

The rise of lone worker protection

A decade ago, few health and safety managers were required to be aware of risks associated with what are now known as lone workers. But as working practices have evolved so has the need for employers to consider the protection of their employees who work alone. Patrick Dealtry charts the rise of the lone worker protection industry and makes some predictions for the future.

In the last 10 years, advances in technology and consumer service demand mean that working practices have changed significantly. Now, hundreds of thousands of employees are identified as being lone workers because they meet or engage with members of the public and work away from the employer's premises.

Initially, there were three or four specialist companies which identified the emerging needs of the employers. Now, suppliers of Lone Worker services come in many shapes and sizes.

The industry, working with police and customers such as the NHS, has collaborated and introduced a new British Standard (BS8484) to offer guidance and support to procurement professionals.

It is important to bear in mind that services are about managing a duty of care and bringing the right response quickly to someone who cannot help themselves. It is through health and safety legislation, to make employers legally responsible for the security of their employees.

As new ways of working are developed, so employment legislation tends to follow rather than lead. The growth of the service economy has seen an increase in employees working away from their employer's premises, sometimes in other premises and increasingly in people's homes.

Early entry companies into the Lone Worker market saw the legislation as an opportunity and developed services accordingly. The police saw the developing market as a potential major demand on their response resources. For this reason, they requested a standard be developed (BS8484) which they could use to control the market, one which could be a positive influence in the control of their major concern - false alarms. This is now the only standard acceptable for obtaining response by the police.

The operation of the service is a classic example of the synergy of man and



machine working together. There are four elements:

- The individual in trouble
- The device or app which generates and distributes the alarm message and opens the audio connection to the Alarm Receiving Centre (ARC) over the mobile network
- The platform in the ARC which receives the alarm message, presents it in a useful form to the operator together with other pre-recorded personal information about the individual and their instructions
- The operator who combines their judgment and experience with the available information, including that from the audio link, to request the appropriate response

The key person in this chain is the ARC operator. The purpose of the technology is to present the operator with all the information needed to request a response. It enables the passage of three essential pieces of information: location, identity and situation. Most solutions for medium and high risk employees are based on GPS for position and the mobile network for communicating the alarm details.

Going forward, technical developments will include:

- Further development of smartphone apps which are increasing in popularity

- Development of more cost-effective satellite communications for those out-of-the-way places
- Use of video to provide evidence and verification
- Developments of the all-important monitoring application to take advantage of the technology to provided further services
- Reduced size and power usage

Many lone worker service providers appreciated that such services, with the implication of managing potential life and death situations, needed to be robust, innovative and as near to 100 per cent reliable as possible. And the introduction of BS8484 has helped BSIA companies develop best practice solutions, including training, which satisfy the demands of health and safety legislation and insurers, thereby protecting both employer and employee.

For some lone worker service providers such as the company I work for, Argyll, the key to providing the best response was to have end-to-end control of the service. Consequently, Argyll designed and built its own ARC, dedicated to the protection of Lone Workers. Argyll has since expanded its services to 'vulnerable people' into services for the elderly, allowing them to stay longer in their own homes, and NHS patients who can be treated at home instead of hospital.

Done properly, Lone Worker protection is a complex business. It involves potential life and death situations. It would therefore be sensible for users of Lone Worker services to seek out BS8484-accredited companies as they have made the investment in resources to ensure vulnerable people have the best possible chance of the highest level of response.

Not doing so makes the employer vulnerable when something does go wrong.

Patrick Dealtry chairs BSIA's Lone Worker Industry Group on behalf of Argyll, where he is a consultant on BS8484 and safety and security industry issues.

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