Working Alone – Oil and Gas



WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Working in remote areas

Working and travelling to remote areas is an inherent part of working in the oil and gas industry. Offshore oil and gas fields, onshore gas pipelines which are remotely located and other characteristics of the oil and gas work make it very common for workers to be working alone and/or working remotely.

Your team may work in the most remote locations for exploration, at pumping stations or in gas plants. Perhaps you are responsible for the safety of land survey crews, oilfield service groups or operators and contractors.

A lone worker can be anyone who works alone in a fixed facility or away from his or her typical base. At times, the definition applies to those who work alone in factories or warehouses on nights or weekends. It also applies to traveling workers in construction, utilities, maintenance and repair, agriculture, and other fields.

In an industry where mistakes can be destructive and life changing, the responsibilities of both lone working employers and lone workers in the oil and gas sector cannot be underestimated.

WHAT'S THE DANGER?

Working in remote areas introduces a number of safety concerns and hazards which should be talked about and discussed during a safety talks.

In these remote areas, workers face harsh conditions and environments. They must drive/travel long distances and frequently off-road, and if an incident does occur, they are effectively stranded and must find a way to communicate the issue.

These and other nuanced elements of remote or lone worker safety like how much water to carry (more than you think) make for a good safety discussion.

Thousands of incidents occur annually that put lone workers on disability—sometimes short-term and often for life.

In 2014, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) reported multiple Oil & Gas-related fatalities in the United States. In fact, the organization reports the Oil & Gas fatality rate is seven times greater than the rate for all U.S. industries.

Lone workers are an integral part of the oil and gas industry and safeguarding these staff is vital in delivering good service. Businesses are responsible to their employees and to their customers. Shutdowns, incidents and production issues can affect other businesses and large-scale leaks can also be disastrous for the environment. Improving safety in the oil and gas industry is good for everyone and good for the planet.

At Risk

The risks that affect lone workers in most industries affect those in oil and gas too – trips, slips and falls account for 37% of injuries in the sector – though there are additional risks generated by the often remote or offshore nature of the work and exposure or inhalation of hazardous materials. When things do go wrong in oil and gas, they can be devastating, resulting in huge loss of life, product and infrastructure.

Risks include:

- Remote location working, whether off-shore, on the road or along pipelines increases the impact of potential incidents and difficulties in raising alarm and maintaining communication
- Working at heights.
- In confined spaces.
- Alongside high – risk machinery and equipment.
- Accidents including trips, falls, slips
- Toxic and inflammable gases

Lone worker hazards in Oil and Gas Sector

- Hydrocarbon releases
- Fires or Explosions
- Dropped objects

The safety situation for a lone worker is worse than for a worker who is surrounded by fellow workers.

Why? If working alone and immediate medical assistance was not provided in time, the result could be deadly.

Most oil refineries, factories and offshore rigs are also considered as **Explosive Hazardous Areas**, where the atmosphere could be filled with flammable gases, mists, dusts, liquids or vapors that could lead to huge explosions. Due to the Explosive hazardous working environment, the lone working employees within these sectors are not allowed to carry their smartphone devices, as it could be a source of ignition.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Lone Working Policy – Solution

Accurately collecting risk assessment data and constructing a usable, effective lone working policy is the first step to mitigating potential risks to your oil and gas employees. Speak to lone workers across the whole organization to best understand their safety needs.

Confidence and communication are key for lone workers operating machinery in difficult circumstances or working alone far from civilization. Ensure that your staff have confidence in their tools, their working environment and their superiors. Make it easy for employees in every part of your oil and gas organization to have someone to call if things go wrong.

Oil and gas organizations have a duty of care towards all their employees and need to be attuned and prepared for the extra risks that lone working in these circumstances can bring.

Key Question

While work-alone procedures may look good on paper, are processes in place to help your lone workers when a safety incident occurs?

The following recommended procedures from the Washington State department of labor.

- Conduct risk assessments to determine if work may be done safely by lone workers.
- Train lone workers on emergency response.
- Establish a clear action plan in the event of an emergency.
- Set limits for what is permissible during lone work.
- Require supervisors to make periodic visits to observe lone workers.
- Ensure regular contact between lone workers and supervisors via phone or radio.
- Use automatic warning devices that alert others if signals are not received periodically from a lone worker.
- Verify that lone workers have returned to fixed base or home after completing a task.

Bottom Line:

The bottom line is that employers must develop a procedure protecting the safety of their employees during working hours, especially if they’re working alone in isolated areas or they’re not within calling distance of somebody.

The burden falls on employers to keep their workers safe.

An organization’s work is not finished after it develops a procedure for monitoring lone workers. It’s important to continually evaluate. Why? The work environment changes with new people, new processes, new equipment, and new hazards.

There are **3 health and safety tips** to consider to help ensure the safety of employees working within an oil and gas sector:

- **Risk Assessment**: Employers should conduct risk assessments to identify key hazards within their work site. By identifying the hazards, employers would be able to take the necessary steps to prevent accidents.

- **Fire safety**: The risk of fires and explosions are very high within these sectors, so ensure that there are sufficient number of fixed and portable fire extinguishers located within the site.
- **Training**: Employers set policies, provide equipment, and put engineering controls in place. Workers also have an important role to play. Their training should cover what they need to know to keep themselves safe.

Workers should know:

- What their employer's "lone worker" policy requires. Make sure they know if they're not supposed to work alone, and what precautions they must take if they must work alone.
- What hazards they are exposed to, including fire, explosion, and volatile hydrocarbon exposures.
- How to use their equipment. They should be trained in the use of PPE and monitoring equipment. Make sure to cover the limitations of respiratory protection equipment.

Regular Interval check on Employees

OSHA says employers must check on workers at regular intervals, be it once for a brief assignment or multiple times a day for a longer assignment. **Means of verification include:**

- Visual: Camera, in-person
- Verbal: Two-way radio (such as a walkie-talkie); in-person; intercom system

OSHA says cell phones are permissible in areas where reception exists. Cell phones are not allowed when an employer cannot show that reception is available due to:

- Sound of power tools,
- Whistles,
- Tapping on decks, bulk heads or tank walls to check on a worker.

FINAL WORD

Lone workers whether working on an off shore oil rig or in a chemical laboratory are prone to more danger and peril than their fellow workers. Effective lone worker policy and procedures must be implemented to protect their safety.