

HOW TO MANAGE YOUR OFF-SITE EMPLOYEES' SAFETY

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Ed Foulke offered insight to the May 5, 2014 issue of *Safe Supervisor*.

QUESTION: We have a number of employees working off-site. How can we best ensure that they are working safely when we are not able to provide regular supervision?

Ed's Answer: The past decade has seen an increase in the number of employers having employees working either "off-site" or at remote locations with little or no supervision. This use of off-site or remote employees has been prevalent in construction, but lately there has been an increase in these types of employees in general industry.

Specifically, general industry employers have experienced an explosion of growth in technology-driven jobs from linemen to an infinite variety of technicians. Similarly, many healthcare employees work alone or in small groups at patients' homes or off-site at hospitals or clinics. An employee whose job description is "driver" may now actually be a "representative" and perform tasks at customer locations. Also, more employees now operate from their homes and report to supervisors at different locations.

Employees working alone increasingly have no supervision or safety professionals present or any managers or auditors to check on compliance with safety or approval of their work. As a result, many of these off-site employees do not receive the safety training necessary to recognize hazards their jobs may present. Additionally, very few employers are

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actually doing a job hazard analysis to determine the safety and health hazards employees may face when working off-site.

While my response focuses on safety issues, employers using remote or off-site employees must realize there are a number of other legal issues associated with such employees, including wage/hour requirements, reasonable accommodation and discrimination issues, family and medical leave, posting of documents required by federal and state or provincial law, as well as employer liability for tort negligence from remote employee actions.

Regarding safety, employers must recognize that the Occupational Safety and Health Act in the United States and various occupational health and safety acts in Canadian provinces and territories require each employer to protect their employees regardless of where they work. For example, construction standards require employers to determine job hazards and train and equip employees accordingly.

More recently, the potential for workplace violence has dramatically increased as more employees work alone at customers' homes or businesses. Employers also have a duty to protect workers against this possibility.

With all this potential liability, it is clear that employers must be vigilant in ensuring those remote or off-site employees are not exposed to or are at least aware of safety and health hazards at their remote work sites. Specifically, all off-site or remote employees should be trained to recognize hazards, especially when they work at multiple locations on a variety of tasks.

Employers must train their employees to assess the site before beginning work and must document this training. Using a company-specific job safety analysis that assists in identifying the hazards at customer sites would be a useful tool for remote-site employees. If regular safety meetings are impractical, employers should use teleconferencing or other methods to update remote employees and remind them of their safety obligations.

In addition, employers need to ensure supervisors or some type of roving managers are visiting remote or off-site employees to ensure that their work area is free from recognized safety and health hazards; and that remote employees are following the company's safety rules.

A checklist should be developed for those supervisors or managers inspecting remote or off-site areas to ensure all safety and health issues are examined and compliance with company safety rules is being documented.

Finally, employers having employees at remote sites should ensure the employer-provided equipment to remote work sites does not create hazards that could potentially injure the off-site employee. Developing a culture of safety for off-site employees is critical in order to achieve a safe environment for those employees.