

WORKING ALONE SAFELY



Working alone applies to work or study occurring when **no other person is in direct line of sight or within hearing range** of the person working. A person may work alone in a lab, office, shop or other University location, or in the field. Working alone can take place during normal working hours, as well as on evenings and weekends.

While it is not always unsafe to work alone, pre-task planning to identify and assess the risks and safety measures needed for a task is an important element of accident prevention. Consider personal safety and reduced building occupancy when planning to work alone.

WHEN IS IT SAFE TO WORK ALONE?

Review the practices and conditions of any work being conducted alone, especially if this type of work has not previously been done alone, and determine whether it can be conducted safely.

STEP ONE: Identify the risks of working alone.

Questions to ask include:

1. Is it appropriate and approved for these tasks to be conducted by one person?
2. Can the necessary equipment/materials be handled or lifted by one person?
3. What specific physical hazards are involved in the work (e.g., working at a height or with electricity)?
4. Will any hazardous chemicals or materials be used?
5. How will individuals seek assistance or first aid in the event of an emergency?
6. Is there a possibility of personal safety issues?
7. Is the individual permitted to conduct unsupervised work? Note that undergraduate work usually requires supervision.
8. Are there hazards that exist outside of normal business hours that are not a factor during normal business hours?
9. Are there any underlying health conditions that might preclude an individual from working alone?

STEP TWO: Assess the risks.

Anyone planning to work with potentially hazardous materials or in conditions that may result in

immediate injury or serious harm should perform a **risk assessment** with their supervisor prior to conducting the work alone. The risks of working with hazardous materials and equipment are heightened when working alone because help may not readily be available in case of an incident. Processes that have potential to result in a life threatening injury or unconsciousness are of particular concern, such as operating a saw or working with corrosive chemicals.

STEP THREE: Implement controls to reduce risk, or do not perform the work alone.

In addition to controlling hazards from equipment, substances, or work processes, some form of remote supervision, check-in procedures, or direct connection to emergency services are additional risk controls.

Determine if the risk of working alone can be controlled or mitigated. Check for possible health accommodations. If the supervisor determines that the risk cannot be minimized to an acceptable level, then the individual should perform the work only when others are present or a suitable alarm device is available that will summon help immediately if needed. Options include:

- A device that sounds an immediate alert to a central, continuously available group or service (e.g., UW Police, UW Facilities) and can be worn by a person working alone.
- The use of a cell phone as an emergency contact device may also be adequate in certain situations.
- A personal locator beacon that can be used when performing work outside of cell service.

The adequacy of a device worn by the individual needs to be addressed on a case-by-case basis.

Some work is too hazardous to conduct alone. Examples include confined space entry or work with pyrophoric chemicals and other [particularly hazardous chemicals](#). Refer to your department's [Accident Prevention Plan](#) and any UW [Safety Manuals](#) relevant to your work for specific policies on work allowed to be conducted alone.

Remember to repeat the risk assessment as tasks, workers or the environment changes!

HOW CAN I IMPLEMENT A BUDDY SYSTEM?

A buddy system can reduce the risk of certain tasks by ensuring a second person (the “buddy”) can provide assistance or get help if the person working alone is injured or incapacitated in the course of their work. There are several types of buddy systems that can provide a safer way to work alone.

- **In-person buddy:** A second person is within hearing range while maintaining physical distancing requirements.
- **Semi-in-person buddy:** A second person is located nearby and checks in regularly (e.g., every 30 minutes) in-person while maintaining physical distancing requirements.
- **Live or asynchronous remote buddy:** The person working alone checks in regularly via video conferencing or phone, but not in-person. Tell the second person your location (building and room number) and your working hours. Discuss the frequency of check-ins, and give instructions on actions they should take if you do not check in at the agreed-upon times.

HOW CAN I PREPARE TO WORK ALONE AND REDUCE MY RISK?

- **Notify others.** Let your manager or supervisor know when you will be working and what you will be doing, and ensure you have approval to work alone.
- **Implement a buddy system** and ask your buddy to check in on you periodically.
- **Ensure you have a way to contact emergency services** in your workspace. Download the [UW Safe Zone App](#) to your phone to connect to UWPD and 9-1-1 services.
- **Assess the risks of the activity** with your supervisor beforehand.
- **Do not perform tasks that are not appropriate** for working alone.
- **Minimize the amount(s) of hazardous materials used.**
- **Document your work plan** and include emergency contacts.
- **Be alert and aware of your surroundings.** For example, avoid wearing ear buds or headphones as it reduces situational awareness.
- **Wear the required personal protective equipment (PPE)** in the workplace, even after hours.
- **Know the location of and maintain clear access to emergency equipment** (e.g., first aid kit, safety shower, eye wash, fire extinguisher, spill kits).
- **Check alarm systems** (e.g., oxygen sensors) frequently and immediately take action upon alarm activation.
- **Review plans for transportation and travel routes.** Avoid walking in dark, secluded, deserted areas if possible. Request a safety escort when working after dark or in secluded areas on the [Bothell](#), [Seattle](#) or [Tacoma](#) campuses.

Contact EH&S at 206.543.7262 or ehsdept@uw.edu for more information about working alone.