

Working Alone

By Kevin Jones

In the Australian sex industry there are several circumstances where sex workers may be required to work alone:

- Escort workers
- Strippers
- Stripper grams
- Small brothels

These circumstances are only slightly different from the nature of the sex work itself where there is almost total privacy (isolation?) when servicing a client in a brothel. In a brothel there is functionally no communication with an outside party until the completion of the booking or in the case of an emergency.

There have been many cases of murder of street sex workers. The daily press regularly reports on these cases with two recent examples being the murder of two prostitutes in the Northern Territory who were dumped in a river, and the murder of a prostitute in Victoria by a Nauruan weightlifter. The murder of brothel workers are usually rare, those of escort workers are sadly more common.

The strangulation of an escort worker in northern Victoria late last century gained considerable press coverage and, thankfully, is a rare occurrence but it does illustrate the occupational risks associated with working alone. A more recent event with strong parallels could be the murder of a real estate agent who was showing a client a vacant property.

According to reports, the Victorian escort agency had a formal process of drivers and a formal communication process. It was these processes that lead to the early discovery of the escort's body, sadly they were unable to prevent her death.

In sentencing the killer, Justice Cummins told him "The person you killed was part of a vulnerable group in our society – prostitutes – which need protection by the law".¹

The judge's words summarise the philosophy of occupational health and safety that OHS law is in place for protection of all people and for the removal of the risk of harm. But vulnerability is not only attached to specific occupations but also to the physical surroundings of an individual. The work practices that require isolation or solitude inherently include a level of vulnerability and it is the responsibility of employers and workers to minimise this vulnerability.

WorkSafe WA has published a list of criteria that it believes is relevant for providing a safer work environment for those workers who must work alone². The criteria have been applied in a draft table below in relation to striptease activities in an off-site workplace, and to escort workers.

The length of time the person may be working alone

How long would the person need to be alone to finish this job?

Due to the nature of striptease and escorts, the sex worker should only be present for a specific time limit between communications.

What is a reasonable time for the person to be alone?

This would need to be determined by the sex worker on site bearing in mind some of the criteria requested when taking the booking.

Is it reasonable for the person to be alone at all?

Given that an employer needs to provide a working environment that is safe, as far as is practicable, it would be reasonable for a driver or companion to accompany the sex worker to verify the booking criteria or to assess the immediate working environment.

Is it lawful for the person to be alone whilst carrying out particular work activities? For example, there is a requirement for a person to stand by when work is undertaken in certain types of confined spaces.

It may not be a "lawful" requirement but it would be a sensible practice.

The time of day when a person may be working alone

Is there increased risk at certain times of day?

Not necessarily. It would depend more on the response of the audience or client.

Communication

What forms of communication does the person have access to?

Mobile phone is usually all there is.

Is voice communication essential for the safety of the person?

Regular communication is an important safety criterion however this needs to be balanced with the privacy of the client or audience.

Will the emergency communication system work properly in all situations?

There is no rapid emergency system unless a driver is waiting outside. Usually this is not the case so it resides with the individual to provide their own protection. It is this circumstance that makes it essential for a clear set of pre-booking/visit risk criteria to be developed.

If communication systems are vehicle-based, what arrangements are there to cover the person when he or she is away from the vehicle?

The worker's mobile phone should be within easy reach throughout the booking as would be the case in a fixed workplace such as a brothel.

The location of the work

Is the work in a remote location?

Possibly

What is the form of transport? The level of risk may vary with different types of vehicles, different bikes (two, three or four wheels) or other forms of transport.

Usually car.

Is the vehicle fitted with emergency supplies, such as adequate drinking water?

N/A

What is likely to happen if there is a vehicle breakdown?

As with any occupation, it is important that independent portable communications are available to the worker or driver.

Will the person be required to leave his or her vehicle for long periods of time?

The length of booking should be pre-determined and enforce.

What first aid equipment is available for immediate treatment? For example, a first aid kit in the vehicle.

A basic first aid kit should be available but this should be supported by first aid skills of any solitary worker.

If first aid equipment is vehicle-based, what arrangements are there to cover the person when he or she is away from the vehicle?

First Aid equipment should be portable.

What level of first aid training is required for the person to be able to use the first aid equipment?

This should be determined on a "needs" basis in line with the criteria of the relevant First Aid legislation or guidelines

The nature of the work.

Is there adequate information and instruction for the person to be able to work alone safely?

The solitary worker should have a maturity and skill-level that minimises any risks of working alone.

¹As quoted in the 02/08/2000 AAP report "18 years for freed prisoner who strangled prostitute" by Stuart Walsh.

² <http://www.safetyline.wa.gov.au/pagebin/pg002563.htm>



What machinery, tools and equipment may be used?

N/A

Is there high risk activity? For example work at heights, work with electricity, work with hazardous substances or work with hazardous equipment, such as chainsaws or firearms.

Not in the traditional OHS sense. There is likely to be an increased risk of violence dependent on the type of audience or client on the premises

Is there likely to be work in a confined space (for example, repair or cleaning work inside a water tank or silo) and is the air in the confined space likely to be low in oxygen or contaminated in some way?

N/A

Is fatigue likely to increase risk? For example, with long hours driving a vehicle or operating machinery.

There should be a limit to the number of bookings safely achievable within each shift. This should consider the number of bookings, travel times and meal breaks.

Is the person likely to be exposed to extremes of temperature?

Unlikely

Is there risk of attack by an animal, including reptiles, insects and sea creatures?

No animal should be present at the worksite unless this is part of the worker's performance.

Is there an effective system for checking that all protective clothing and equipment and emergency equipment is packed and in good working order?

The sexual personal protective equipment should be checked and verified prior to each booking or each shift. Although the PPE may be provided by the employer, it would be the worker's individual responsibility to ensure its suitability.

Are there existing procedures for regular contact with the person who works alone?

Several jurisdictions recommend regular communication but this is not always legislated.

If the person is working inside a locked building, how will emergency services gain access if the person is unable to let them in? For example, night cleaners who work alone.

This issue is relevant to the solitary sex worker but not for the purposes of emergency access, rather emergency exit. The worker should ensure that the doors to the premises remain unlocked throughout the performance.

The competencies and characteristics of the person who is to work alone

Are you aware of anything in the person's ethnic, cultural or religious background that is likely to increase risk if he or she works alone? For example, long periods of fasting where the lack of food and water intake may increase the risk of ill health in very hot weather.

Not in relation to the sex worker however some employers apply specific geographic or ethnic "no go" areas wherein they decline to provide services.

Does the person speak English or is there anything that would interfere with his or her ability to contact someone in an emergency?

No sex worker should be allowed to work alone with inadequate communication skills.

Are there factors relating to the person's age that are likely to increase risk?

Not necessarily.

What is the person's general behaviour and level of psychological maturity?

Is the person physically capable of completing all work activity alone?

Any assessment of the working environment must include the audience size in determining the appropriateness of specific sex workers.



Pic: Pieter van Gaart

Are you aware of a pre-existing medical condition that may increase risk?

This should be considered when choosing a suitable sex worker for the particular working environment.

Is the person likely to make sound judgements about his or her own safety?

This relates directly to the training, maturity and skill-level of the solitary worker. The circumstance may be reduced if a driver or companion accompanies the worker.

Is the person likely to cope in unexpected and stressful situations?

See Above

What is the person's level of work experience and training?

See Above

Has the person had training to prepare them for work alone and, where applicable, in remote locations? For example, training for first aid, relevant administrative procedures, vehicle breakdowns, communications systems and bush survival.

See Above

If a road vehicle is used, is the person competent to drive on country roads and, where applicable, in off-road situations?

The isolated location of a potential workplace is of great importance but the method and route of access should also be considered

Is there anything else that applies to your situation that is likely to increase risk for the person who works alone?

There is a growing acceptance of some elements of sex work operating within the obligations of occupational health and safety legislation. The biggest barrier to OHS compliance in brothels is shared by small businesses around Australia, the low priority given to the management of workplace safety by business owners. This attitude was reinforced recently when discussing brothel OHS with a sex business advocate. The members felt that involvement in the writing of a book on OHS in brothels would expose their non-compliance whereas their assistance would identify areas for improvement for the whole of the industry.

What is needed to improve the safety of sex workers is for the language of the sex worker to blend with the language of workplace safety. In this way, real practical improvements in safety can be achieved with little disruption and minimal cost.

Kevin Jones is a workplace safety consultant and Editor of Safety At Work publications. He can be contacted on 03 9478 9484 or at jonesk@safetyatwork.biz

© Workplace Safety Services P/L Reproduced with permission