

Technology protects isolated employees

Check-in alerts and panic buttons are key safety features

BY ALAN CROOKS

As more and more provincial jurisdictions enact working-alone legislation, corporations, governments and other organizations are looking for ways to protect employees and sub-contractors who work alone or in isolation.

Changes to the Criminal Code that make it easier to charge corporations and executives for workplace deaths have also made supervisors more conscientious about due diligence in protecting the safety of employees who work away from the employer's main place of business because companies have civil and criminal liability exposure.

New technology has made it easier to develop a safety system to keep track of employees working alone. The most important feature from the user's perspective is a system that is easy to use and available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, every day of the year.

As two-way communication is required in most jurisdictions with working-alone legislation, it is essential the system incorporates the use of devices such as cellphones, satellite phones, pagers, personal computers, laptops and land lines. To minimize the telecommunications cost of the system, the use of toll-free numbers is useful. Monitors or supervisors should be able to access the safety system via phone and

web-enabled hardware such as laptops and BlackBerries to check on the safety of employees.

The safety system should have a fixed and variable timer function. The fixed component, for example the maximum time between check-ins, should be set by the employer. The employee, who knows if a situation is more risky and requires more frequent check-ins, should be able to control the variable timer.

Another useful feature is a worker-down component. This feature sends an emergency signal when the employee is incapacitated and cannot call for help. This component should be lightweight, as it will be worn by the employee, and should be extremely easy to use. The ultimate worker-down component should be automatically activated but could also have a manual activation option.

Another feature the safety system should incorporate is a panic button. Employees who work alone or in isolation need to have a way to communicate they need help quickly. It is important this component is easy to use and provides the monitor with information that helps locate the employee.

Examples of information that would assist a monitor would be a voice message about the employee's location or a data field incorporating global positioning system (GPS) location technology. GPS technology allows the safety system to display a

map of the employee's location. The GPS information should be continuously available to monitors via the web with proper authorization.

Another important feature is a reminder alert. Employees working alone frequently lose track of time. The system should be able to send out reminder calls if an employee fails to check-in at a designated time. The system should have a fail-safe feature that assumes an unconfirmed emergency if an employee cannot be reached or fails to check in. At this point, the system should be able to contact the individual responsible for the employee's safety.

The system should log all the transmitted information and keep a record of all activity. This record provides the due diligence that an effective work-alone safety system for each and every employee is in place. It also allows supervisors to ensure the organization's safety procedures are being followed. If the proper procedure is not being followed, the system should allow reports to be printed out so the supervisor has documentation to show where the employee is not implementing the working-alone safety rules.

Alan Crooks is vice-president of sales for Tsunami Solutions, a Vancouver-based supplier of the SafetyLine Working Alone solution. He can be reached at (604) 720-7800 or alan@safetyline.ca. For more information visit www.safetyline.ca.