Remote and Mobile Workers: Management Briefing

Research has shown that the number of people working from home has increased by 13 per cent in the last five years. In 2012, just over four million employees usually worked from home, a rise of 470,000 since 2007 in the UK and Ireland. A remote and mobile worker (RMW) is defined as an individual who spends less than four hours at a home, or office base per week with the majority of their working time being on the road or with clients RMW are those:

- travelling
- with clients in their premises or at neutral locations
- away from the office at conferences
- on assignment
- working at home

'Working Alone' or 'Lone Working' means working in an area, or in circumstances, where there are no other workers present. In the event of an emergency there is no one to give assistance, or summon help. Most RMWs are lone workers including, sales staff, service engineers, healthcare workers, probation officers and those who work outside normal office hours – security staff, cleaners and maintenance staff.

It is estimated that the mobile workforce will continue to grow in coming years.

Health and well-being of RMWs

The risks to physical safety faced by RMWs particularly verbal and physical assaults in the case of public-facing roles, have long been recognised. In studies almost two-thirds of RMWs report psychological distress, neck, shoulder, lower back pain and poor mental health linked to:

- longer working hours
- higher customer numbers
- high psychological demands
- low decision authority
- lack of role clarity
- role conflicts

Driving (both high mileage and long hours) is linked to lower back, neck and shoulder symptoms. An adjustable lumbar support and adjustable steering wheel can reduce sickness absences due to musculoskeletal pain.

It is estimated that just under half of RMWs suffer road rage, at least once a year and 11% are assaulted.

Case Law

In 2004, a Scottish gamekeeper died after crashing his quad bike, however it took 52 hours for anyone to notice he was missing. Trustees admitted failing to provide a means of communication or carrying out a risk assessment for a lone worker to report in at the end of a shift. Also he was not provided with a mobile phone to call for help. The estate he worked for was fined £3,000.

Estate agent Suzy Lamplugh disappeared in 1986 after she went to meet a client at an empty house. Her parents were keen that lessons should be learnt from the case to make it less likely that others would losefamily members through poor management of lone working, setting up the Suzy Lamplugh Trust(http://www.suzylamplugh.org) to highlight the risks people face and to offer advice, action and support to minimize those risks.

Actions to protect RMWs:

- plan journeys to minimise the miles driven
- build in time for rest breaks; every 2 to 3 hours of driving time
- ensure decision-making levels of authority are clear
- foster a supportive management style
- encourage physical fitness to help reduce chronic fatigue
- ensure there is a clear policy on restricting the use of mobile phones, particularly hand held phones whilst driving.

Recommendations for employers:

- conduct risk assessments for remote/mobile working activities
- design and implement policies and procedures to protect those who work alone
- monitor working procedures to ensure safety
- consult with employees and/or their representatives about policy
- compile and maintain a database of locations/persons that should not be visited by just one worker
- provide information, instruction, training and supervision for workers
- issue workers with necessary communication equipment (e.g. personal alarms, mobile phones, walkie-talkies, personal GPS) and ensure that appropriate training is given in their use
- record the location of workers, via an automated system, diary, white board or personal GPS
- require workers to regularly report to their office base or to a co-worker
- provide workers with appropriate training, e.g. aggression management, assertiveness and negotiation as relevant to their work
- ascertain the medical history/fitness of potential workers if activities are likely to impose extra demands on physical or mental stamina
- eliminate cash handling as far as is reasonably practicable
- ensure the workplace and workstations are suitable (sufficient lighting, ventilation and heating, means of access and egress, fire precautions).

Legal duties

The main areas of health and safety law relevant to RMWs are:

- The Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 (HSWA)
- The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (MHSWR) 1999
- The Display Screen Equipment Regulations 1992 (as amended)
- The Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992
- The Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations (PUWER) 1998
- The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations (COSHH) 2002 as amended
- The Electricity at Work Regulations 1989
- The Confined Spaces Regulations 1997.

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