Using a Research Approach in Human Resources

Report Title: An analysis of the effects of lone working and current strategies at Ecigarette Direct

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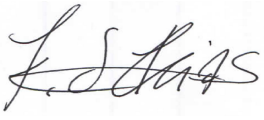
Signed: 

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Executive summary

This report was produced to explore effects of lone working and current strategies in place at Ecigarette Direct (ECD) for employees working in the retail sector, in order to recommend ways of improving engagement, health, safety and the wellbeing of employees.

The research draws attention to the current lone worker strategies and the expectation that retail staff will all experience lone working at ECD. This topic has been flagged to HR on several occasions by employees as reasons for leaving and for exacerbating mental health issues.

The survey sample size presented 10 employees who work across the company retail stores in the UK. The employees were identified from running a staff report on ECD's Human Resource system to see who was still currently actively working during Coronavirus, ie. not currently on furlough leave.

The results revealed that all participants had experienced lone working at ECD with 37.5% feeling that they were subject to lone working over 75% of the time.
75% of respondents said that that liked lone working some of the time and 62.5% said that they felt safe when lone working
All were aware of some of the lone working systems in place, however, none were aware of store risk assessments. 25% of respondents said that lone working had adversely affected their wellbeing.

Key ideas for improvement expressed by participants was to receive additional training on lone working and managing conflict; the introduction of a panic alarm system; more regular check-ins and for candidates to be explicitly informed of the requirements of line working at the first interview stage.

Following this report, recommendations will be made to the ECD Board of Directors in order to provide a strategy to establish lone working systems and therefore maximise employee health & wellbeing. The main recommendations include implementing a specific lone worker policy, the review and availability of store risk assessments and additional training for retail staff and managers and the potential implementation of personal safety devices or panic schemes.

Limitations encountered included a small sample size due to employees being inaccessible whilst on furlough leave due to COVID19 and a reduced timeline for the research.

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1. Introduction

This report was produced to explore the effects of lone working and current strategies at Ecigarette Direct (ECD), on retail employees. It is for ECD stakeholders, specifically retail employees, directors and retail managers. The report should benefit stakeholders by improving health, safety, wellbeing individual and organisation performance.

ECD is committed to the welfare of all colleagues. The small physical size of retail outlets and a recent restructure has led to increased lone working in retail stores. Therefore, the HR team was keen to explore the current lone working practices and their effects on staff. Two leavers cited that lone working had negatively impacted their mental health and had resulted in sickness absence and one employee also resigned as a result of the expectation of lone working in their role.

My aim is to research to discover how much of the workforce is affected and to gather employee opinions. I also aim to critically analyse strategies to assist and support employees who are required to undertake lone working.

My objectives are:

- To identify and analyse the factors of lone working and the effects on retail employees.
- To identify and analyse the strategies to support lone working.
- To critically analyse the current strategies in place to support lone working at ECD.
- To make recommendations for a lone working strategy for possible implementation at ECD.

2. Literature Review

Whilst researching lone working, it became apparent that this area lacks thorough research in a retail setting, with most academic studies being associated with the healthcare sector. Research by Ransom and others focus on lone working in hospital settings, whilst work by Brennan reviews lone working in all work environments. The Suzy Lamplugh Trust (2018) also conducted a survey which looked at safety and the retail sector.

2.1 Lone Working Terminology

Ransom's defines 'working alone' as, "…any work undertaken in isolation from another member of staff…" and includes those "…who might work only for a short period of time on their own, as well as those who work whole shifts unaccompanied on a regular basis" (Ransom, 2002, p.4).

Brennan states lone workers are those who: work from a fixed location, such as one person working on their own or apart from those on the same premises; from a fixed location; at home; and mobile (Brennan, 2012, p.27).

Both definitions are underpinned by the Health And Safety Executive (HSE) definition of "Lone workers are those who work by themselves without close or direct supervision" (HSE, no date a).

2.2 Health & Safety

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (MHSWR) 1999, were formed under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974. Under these regulations, "…all employers have a responsibility for the general welfare of their employees at all times they are on duty" (Hill, 2009, p.41). Employers must identify workplace hazards and take action to minimise them through risk assessments. Dewland et al note that risk assessments and the establishment of a safe working environment, (including training) are paramount (Dewland, Hancock, Sargeant, et al, 2013, p.837).

Ransom supports this by noting that those who work alone are more exposed to health and safety risks than any other workers and suggests a strategy focused on appropriate risk assessments is best to limit risks (Ransom, 2002, p.4).

An extreme example of lone working gone wrong is the Suzy Lamplugh case. In 1986, an estate agent, Suzy, disappeared in the middle of the day after showing a client a house. Her body has never been found. The Suzy Lamplugh Trust was set up to help people develop personal safety skills and strategies such as conflict management in order to keep people safe (The Suzy Lamplugh Trust, 2019).

Hill supports the HSE stance that a lone worker should not be at any greater risk than any other employee and that particular processes should be implemented to ensure safety of lone workers (Hill, 2009, p.42).

2.3 Mental Health & Wellbeing

The 2020 Deloitte Mental health and employers report found that poor mental health costs UK businesses over £33 billion per year (Hampson, and Jacob, 2020).

Lack of contact with managers or colleagues can leave employees feeling disconnected and isolated, which can affect mental health. Direct and regular communication can assist managers in recognising signs of stress (HSE, no date b). Price (2018) believes that regular telephone calls offer an opportunity to discover how workers are handling current workloads. This also allows the building of familiarity and rapport which will make remote workers more likely share any problems they are experiencing.

Ransom explains employers have a legal duty to ensure that health is not placed at risk as a result of disproportionate and continued stress, as a result of the way work is organised or from daily demands (Ransom, 2002, p.7).
Vazquez (no date) discusses why stress as a result of work-related pressures should be considered, eg, there may be a procedure for adequate breaks for lone workers, but due to time pressures/workload, the employee may not take breaks. This could lead to fatigue-related incidents and poor physical and mental health.

Ransom highlights jobs that work with the public can put pressure on staff and place them under significant emotional demands. Lone working under such conditions can cause additional stress factors, such as making decisions without support and potentially having accusations made against them. Additionally, the possibility of violence and abuse means "…lone working is a minefield of stress possibilities" (Ransom, 2002, p.7).

The HSE defines violence as “any incident in which an employee is abused, threatened or assaulted by a member of the public…..arising out of the course of employment” (Ransom, 2002, p.5). Harassment, aggression and violence faced by employees is an ongoing challenge. Research by The Suzy Lamplugh Trust (2019) identifies negative effects, which include; physical and emotional harm.

2.4 Financial factors

It is important for organisations to invest in employee engagement. CIPD (2017) research outlines that employees who feel safe at work are more engaged and perform better.
The progressive reason for lone working is so organisations can save money through not needing as many staff members on shifts. This can leave employees feeling abandoned and result in them becoming disengaged and could lead to underperformance.

Smith’s research found that employees felt that monitoring and training would raise confidence to work alone (Smith, 2007, p.6-5). The Suzy Lamplugh Trust (2018) backs this by saying that lone-worker training for managers/employees should be provided to help them prepare and respond to risks. However, training can be expensive and time-consuming.

The Suzy Lamplugh Trust (2019) believes that personal safety devices are the most effective way of protecting lone workers. Solutions use an alert system, which allows users to raise an alarm. The downside is that this technology can be expensive to roll out.

Wood believes that most systems are easy to use, install and are agile. Wood also notes that although there may be hesitance to implement a solution, especially when fear of technology, cost and time are considered, such solutions can avoid near misses (Wood, 2004, p.33).

Brennan claims, “While some aspects of lone working are high risk, the failure to implement systems to reduce recognised risk could leave employers open to charges of negligence and costly litigation” (2012. p.29).

Most research into lone working centred around healthcare settings but most of the findings are adaptable to other settings. There was little specific research in the retail sector, which is surprising as most small outlets often only have one employee operating outside of peak times.

3. Methodology

A questionnaire was developed based on current strategies and was followed by small focus groups.

The basic philosophical approach can be deemed interpretivist as it focuses on humanistic qualitative methods. Although the initial questionnaire would not be deemed interpretivist, the follow up unstructured focus groups are. This approach was taken to gain insight into lone working of retail employees, in order to achieve an empathetic understanding of the potential effects.

Methods were mixed, as small focus groups followed the initial questionnaire, meaning that data was qualitative. Both open and closed questions were used in order to gain constructive data. The

questionnaire was designed to be clear and concise to increase the response rate, which is deemed a success as the final response rate was 80%. 10 questionnaires were distributed and were followed up with 4 employees attending 2 small informal focus groups in order to create open discussions about lone working and to also probe themes captured in the questionnaire.

Participants were asked to respond to 25 questions using a Google Form, which pulls responses into charts and a spreadsheet. The data was analysed through charts, spreadsheets and the manual recording of keywords/phrases. These methods were chosen to enable the questionnaire to be distributed easily and the data to be analysed quickly. The main questions were followed up with the opportunity to complete free text answers for further comment/elaboration.

Information at the start of the questionnaire outlined the main research procedures so that they knew what to expect and emphasised that participation was voluntary. Consent was informed and gained through the questionnaire and documented. Information also outlined that refusal to participate would not affect treatment. Participants were also informed that information provided would be confidential and if published, would not be identifiable. Finally, they were informed that they could choose to withdraw consent at any time.

The rationale behind selecting the retail sector of the organisation was based on the 'Action research design' (Perkins and Woodhams, 2016, p.97). The retail team had recently undergone a restructure which resulted in an increase in lone working.

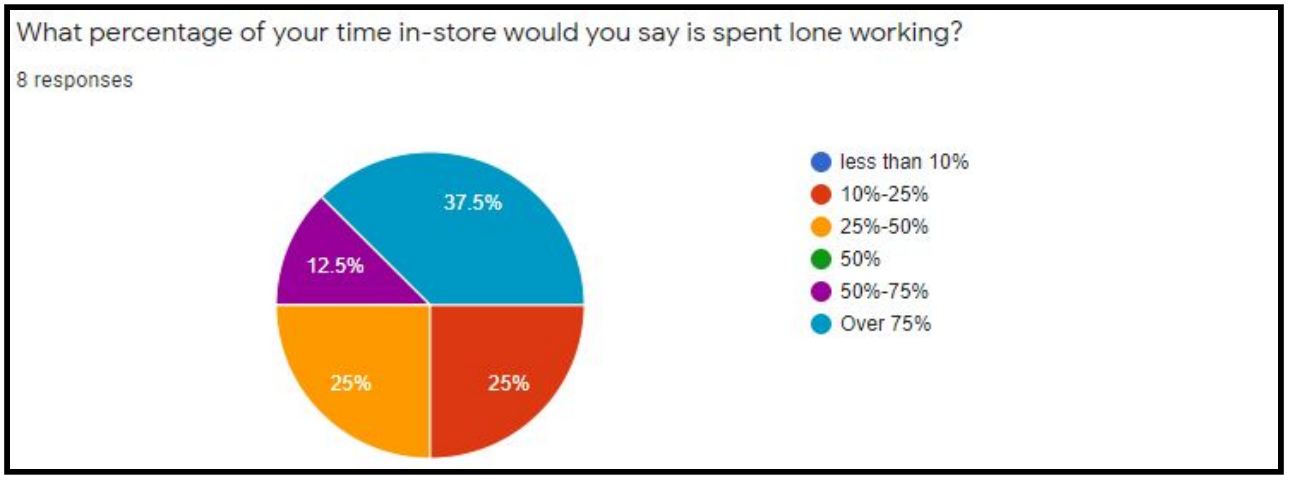
Ethical considerations such as the risk of emotional distress were reviewed and deemed low risk. Questions were not mandatory therefore if a respondent felt uncomfortable they could choose not to answer.

I believe that the research is reliable as it is easily repeatable and replicable in the same setting.

4. Findings/Discussion

The findings presented in Chart 1 show that lone working is common. All staff (100%) had experienced lone working at ECD with 37.7% of respondents answering they were subject to lone working over 75% of the time:

Chart 1

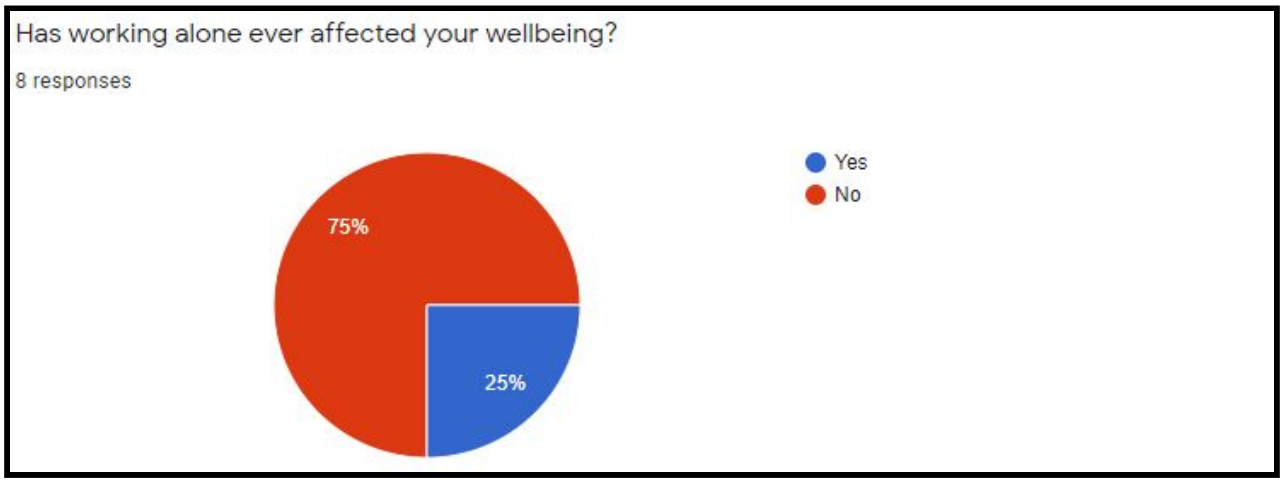


75% of respondents said that that liked lone working 'sometimes' and 12.5% said that they like working alone and outlined the main reasons for this was having more time for reflection; to focus on tasks and self-development

The remaining 12.5% said they did not like lone working for reasons such as additional pressure, lack of support, and feelings of loneliness and vulnerability. The HSE (no date b) outlines that lone workers with poor contact with managers or colleagues leaves them feeling disconnected, isolated or abandoned, which can adversely affect performance and mental health.

It was positive that 75% of respondents deemed that lone working had never adversely affected their wellbeing:

Chart 2



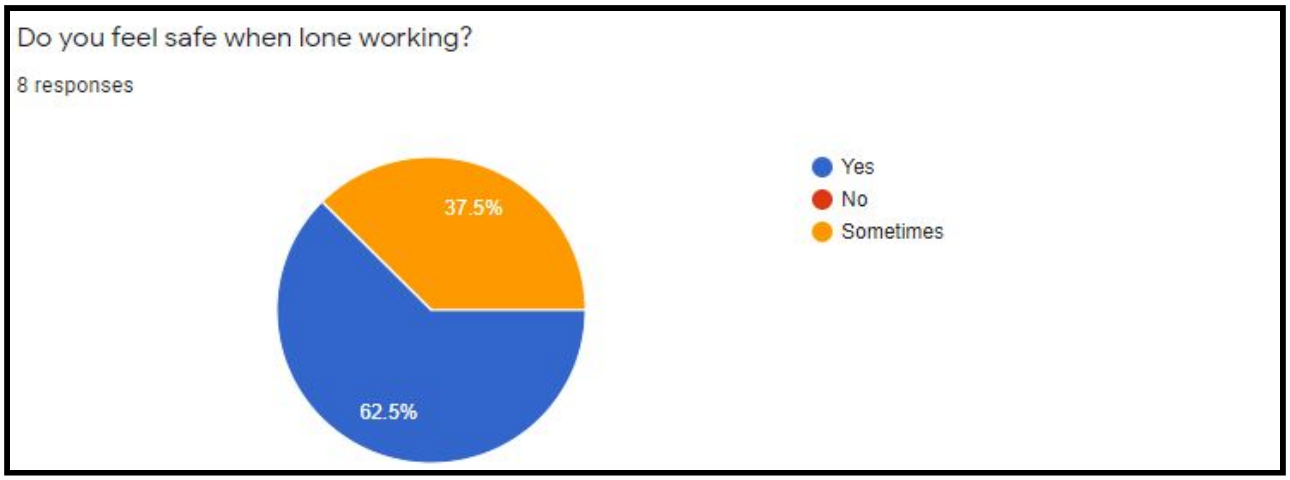
ECD promotes mental health and wellbeing and offers a variety of support systems. Findings from the focus group found that colleagues are confident to raise any wellbeing concerns if necessary and know how to access support.

Feedback from the free text answers and focus groups was that lone working was indeed, sometimes lonely. Having company made the day pass faster and some said working with colleagues felt more supportive, was motivating and fun. CIPD (2017) research shows that the support, recognition and commitment to health and safety is important for workplace wellbeing and employee engagement.

ECD recently rolled out GoogleChat, a quick messaging system for employees to easily keep in touch. Focus group feedback on GoogleChat was positive. Clark (2019) believes that businesses should use intranet and communication platforms to help bring remote employees into the fold. Keeping up to date with business updates and other informal topics, remote workers can feel legitimately part of the organisation.

Over half (62.5%, 5/8) of respondents felt safe when lone working:

Chart 3



20% of respondents stated that they didn't like lone working as much during the winter due to it getting darker earlier and having to close the shop in the dark.

During the focus groups most expressed interest in additional training and panic systems or devices. Research by The Suzy Lamplugh Trust (2018) concluded that organisations should embed a workplace safety culture by raising awareness and provide lone-worker training to help employees prepare and respond to risks.

ECD has the following lone working strategies in place:

- Store telephone with quick dial
- CCTV
- Ranger Schemes (Location dependant)
- Shopping centre security (Location dependant)
- Walkie Talkies (Location dependent)
- Lone Worker Guidance
- Store risk assessments

All respondents were aware of some of the current lone worker systems in place, with 62.5% never having needed to utilise any systems. Unfortunately, some systems are only available in some stores as they depend on localised town/shopping centre schemes, although feedback was that they were rarely used. None of the respondents were aware of lone worker guidance or risk assessments. Hill (2009) highlights the importance of risk assessments being communicated and reviewed by all parties frequently.

62.5% said they had experienced an incident whilst working at ECD. Incidents ranged from aggressive behaviour, verbal abuse, sexual comments and theft. Nazir (2019) writes that violence against shopworkers is a big concern for retailers.

Personal reports of incidents were troubling:

> "A couple came in one evening. One kept leading me away, whilst the other stole liquids. I have been verbally threatened by male and female customers."

> "....guy was making sexual comments toward me and it made me feel ...uneasy and uncomfortable."

The Suzy Lamplugh Trust 29018) highlights those working retail face risks like verbal and physical abuse from customers, with workers reporting threats when asking for identification before selling age-restricted products. Asking for proof of age can be a trigger for violence and abuse from customers.

During the focus group participants said they would/had reported incidents by contacting their line manager. None were aware of any specific reporting procedures, apart from the accident report book.

The HSE (no date) suggests incident forms should record information to aid an investigation of an incident. It is important for management to deal with any incidents that arise so that the victim does not experience emotional issues because of the incident. Peer debriefing could be offered to enable the person to contribute facts of the incident, while also receiving emotional help or counselling. Currently, ECD has no such procedure or reporting guidelines in place.

5. Conclusions

Following a literature review, it is evident that research into lone working has taken place, but there was no specific research into lone working in the retail setting at ECD. Framework and guidance provided by the HSE and The Suzy Lamplugh Trust should be considered and adopted by employers.

The aims were to identify and analyse lone working and the effects on retail employees; to critically analyse the current strategies in place and make recommendations for a lone working strategy for possible implementation at ECD. The current support systems in place appear to be adequate, however, areas that could be improved are additional training and the creation of a lone working policy. The Suzy Lamplugh Trust (2019) advocates the importance of training and upskilling employees in personal safety and conflict management in order to achieve a happier, more productive and confident workforce.

Ransom's preference is that no person should have to work alone. If this cannot be the case, appropriate aids, security procedures and access to support should be available to those who have to work alone (Ransom, 2002, p.4). It would be difficult to prevent lone working in ECD due to staff shortages, and the current social distancing restrictions. To increase the headcount just to counteract the amount of time lone working would not be cost-effective and would impact profits.

6. Recommendations for change

The following recommendations will be presented to the directors and will also be communicated to the wider retail team.

1. It is recommended that the creation and circulation of a lone worker policy is implemented and includes risk assessments, conflict management and incident reporting procedures. Risk assessments and action procedures intend to make health and safety management more proactive. This is supported by Hill (2009) who outlines that risk assessments should be undertaken relating to training, supervision and using equipment or hazardous materials (Hill, 2009, p. 41).

2. Secondly, all retail staff and associated managers should receive specific lone worker training. The HSE (no date b) advocates additional support and training for such staff. Brennan (2012) demands that training for lone workers should include; defining and identifying lone working; areas that may increase the danger of violence; trigger points for aggression; how to risk assess possible dangers and conflict resolution. Specific training for managers should include recognising signs of stress. Cost implications and logistics should be fully considered first.

3. Finally, further research into aids such as panic alarms or text registration for 999 emergency SMS service should also be considered. The Suzy Lamplugh Trust (2019) believes that personal safety devices are the most effective way of protecting lone workers.

7. Limitations

Original plans were to gather primary research in mid-January, at the end of peak Christmas trading. In January the organisation announced a redundancy consultation, meaning I had to postpone until after the consultation was completed. Following completion, the Coronavirus pandemic began which meant that the majority of retail colleagues were furloughed. A small pool of retail employees were drafted to assist the head office function. I, therefore, approached them to complete the questionnaire. Hence my sample size was very small in comparison to my original proposal. This also meant that my timescale to complete the primary research was greatly reduced and it was also difficult to arrange the focus groups around shift patterns.

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