment.govt.nz/starting-employment/rights-and-responsibilities/protecting-employees-who-work-alone/>
- Mulki, J. P., Bardhi, F., Lassk, F. G., & Nanavaty-Dahl, J. (2009). *Set up remote workers to thrive*. MIT Sloan Management Review, 51(1), 63. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Felicia_Lassk/publication/264844669_Set_Up_Remote_Workers_to_Thrive/links/542ec3900cf29bbc126f5601.pdf
- New Zealand Law Society (2018). *Practice Briefing: Working Remotely*. www.lawsociety.org.nz/news-and-communications/news/guidelines-for-working-remotely-released
- Protective Security Requirements (2017) *Remote-working* <https://protectivesecurity.govt.nz/home/physical-security-management-protocol/working-away-from-the-office/working-away-from-the-office/remote-working/>
- Republic of Ireland's Health and Safety Authority (2018) *Guidelines on Lone Workers*, http://www.hsa.ie/eng/Topics/Hazards/Lone_Workers/
- Safe Work Australia (2017) *Remote and isolated work*. <https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/remote-work>
- United Kingdom Health and Safety Executive (2013) *Working alone Health and safety guidance on the risks of lone working*. <http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg73.pdf>
- United Kingdom Institute of Occupational Health and Safety, (2014). *Home Office, Mobile Office: Managing remote working*, www.iosh.co.uk/homeworking

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Appendix 1: Risk assessment

When assessing the risks associated working remotely, managers are required to apply the hierarchy of control in the [Health and Safety at Work \(General Risk and Workplace Management\) Regulations 2016](#). There are also a number of steps that should be taken when assessing the risks and identifying the hazards associated with the working remotely. For example, investigate previous incidents; consider the extent to which working remotely will increase the level of risks; decide on risk controls (which might include equipment, guidance and training, etc.), and monitor and seek feedback on their effectiveness.

While risks vary in terms of their probability and severity, it is also useful to think about specific risks in key areas, such as information, working environment and tasks, and administrative tasks, and the process, as outlined below:

1. The first step is to review the health and safety *information* in the organisation. Ask questions like:
 - Have there been incidents with staff working remotely or in isolated situations?
 - How serious were the incidences?
 - Is there a pattern to the incidents, for example, location, time of day, type of work?
 - Has members of the safety committee or safety representative or a supervisor spoken to all the workers who work remotely or in isolated situations to ask if they have had any near misses and what they see as a potential risk.
 - Are there policies in place? And are all staff aware of the policies and are they followed and monitored?
2. Consider the *working environment and tasks* being performed and ask questions like:
 - Are workers working in or around potentially dangerous situation (e.g. violent situation, working with hazardous materials, etc.) and how great is the risk?
 - Is the work done late at night and if so do workers leave the workplace alone?
 - Does the worker work with the general public outside the office?
 - Will workers be handling hazardous material while they working remotely in isolation?
 - Is there a requirement for personal protective equipment, such as respiratory protection for these substances that would indicate a higher risk?
3. Next consider the administrative risk controls around the workplace and the way risks are managed. . That is, so far as is reasonably practicable, providing the highest level of protection around the hierarchy of controls – namely: eliminate, substitute and minimise, for example:
 - Is access to the work site controlled? This can help or create challenges.
 - Is there a risk of a fall? Will workers be climbing or working from heights?
 - Can jobs be redesigned to limit the need for workers to work remotely or in isolation?
 - What is the length to time and the time of day workers can safely work remotely or in isolation?
 - Is there a written work procedure for each risk area that is off-site or isolated?
 - Can a list of higher risk tasks be created, e.g. operating in potentially hostile environments?
 - Are there temporary risks that may require back-up only for the duration of the task or while a particular service is being delivered?
 - Is there a means of communication available, such as a portable phone, personal alarm system, or emergency call button?
 - Will the communication system work in all circumstances and will a call-in be adequate?
 - What will be done if there is no response?
 - Would a “buddy” system work in your work environment where workers working alone could call each other?
 - How familiar are the workers with the workplace and how experienced are they working remotely or in isolation?
 - How well trained are the workers (including part-time and casual) to handle an emergency if they were away from their office?
 - Do staff know all the relevant procedures and what they do now - formally or informally - to reduce hazards of working remotely or in isolation?
 - Is there a system in place to ensure procedures are being followed?
 - Were there recommendations made from previous incidents around working remotely or in isolation and the risk levels, were they implemented and did they work?

Appendix 2: Call-in Procedure for workers working remotely

Worker:

Name _____

Address _____

Phone: _____

Supervisor / manager:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Time and location: *Where will the person be working outside the office?:*

Street Address _____

Location (division, department, section, etc) _____

When and how long will the person be working?: **DATE(S)** _____ **TIME:** From _____ to _____

Mode of transport

Car Bus Train Plane Boat

Estimated duration _____ Estimated time of arrival _____

Risks

What tasks involved? _____

What are the main risks? _____

Communication: Who is the person responsible for checking on the worker?

Name _____ Contact phone number _____ Address: _____

Method of contact: Phone E-mail Face to face

Contact times: Every 1 hour 2 hours 3 hours 4 hours

No response procedure

If the worker cannot be reached and does not respond within _____ minutes of missing the contact time, face-to-face contact will be made by:

Co-Worker (name) _____ or Supervisor name(s) _____

In the case of an emergency or an unsafe situation, the worker, co-worker(s) or supervisor encounters are to immediately contact the designated response person (telephone _____) for instructions and/or call the emergency services (telephone _____)

These procedures will be reviewed at orientation and at least annually. Any change in names or numbers will be made immediately.

_____/_____/_____
Signature of worker Date Signature of supervisor Date