

Half Of Multinationals Have No Plan In Place For Dealing With A Pandemic

International HR must be involved in company crisis plans if the very specific needs of expatriates and their families are to be considered, but how many companies even have a plan in place? ECA International recently ran a survey on policy provision for pandemics. Andrew Shaw, ECA's Managing Director, comments on the findings.

Over the past decade we have seen a number of diseases and medical emergencies break out across geographically diverse locations. These have included SARS, swine and avian flu, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome otherwise known as MERS and now Ebola. With cross-border travel inevitably increasing the potential for pandemics, it is clearly in the interest of multinational organisations with mobile and expatriate workforces to be prepared for such events.

But how prepared are multinationals for crisis in reality, and just how involved are international HR in crisis planning? To get a better idea of the provision companies currently have in place to deal with pandemics, ECA carried out a quick spot survey among global mobility managers at the beginning of August.

It is shocking to learn that of the 189 companies taking part, nearly half said that they either had no plan, or were unaware of a plan within their organisation to deal with outbreaks such as the current Ebola.

Of those companies who were aware of the existence of a business continuity plan, many were unaware of the specific provisions within in, and therefore to what extent pandemics were catered for within that plan.

The concern for those GM managers without, or unaware of, contingency plans for potential emergencies such as the Ebola outbreak, is how the difficult extra sets of issues that come with being responsible for expatriated employees can be dealt with. Knowing who is responsible for which staff, which family members are on assignment, how to reach people far from HQ or their 'parent' entity, knowing where the required local facilities are in potentially hundreds of locations – and possibly remote or undeveloped ones at that, are among the variables which add to the complexity of crisis management. At the time of crisis, it pays to know as

much as possible to be able to co-ordinate an effective response. Companies also need to think through when or indeed, whether, they will treat their expatriates differently from locally employed staff in different kinds of scenario.

Certainly, the best way for companies to ensure that these issues are addressed within any crisis policy is to involve and inform global mobility teams. And if there is no plan at all, global mobility teams should plan to take up the mantle for themselves. Apart from risk to business, companies need to understand their duty of care to their employees.

So where companies do make provision for outbreaks of disease, what do they involve? Clearly, the provisions have to accommodate a great number of scenarios, so specifics are rarely possible for every case. For those participants reporting some kind of business continuity policy, the most common area covered is the ongoing provision of a safe working environment (83%). This could mean providing masks, if appropriate (this was widely reported as one of the measures implemented during the SARS outbreak); introducing additional hygiene measures in the workplace; monitoring staff health; providing extra healthcare; quarantine if necessary, and ensuring everyone has the most up-to-date information on the outbreak, whatever it may be.

Companies might also consider including splitting teams and working them from separate offices, or alternating working teams in order to mitigate against the risk of an entire office going down with an infection and business continuity being lost.

Ensuring that there is a plan in place should people no longer be able to travel to work is the second most common measure adopted by survey participants, and 70% said they provide IT provision or extra support to facilitate working from home.

For expatriate staff, evacuation or repatriation may need to be considered. Three quarters of companies who had a policy, said that it made provision for repatriation of an expatriate, if possible, and/or their family in the event of a pandemic. Consideration needs to be made, though,

for scenarios where travel is not possible for whatever reason, and to what extent the company will also support its local staff who are experiencing the same risks.

With regards to the Ebola crisis specifically, most of the companies we surveyed with staff in West Africa were taking a wait and see approach at the time of the survey being conducted (August), although travel restrictions were already in place amongst a number of them with 20% restricting movement in and out of the region, and 23% within the region.

Very few companies said they would increase location (hardship) allowances (4%), or provide a new exceptional allowance (5%), to their expatriates in the event of a pandemic. We would certainly suggest that a location allowance shouldn't be used as 'danger money' or to compensate for one-off crises. Direct and practical response and support to any kind of crisis is a more effective and responsible approach.

For those companies unsure about their crisis policy, we would advise the following:

- Engage with the business continuity team to ensure there is a plan and that it takes expatriates into consideration
- Ensure crisis management communication protocols have been worked out - and are well understood across the business - in advance
- Engage a specialist travel security provider to help with policy or at least advise on case-by-case scenarios
- Champion the development of your company's pandemic or crisis policy within the organisation, or at the very least create one for your part of the business
- Monitor government warnings in hotspots and feedback from people on the ground.



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