

Working Alone

Addressing hazards faced by the lone worker

AMTA and Psychosocial Hazards

The Alberta Motor Transport Association (AMTA) is working to draw attention to the problem of workplace psychosocial hazards in the trucking industry. We have published a [guide on addressing psychosocial hazards](#) meant to provide best practices small- and medium-sized carriers can put into place. This bulletin presents one of the best practices from the guide: addressing hazards from working alone.

Overview

Working alone is experienced differently by different people. Some may prefer to work largely or completely alone; others may suffer when they do not have regular contact with other people.



Regardless of how working alone is experienced, it is a hazard requiring mitigation. It also plays a role in an organization's level of psychological safety. This section will mostly focus on drivers. But, carriers may have staff working alone in other roles, and this information will apply in such cases.

Working alone is common to varying degrees within the trucking industry. Some drivers work alone in their cabs while surrounded by other traffic. Others may drive in remote areas where there is no other traffic for long periods of time. A driver may have a swamper one day but is then alone the next.

Working alone presents its own health and safety hazards. Workers who are alone will not have the same level of access to medical help as workers in populated workplaces. Depending on their location, a sole worker may become the target of workplace violence. From a psychosocial standpoint, working alone means signs of worker distress may not be detected by co-workers in a timely manner. If working alone leads to feelings of disconnection with work, unclear expectations, and a lack of social support, psychological health and safety will suffer [1].

There are also occupational health and safety (OHS) compliance requirements for provincially-regulated carriers in Alberta related to working alone. Part 28 of the Occupational Health and Safety Code provides specific criteria for when a worker is considered to be working alone [2]. According to guidance information from the Government of Alberta [3], a driver on a highway - where help from other drivers is reasonable to expect in a timely manner - would likely not be considered working alone by Alberta's OHS Code; however, if the highway is not busy or the driver is operating in a remote area, the working alone rules would apply.

Alberta's OHS Code also lists working alone as a hazard that must be addressed in an employer's hazard assessments [4]. Addressing hazards from working alone isn't optional: it's legislated. While the phrase "working alone" does not appear in either the Canada Labour Code [5] or in the [Canada Occupational Health and Safety Regulations](#) [6], federally-regulated carriers are still required to "develop [...] a prescribed program for the prevention of hazards in the work place appropriate to its size and the nature of the hazards in it" [7]. Given how common hazards from working alone are in the trucking industry, it would be hard to omit these hazards while demonstrating due diligence.

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Addressing working alone as a hazard is a way carriers can not only comply with legislation referenced above. It represents a best practice by which carriers can bolster their efforts to improve psychological safety. Workers who, despite working alone, know they will be checked up upon by their carrier will likely have some of their mental burdens eased. Additionally, electronic support from the carrier while the worker remains alone may be better than having individuals paired together if the pairing can lead to additional psychosocial hazards like bullying, harassment, and violence.

Benefits

As described in the section above, carriers that address hazards from working alone will be addressing specific compliance requirements. This will help reduce financial and reputational risks to the carrier that can result if the carrier were to be non-compliant.

Truck driving can be an isolating profession. While many people enjoy the feelings of independence that come from trucking, many still want to know they have the support of their company. A company with a reputation for supporting its drivers will be more competitive from a labour attraction and retention standpoint.

Since carriers often employ vehicle tracking technology, in-cab dispatching systems, and electronic logging devices (ELDs), a carrier may find they already have equipment in place to build a robust working alone safety program. Carriers currently without these systems will find many cost-effective options available to them.

Challenges

In trucking, carriers need to strike a careful balance between the hazards of working alone and the hazards that come from working with others. While pairing people together may seem like the most logical solution to working alone hazards, if the pairing brings additional risks it may be better to have workers remain alone and opt for electronic devices to ensure workers are always in touch with the carrier. Having two workers in isolation together brings up hazards from sexual and racial harassment, violence, and bullying. Carriers will need to exercise caution in establishing teams and pairings, opting for electronic surveillance as a hazard control instead of pairing if there is a risk of psychosocial violence.

Another major challenge carriers will face when building a working alone safety program is going deeper than the first point of contact. It is easy to assign an on-call phone to someone on staff so drivers and other remote workers have around-the-clock access to the carrier. However, such an approach will be of little use if the person answering the on-call phone lacks procedures for providing assistance. Carriers will need to have some basic emergency response plans in place for foreseeable problems; if they are using regularly-scheduled check-ins, there will need to be an actionable plan for when a worker fails to respond to a check-in.

There is also likely not a single, basic working alone program that will fit all of a carrier's needs - especially if the carrier has over-the-road operations. If the carrier's plan requires cell phone service, such a plan will only work where there is cell phone coverage. That's not to say a cell phone-based program is inadequate; it just means a carrier needs to plan for times when cell service is unavailable.

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More Help

A carrier must, at a minimum, comply with the legislation that applies to their operations. AMTA has provided references in the sections above to legislation for both federally- and provincially-regulated carriers. In addition, the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) provides general information for precautions for working alone [8].

Through a quick internet search, a carrier will be able to find numerous vehicle telematics providers who can outfit a carrier's vehicles with electronic equipment to monitor the vehicle, provide accurate location updates, and communicate with the driver. Many of these telematics providers also offer electronic logging devices (ELDs, which are mandatory for federally-regulated carriers [9]) and systems to help with dispatching, so a carrier can likely find a system that can do much more than assist with a working alone program. Some of these systems use satellite connections to send data, meaning they work even when cell service is not available.

For carriers looking for ELDs to comply with Canada's Federal ELD rule, they must pick a device from the list of Transport Canada-certified ELDs to find out what ELD providers are approved for use in Canada [10]; if they also have operations in the USA, they must also ensure the ELD is on the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration's (FMCSA) list of registered ELDs [11]. Once they know the ELD is legal in both countries, then they can see what telematics options the supplier provides.

Need Help? Contact AMTA

AMTA can provide carriers with guidance on the information presented in this bulletin. If you have any questions, please contact AMTA and our experienced staff will be happy to help. For your safety and compliance questions, please email Workplace Support Services (WSS) directly at wss@amta.ca. For more updates like this on a variety of topics related to the trucking industry, please [sign up for our eNews](#).

References

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