Why Travel Safety Training For Employees Is Increasingly Important

In the aftermath of the Paris terror attacks, the subsequent Brussels lock down and travel warning issued by the US Government, any manager with responsibility for travellers should rightly question the risks employees may be exposed to and review what support they need to help keep them safe. Many managers may find it difficult to determine what the real risk is versus people's perception of risk and how do you protect against the former and relieve the latter?

Background Risk

It is worth bearing in mind that very few countries rate as having no travel risk, there is always a chance that something may happen. Extreme weather or natural disasters are increasingly common phenomena, crime invariably poses an issue and extreme violence will always exist when there are disgruntled groups. Islamic terrorism currently gains huge amounts of press coverage, however many western countries have had an ongoing risk of terrorism from separatists, extreme religious or political groups and activists (particularly animal rights groups).

Most people who commute and work in major western cities are exposed to a risk of terrorism every day. We trust that the state security apparatus is doing everything in its power to reduce this risk to an acceptably low level whilst working with the transport and infrastructure companies to ensure we are kept as safe as can be. Those of us who appreciate this risk make a conscious decision to go about our daily lives, because it is highly unlikely that we'll be caught in an incident. When such an employee travels to another low risk destination the risk doesn't significantly change, they are still incredibly unlikely to become a victim of extreme violence, however now their employer has a responsibility to ensure their safety.

Risk Assessment

All organisations must have a reason for sending their employees on business travel and prior to any trip it should have a system to establish whether the business benefit outweighs the risk. This risk assessment should factor in two important considerations; what is the risk at the destination and what is the risk profile of the traveller.

Most country travel risk rating systems use 4 to 5 categories that range from low to extreme risk, a quick internet search will show several commercial companies and government sites that can be referenced. For travel risk this usually factors in a range of inputs likely to affect a traveller such as health, security and transport and allows an organisation to have measures for these different rating levels rather than having to look at countries individually.

LGBT Corporate Travellers

Personal risk can be a more complex issue and needs a more personal approach. Sex, race, gender identity, experience, language skills, appearance and health all contribute to personal risk and different countries may pose different personal challenges dependent upon these factors. For example, there are currently 7 countries in which homosexuality is punishable by death, and a further 70 with laws against homosexuality that frequently hand out lengthy prison sentences.

Which Department Is Responsible For Business Traveller Safety?

Most companies understand the need for a robust travel risk management process and appropriate policies and procedures to support their travellers. However, few companies have a single department that has overall responsibility for their travellers - with responsibility split between HR, security, business continuity, travel, insurance and finance (to name a few). Whilst all care about traveller safety, no single department may have the budget, resource and, importantly, board backing to implement a company-wide travel risk management process.

Travel Safety Training

Travel safety training is an important part of any travel risk management process to educate the travellers in the risks they might face, how to mitigate them before travel, how to behave on the ground to reduce their likelihood, and how to respond if something unexpected should happen. The benefit of implementing a training programme prior to writing policies and procedures is clear: It can empower the employee to keep themselves safe, while the organisation puts their travel support structure in place.

For the average business traveller to any destination, the most likely risks are the everyday risks; travellers' diarrhoea, petty crime, road traffic incidents and losing items. The net result of any of these things happening to the traveller is going to be an increase in the stress they experience and a corresponding reduction in productivity. Most of these everyday risks can be largely avoided through making the traveller aware of safe practices and behaviours on the ground.

If a traveller has had relevant training, they should be in a much better position to take responsibility for themselves. If you as the employer / manager have provided them with a course that shows them what to watch out for, they can take measures to mitigate that risk. For example, in some locations, hotels are booked due to their proximity to offices or factories and may not have the appropriate level of security. Is it not much better for the employee to make the case to move hotel, than wait for an incident to happen?

What are their transport options? It may be that public transport isn't a safe option at their location but to use a private hire vehicle contravenes policy; if you have provided training that shows them how to stay safe, you are allowing them to make decisions on the ground, based on safety first and not finance.

Flexible Modules

Travel safety training shouldn't be one size fits all and should be toned appropriately for the business traveller. Often experts like educating the audience in their expertise and not tailoring their messages to keep the learning points pertinent, practical and easily applicable. All employees should start with a foundation course that is short and promotes safe travel. The risks a traveller may face will probably increase as they venture into developing markets

and the support and training being offered should increase proportionally.

To put death by terrorism into perspective, pre-existing medical conditions are the biggest killers of business travellers and road traffic incidents are the largest non-natural cause of death. These can largely be avoided through pre-travel medical check-ups, appropriate medical support and road safety training. There is the awareness amongst travellers of serious tropical diseases, but actually it is more important to make sure that routine western vaccinations are kept up to date as these diseases are far more prevalent in the developing world than their exotic counterparts.

In locations where tangible security risks exist, for example kidnap for ransom, training and physical security measures can significantly reduce the risk for the traveller, whilst also providing reassurance to them and allowing them to concentrate on the task at hand.

Terrorism by its very nature is designed to sow fear, and this fear often outweighs the real risk a traveller may face. The fear can be debilitating however, and a good education process with a support structure for the traveller can give them the peace of mind they deserve and allow them to travel safely.

There are over 75 countries where homosexuality is currently illegal or highly restricted as illustrated in the map above

Saul Shanagher, Director, beTravelwise, developed a flair for travel safety training working as Global Head of Travel Security Training for International SOS, the world's leading assistance company. He and co-Director, Andy Prior, launched beTravelwise to offer a new, innovative approach to corporate travel risk management compliance, with cost effective blended training, appropriate for health, security and travel risks faced by employees on business trips abroad.

About beTravelwise: Launched in Autumn 2015, the company won the 'Next Big Thing Award 2015' at Business Travel IQ event, October 2015. It is a member of the International Gay & Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA) and is a partner in the UK Government Foreign and Commonwealth Office initiative 'Know Before You Go' campaign www.gov.uk/knowbeforeyougo. For more information about beTravelwise, please contact the London Office: +44 (0)20 7183 4757

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