



Health and Safety for mobile workers

WRITTEN BY NATASHA JOSEPH
GRAD IOSH, IAEM, AMBCI,
HSE ADVISOR
SOL CARIBBEAN LTD

The global pandemic has caused radical changes in the way most companies conduct their business. Caribbean people are very resilient, and I believe this is demonstrated in the level of innovation I am witnessing in some businesses. Remote work has been one of the critical alternatives to the traditional workplace as employers aim to maintain profitability and good customer service while adhering to physical distancing requirements. However, we should not forget mobile employees as we consider changes to the physical workplace.

Mobile (peripatetic) employees either have no fixed workplace or work at different locations away from their normal workplace. Examples of mobile employees include Airline Pilot/Cabin Crew (travelling to different airport destinations) and Salespersons (who may or may not have a fixed work-base but spend most of their time travelling to customers).

Employers must understand and address the health and safety legislation applicable to mobile employees just as they do for employees working at the organisation's premises. Both employees and the employers must be cognisant of the potential challenges when dealing with workplaces that are not under the operational control of the employer. According to the Safety and Health at Work Act (2005), "workplace" means any place where persons work or are employed including a factory, but does not include a private household where persons work or are employed only in domestic service.

Employer's Duty

Obligations include but are not limited to, completing a suitable and sufficient risk assessment of the significant hazards and implementing appropriate control measures. Since COVID-19, some local distribution companies have included hygiene items (soap and hand sanitiser) in the personal protective equipment kits provided for delivery drivers. This is an example of adapting to a new hazard, however several other hazards must still be evaluated using a

more comprehensive approach. For instance, travel between locations during work activities as well as working alone and working different shifts/irregular hours.

Job-specific hazards may include working in confined spaces, working with harmful substances, manual handling, use of tools and heavy equipment, possible threats of robbery and violence (especially if cash collection is associated with the job). Gender-specific issues (e.g. sexual harassment) and personal vulnerabilities due to an employee's health conditions, should be considered during the assessment. Employers are also obligated to ensure the most effective and practicable combination of controls are used to address the level of risk. Examples include implementing suitable maintenance programmes for tools, equipment and vehicles and alternatives for cash collection (e.g. credit, debit and digital payments). Providing adequate personal protective equipment, first aid and emergency response arrangements are also mandatory.

Employee's Duty

Whether directly supervised or not, employees must comply with reasonable safety instructions given by their employers. Mobile employees must assist their employers to identify and address the hazards associated with remote work. This can be achieved by complying with reasonable workplace health and safety policies and procedures; and reporting all accidents, near misses and concerns.

Safety/Security Risks

The main problems associated with meeting regulatory safety compliance for mobile employees are the employer's lack of operational control of the remote location and the lack of immediate supervision of the mobile employees.

These problems are compounded if employees are desensitised to the risks, are afraid to report issues or are conflicted due to incentive schemes that focus on high output. Therefore, the best way to counteract these challenges is to approach safety holistically.

What employers need to do

An effective risk management process can be achieved by:

- Facilitating and encouraging proactive action on health and safety matters/concerns (Reward and Recognition Programmes for all employees).
- Engaging and consulting remote employees when evaluating hazards and control measures
Implementing an Incident Reporting and Investigation Process so all accidents, near misses and unsafe conditions are reported to and addressed by management.
- Fostering hazard awareness via appropriate training and effective communication (especially related to security issues).
- Providing appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and training on the same
- Managers and supervisors demonstrating good leadership and commitment by conducting periodic site visits and addressing health and safety issues promptly
- Procedures and Mobile Applications (Apps)
- Communication plans that include specific check-in times and protocols
- Mobile workforce management software can be used to track, in real-time, the movement and status of each employee.
- Planning for emergencies and consulting with emergency services about possible emergency response scenarios in remote locations.

Remember to ensure Risk Assessments are carried out for all tasks and processes including travel to and from clients' premises. Key steps include understanding the applicable laws, evaluating the dangers and developing and implementing an appropriate plan.