Expecting The Unexpected: Keeping Employees Safe Across A Global Workforce

For global HR professionals, the last few months spent navigating the response to the COVID19 outbreak have been a challenging and occasionally worrying experience. As more and more companies expand beyond their home markets, HR responsibilities and management of employees have become spread over a wider network of regions - and when unexpected challenges compromise the safety of remote teams, a dynamic response is needed.

Although the decentralisation of employees from main office locations has also been a benefit to stop the spread of the virus through close contact, companies have been tested by the implementation of worker protections and information-sharing amongst expatriate or remote staff. Employer duty-of-care stretches beyond emergency scenarios – in any circumstance where workers are not on home soil, HR and operational teams are rightly wary of potential local risks and threats to the security of their employees.

In today's global economy, the percentage of workforces heading on global assignments or working remotely is increasing year-on-year; a survey by the CIPD in 2019[1] found that 54% of workers in the UK had some option of remote work, while the Global Business Travel Association predicted increased spending on business travel of up to 1.7 million USD by 2022[2], signalling an upward trend.

So how do we as global HR professionals set in place the right measures to ensure our decentralised staff are protected overseas?

Safeguarding Workers: Our Experiences

In the early days of Mauve, our clients were predominantly based in the telecommunications, energy and engineering sectors – often, their projects entailed sending large quantities of workers out to overseas locations to implement new technologies, develop local infrastructure or train local staff to carry out their role.

These locations were at times undeveloped, unstable or hazardous. As the employer of record for these workers, we retained a duty-of-care to safeguard employee wellbeing. With multiple parties involved in the hire and management of workers, this took detailed planning. The idea is not to stifle the worker on what can be an already stressful assignment, but to rigorously prepare involved parties for all eventualities so that unwelcome surprises are at a minimum.

Over the years as differing threats have come and gone, and as remote work has grown, we have learnt considerable amounts about the protection of our internal and external workers. We have built this knowledge into a framework of robust processes, identifying 5 key areas of focus.

1. Open Lines Of Communication

Communication is the foremost component of the worker support and security mechanism. Any company responsible for managing remote workers should build a contact plan into their early stage preparation.

Regular check-ins are a must to ensure wellbeing and effective communication. Schedule verbal or face-to-face contact at routine intervals – ensure you have staff available to respond in that time zone to avoid the worker feeling isolated. Know when and how to escalate any concerns so you can provide solutions quickly – leaving employees waiting for responses will impact morale.

A separate contact procedure should be established for the worker in emergency situations. A one-size-fits-all approach may not be appropriate; in the planning phases of an international assignment, it is worth assessing potential local risks and mapping these to your emergency procedure to ensure there are no gaps when it needs to be implemented.

Technological tools including tracking apps can be utilised if the worker will be very mobile during an overseas assignment or in a particularly volatile location. These can only be activated with the worker's consent but can provide peace-of-mind of a fast response in the event of an emergency.

2. Set Processes And Responsibilities

Before the worker sets off on any global assignment, responsibilities should be set for a number of different functions. Accountability for phases such as planning, onboarding, monitoring, on-the-ground contact and offboarding should be established – departmentally, this could fall to HR, Operations teams or line managers depending on the size or scope of the business.

A logical team of responsible staff with decision-making capabilities should be established for emergency situations, meeting regularly to monitor situations as they evolve and to form responses. All parties should understand where to report and escalate potential issues.

Once duties have been established, the responsible personnel can prepare in advance of the assignment with professional risk assessments and efficient processes to ensure the team and worker are on the same page. This could include setting policies such as:
- Business Travel policies
- Business Continuity policies
- Remote Working policies
- Worker Ground Rules
- Health and Safety guidelines
- Emergency Procedures
- Employee Handbooks
- Country Factsheets

If the level of threat in a country is unknown, it is worth carrying out a risk assessment. These can be useful in assessing the individual, current circumstances of the company's operations in their chosen country, and will shed light on operational red flags and recommendations.

Ensure policies and processes adhere to any rules or requirements of the country of work – falling foul of legislation can lead to penalties and blacklisting.

3. Educate Staff

Education of remote or mobile staff is valuable to safeguarding practices. Language and cultural training before an assignment starts can be extremely valuable in the support and security of expatriates. A threat such as the coronavirus outbreak can be made more distressing if the worker has not yet

familiarised with the linguistic and cultural nuances of their host country's response.

Staff should be trained on remote or global protocol and kept updated through internal communications of any situations impacting their country of work. Although some threats may take us by surprise, training should be set in place at the earliest opportunity and maintained on an ongoing basis, where possible – being proactive rather than reactive will help to avoid a hastily-scrambled or panicked response from workers and leadership alike.

Relevant global assignment policies and processes should be made accessible to workers; these should be stored somewhere the worker can access at all times, from anywhere. Some companies utilise apps, worker portals or collaboration platforms for this purpose.

4. Check Insurances And Repatriation Cover

An unfortunate but unavoidable fact of managing vast numbers of worldwide employees is that, on occasion, a worker is injured, suffers illness or dies whilst on an international assignment. Mauve experienced this in Kenya where a client's worker passed away unexpectedly in his sleep following the Avian Flu outbreak and had to be quickly repatriated back to his loved ones - a situation that required very careful and sensitive management.

Employers must ensure their workers have adequate healthcare insurance in place that covers the country of work and assignment activities. It is also imperative that insurance covers seemingly unlikely eventualities – during the recent COVID19 outbreak, many companies realised their insurances did not cover pandemic or epidemic situations, leaving them uncomfortably exposed.

Without insurance, employers can be saddled with the responsibility for escalating medical and repatriation costs as an unwelcome addition to an already distressing situation. Remote workers who are local nationals without the need for insurances should equally feel that they are medically supported by their company, knowing how and when to report health issues.

5. Seek External Support

Another step towards improved worker wellbeing and peace of mind in a volatile work location is to contract with an international security management company. This is particularly useful in cases where you do not have resources to spare in the worker's time zone.

Security management companies offer education and training on potential travel risks before the worker has entered the country of assignment, and then supply trained 24/7 overseas security and assistance in the event of accidents, safety threats, natural disasters and so on.

They can also provide local points of contact for the worker in country if you do not have internal staff available in the worker's time zone, and in the event of a severe threat, safely evacuate staff as needed.

To protect internal and external staff, Mauve works with two internationally-renowned organisations with a combined reach of 100 locations worldwide; this gives us the peace of mind that all deployed personnel are protected from harm and supported in the event of an emergency, providing a safe, secure and healthy working environment.

Preparation Is Key

If we have learnt anything from the recent virus outbreak, a prepared company is a protected company. The outbreak has been a marker of preparedness and those with policies and processes already in place have been able to react swiftly in implementing emergency protocols to protect workforces.

New learnings will arise with every new threat or challenge that arises in the wake of COVID19, and there will be inevitable surprises thrown at us as we navigate the changing face of employee management across borders. However, we can soften the impact by readying ourselves through the above framework – creating a happy, safe work environment for staff, wherever in the world they are situated.

References:
1. CIPD, UK Working Lives Survey, 2019 - https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/work/trends/uk-working-lives.
2. GBTA, Annual Spending Report and Forecast, 2018 - https://www.gbta.org/research-and-tools.

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Chief Executive Officer
As one of Mauve's founders, Ann was the first and only "back-office" employee in the early days, providing services and support to telecoms projects. Today, Ann's role as CEO is just as energetic and she is profoundly involved in the business at every level. Ann is multi-lingual and enjoys experiencing new cultures as she travels the world expanding the organisation's infrastructure.
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