

SPOT me now

by Fintan Robb

Satellite messaging keeps remote workers safer

REGULATORY AUTHORITIES are constantly scrutinizing organizations, making sure they are ensuring worker safety. Among the many areas of concern that need to be addressed is the area of work alone and check-in policies, and the responsibility of organizations to maintain communications in the field, especially in emergency situations. According to occupational health and safety legislation, employers are required to establish an effective means of communication between the worker and persons capable of responding to the worker's needs.

If effective electronic communication is not practical or readily available at the work site, the employer or another competent worker must accompany or visit the worker; or the latter must contact the employer or another competent worker at appropriate intervals.

This can present a significant challenge for employers of workers that spend the better part of their working day in isolated areas. Parks and recreation personnel, exploration specialists, researchers and natural resource professionals can sometimes spend days at a time out of communications range. Given the limitations of cellular coverage, employers must look to other options to ensure communications are maintained to meet health and safety requirements.

Where communications are lost and a worker has not returned to his or her designated reporting station in time, the only option is often to launch full-scale search and rescue activities. Such searches are very costly and in many cases, rescuers are conducting searches without specific geographical coordinates.

Government has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars and countless hours engaged in search and rescue operations looking for workers who have been out of reach longer than anticipated. In some cases, the worker has simply fallen behind schedule or has had some mechanical breakdown that kept them



from returning or reporting in at a scheduled time. In others, searchers have ended up spending days exploring thousands of square kilometers of terrain searching for someone who may be critically injured or worse. The extra time spent combing broad territorial regions increases the risks for an injured or stranded person.

It is possible to maintain voice and basic text messaging contact through the use of portable satellite communications. However, deploying satellite phones for every worker is expensive and can be beyond many budgets. In addition, satellite phones, while fairly rugged, are of little use if they have been dropped or submerged in water. Nor can they convey precise location coordinates and may prove too challenging for a severely injured person to use.

A new and very affordable alternative is the concept of a satellite messenger – an easy to use and inexpensive waterproof handheld GPS-enabled device that can send outgoing signals of various levels of urgency at the

touch of a button. Not only can managers or emergency workers immediately grasp the worker's needs and respond accordingly, the GPS capabilities integrated into this lightweight device will pinpoint the person's location to avoid wasted hours and expense in search and rescue efforts.

SPOT Satellite Messenger is a one-way communications device that features simple buttons that generate different types of messages for sending directly to a series of designated email addresses (up to five), mobile phones (up to five), or to a worldwide 911 facility, depending on the level of urgency.

Key features include:

- **Alert 9-1-1** – Automatically contacts emergency responders to dispatch search and rescue teams to an exact location, with GPS accuracy. Signals will be sent every five minutes for up to seven days.
- **Ask for help** – For less critical emergencies, users can press this button to send requests to their head office or supervisor's emails or cell phones. Signals are sent every five minutes for up to seven days.
- **Check in** – Users simply need to press this button to advise employers if they have arrived at a location and keep them posted on where they are at specified intervals.
- **Track progress** – This optional feature allows users to send their location coordinates at designated intervals for tracking on a website using Google Maps™. This feature helps employers and workers in uncharted areas to record safe routes for future reference.

In all instances, signals include detailed GPS coordinates. This is particularly useful in reducing the time of search and rescue efforts and increasing the chances of saving a worker in trouble.

SPOT is a simple and easy way to minimize the risks associated with individuals working alone and to help organizations meet legislated mandatory check-in reporting requirements for workers in the field. It has enormous potential to improve worker safety across the country. Given the low entry costs, (equipment and annual subscription fee total less than C\$300). It is affordable enough to consider equipping every remote worker. *www*

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