

International Business Travel: Understanding The Impact On Mental Health

Business travel brings with it a host of opportunities for both employees and businesses. It enables the former to experience a foreign country and what it has to offer, and occasionally even turn their work travel into a mini ‘bleisure’ trip. For businesses, this can lead to more engaged, productive employees, as well as more business opportunities. But there can also be a downside to international business travel (IBT); our research with International SOS Foundation revealed some of the physical and psychological impacts. Potentially, some of the reasons why it has been found that frequent travellers make three times as many claims for psychological treatment than those who don’t go on regular business trips.

To not only to fulfil their Duty of Care, but also foster a happy and productive mobile workforce, organisations need to understand how they can protect the mental health and physical wellbeing of their travelling employees.

IBT Impact On Mental Health

As exciting as it is to be in a new country, and experience a different culture, IBT can have a major impact on employees’ physical and psychological health. Especially as being away from home can disrupt normal routines, such as healthy eating patterns and regular exercise. Only 40% of international business travellers reported having a good work/life balance while abroad, and many also said they work longer hours when away.

Partly as a result of this, around a quarter of business travellers experienced mental health issues which were more prevalent than normal, and nearly 31% suffered from emotional exhaustion, a core feature of burnout, on a weekly basis. Worryingly, this stress seems to affect women more; female respondents showed, on average, significantly higher levels of emotional exhaustion than males. But interestingly,

those with children reported lower levels of depression than those without children. Levels of reported stress were broadly similar for parents and non-parents.

Supporting Employees

While many organisations are taking care of the logistics of business travel, such as booking hotels and transport; when it comes to health and wellbeing, it can often be a different matter. Our research found that there is a lack of provision in terms of mental health support for mobile workers. With only 1 in 5 (21%) business travellers surveyed saying they were offered mental health support, and just 25% a wellness programme.

This lack of support is not just detrimental to employees and their wellbeing, but can also hurt the businesses bottom line. As those IBT’s suffering from stress and mental health issues won’t be able to carry out their work as effectively.

Luckily, there are things organisations can do to help ensure their employees are properly supported from a mental perspective. These include creating clear policies, behavioural expectations and practices around travel that encompass individual differences, but also monitoring the mental health of their IBT population. It is recommended that mental health monitoring is included in pre- and post-travel health checks, in addition to the physical checks. This will encourage making mental health discussions part of the normal conversation within the organisation. Ensure that any feedback survey post trip includes not just logistics, but also questions on mental health and psychological experience.

In addition, it’s important to encourage IBTs to build recovery and rest into their schedule while on a trip and on return. Enable flexible work schedules so that IBTs can recover – which may include allowing them to work from home, take prolonged weekends and book bleisure time. It goes without saying, but creating an organisational culture of openness around mental health is also key. The aim here should be to reduce the stigma around mental health and create a culture where employees feel that the organisation cares about their wellbeing. Ultimately, it’s about creating an environment where they feel safe to disclose

existing conditions, and talk to colleagues and managers if they are suffering from or at risk of mental health issues.

Within the context of increasing international business travel, organisations need to understand both the potentially positive and negative implications business travel can have on their workforce. This will better help them offer guidance and support to employees, and ensure they are happy and engaged no matter where in the world their job takes them. At the end of the day, helping IBTs needs to be about much more than just booking their tickets, and hotel rooms. Actively supporting their overall health - both mental and physical – and ensuring they have the assistance they need is key to not just meeting an organisations Duty of Care, but also driving performance and happy, healthy and engaged workforce, at home and away.



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Her research is focused upon leadership and management, particularly upon the link between management and employee well-being. Her doctoral research explored the role of implicit theories of leadership in the context of employee well-being, focused on understanding more about why managers may impact upon the health of employees in the workplace.



KEEPING INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS TRAVELLERS HEALTHY, HAPPY AND ENGAGED AT HOME AND AWAY

34% of IBTs are more likely to engage in a number of **RISKY BEHAVIOURS** when travelling on business

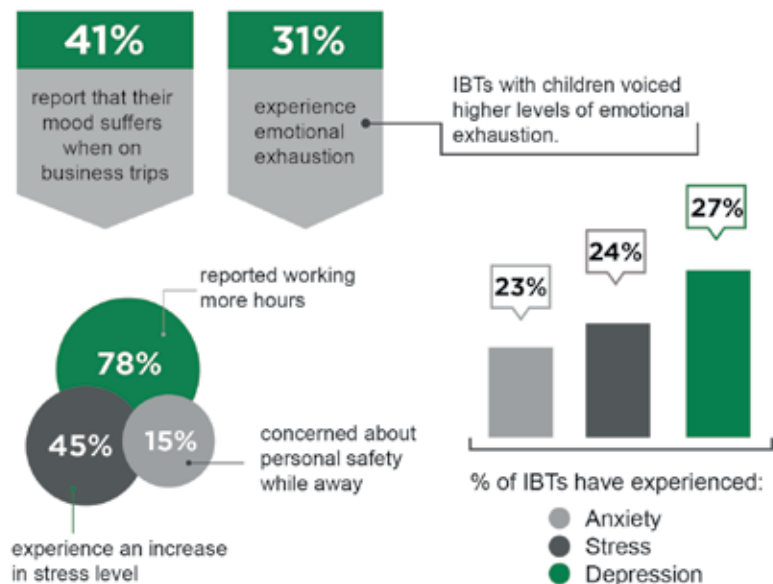


EMOTIONAL OUTCOMES

POSITIVE



NEGATIVE



PHYSICAL HEALTH IMPACT



WORK/LIFE BALANCE

ONLY 40% of IBTs reported a sufficient work/life balance

