WEEK 33 AUGUST, VACATION SEASON · ~5 MIN READ · ONTARIO CONSTRUCTION

Working Alone & Covering for Absent Crew

It's August, half the crew is on holidays, and you end up doing solo a task that two people normally handle. If something goes wrong with nobody around, help can be a long time coming — and "I've got my phone" is not the same as having a system.

The hazard

Working alone means no one to spot a hazard, steady a ladder, or call for help if you go down. Covering for absent crew adds a second problem: you may be doing a job you don't normally do, with steps and gear you don't know cold. And a phone in your pocket only helps if you're conscious, in signal, and someone is expecting to hear from you.

What to do

- **Decide which tasks aren't done alone — before the day starts.** That's an assessment of the task and the location, not a judgement call at the moment somebody's short-handed. Write the list down so it doesn't get re-argued at 3 p.m.
- **Know the difference between "needs a partner" and "needs something specific."** Plenty of work has its own named requirement rather than just a second body:

- **Confined space** — a trained attendant who stays outside, plus rescue procedures and equipment ready before entry. - **Work in a trench** — another worker above ground, close to the trench or its access. - **Energized electrical work** — the qualification and written procedures that go with it, and at 300 V or more a rescue-capable competent worker positioned in view. - **Heights** — a rescue plan that works, because hanging in a harness is its own emergency. - **Machines and traffic** — the required signaller where the path is obstructed or someone could be endangered. If the task has one of those, a willing coworker is not a substitute for it.

- **Set a check-in interval and an escalation.** Who calls whom, how often, and — the part people forget — **what happens when a check-in is missed.** A check-in with no escalation is just a phone call.
- **Make your location findable.** Responders need an address, a gate, and a way in — not "the north side." Say where you'll be and when that changes.
- **Have a backup for dead spots.** If your area has no signal, the plan is a radio, a fixed check-in point, or someone physically laying eyes on you — not hoping for a bar.
- **If you're covering an unfamiliar task, get a walk-through first.** Don't work it out from the packaging.

Watch out for

- "I'll just be a minute" jobs that become solo work at height, in a trench, or on a machine.
- Taking on a coworker's task without knowing the safe steps or having the right gear.
- Dead spots on site — know where yours are.
- A check-in plan nobody is actually monitoring, which is most of them by mid-afternoon.

Talk it over

- Who's working alone today, where exactly, and who is expecting to hear from them and when?
- If a check-in got missed at 2 p.m., what would actually happen — and who would notice?
- Is anything on today's list a task that needs an attendant, a signaller, or a rescue plan rather than just company?

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