

Taking Flight: Keeping Employees Safe Around the World

by Nancy Schnitzerling

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Like any human resources director, I deal with everyday issues such as talent retention, staff training and helping people sort out interpersonal relationships. In the past few years, however, I have also learned to deal with much more unusual issues such as having a female senior staffer travel to a nation where she cannot appear in public without a male relative—at the risk of stoning.

When she turned to human resources for advice, I realized we had a lot of work to do! Not only did we need to help employees understand visas, cultural norms, and security when they traveled; we also had to quickly develop a system to keep track of where in the world they were, and what to do if they became ill or needed other assistance.

Going Global

How did Liberty Science Center, a regional museum next to the Statue of Liberty in Jersey City, NJ, become involved in travel to the Middle East, Mexico, Turkey, and beyond? This change came about from the development of a new enterprise—Experience Services.

Coming out of the institution's \$109 million, 22-month expansion and refreshment project in 2005-07, the Center had an in-house group of experienced, talented, and eclectic designers. With expertise in everything from building retrofit and exhibit development to interior environmental design and "wayfinding" signage, the Center decided to offer these services to institutions worldwide, extending the Science Center's reach and adding another revenue stream to the budget.

In this increasingly global world, chances are good that sometime in your career you may be

asked to grapple with issues of foreign travel. Like any other human resources task, the most practical tip is to start with a process, preferably one that has been thought through before employees are standing in your office announcing that they are off to China.

Gather Data

First, gather data. Develop a form (HR people just love forms, don't they?) asking travelers exactly where they are going, when they plan to leave, and when they plan to return. The form should also ask for health information and emergency contacts. The middle of an emergency is not the time to find out that the employee's information is not current!

In addition to the informational form, make it mandatory for staff to provide a very detailed itinerary. Know where the employee is—and the contact information in those places—at all times. This could make a huge difference in his or her safety in the event of civil strife, a natural disaster, or other unforeseen developments.

Passports and Visas

Human Resources must also review travel documentation, such as passports. Many countries require that passports not be within six months of expiration. It is also a good idea for HR to have a copy of the passport. In the event that the passport is stolen or lost, you can fax the copy of the original to the closest US Embassy for a temporary passport, allowing the employee to return quickly and safely.

The fun starts when you begin to research visa requirements. Visas are like permission slips to visit a country. The traveler asks, "May I enter your country?" and the nation says "yes" or "no." Each country has different visa requirements, and the timing, method, and location of acquiring a visa can be confusingly

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different. Sometimes you can submit an application; in other instances you have to visit an embassy or consulate in person—occasionally more than once! Sometimes you must get a visa in the U.S. before traveling, but in other cases you can purchase one upon arrival in the host country.

Canada and Mexico do not require U.S. citizens to purchase a visa, but China will not allow travelers to even board a flight to their nation without one. Tourists buy visas at the airport in Turkey before going through passport control. India recently enacted a law stating that visitors cannot get a visa for reentry unless they have been out of the country for at least two months.

Cultural Differences

Employees must understand cultural differences and expectations prior to departure. Human Resources can help keep them safe and free from hassles by researching gender restrictions, clothing norms, and ethics restrictions that will be imposed on all visitors. Your employees are guests of the country they are visiting and must abide by cultural boundaries prevalent there. For example, no matter how we may feel about the practice, certain countries limit the movement of Americans of Jewish descent, and for their own safety, any Jewish staffers must be aware of this restriction before they embark on a trip to those nations.

Going back to our first example, when we applied for a visa for our head of design, the nation in question would only issue a “special permission” seven-day visa. Why so many restrictions? The head of design happens to be a woman, and in Saudi Arabia, a woman is not allowed to appear in public without her father, husband, or other male family member. Any

woman caught in public without the appropriate accompanying male family member is subject to jail and /or stoning.

Insurance

Another important consideration of employee foreign travel is insurance. Life insurance policies may not be in effect in certain countries without a special “war risk coverage policy” on those individuals during their time of travel. But if you haven’t planned ahead, you may not even be able to purchase extra coverage—the ability to purchase war risk coverage depends on your policy, and you may need to negotiate the right to purchase it with your insurer. When in doubt, have a conversation with your broker to see if and when you need to purchase this coverage.

In addition to war risk coverage, you need to make sure that employees are covered for non-work purposes, such as going to the marketplace to buy souvenirs. Some insurers won’t cover employees who are enjoying a little sightseeing on off hours.

Considerations providing western-style medical care and even body reclamation, should a staffer die abroad, should also be discussed with your insurance broker.

Vaccines

Plan ahead! Vaccines may be required to enter or return from foreign countries, and some must be administered in specifically-spaced series weeks or months apart. In addition to required vaccines, and depending on the disease outbreaks in the country the employee is planning to visit, the prophylactic or preventative use of medications may be suggested. A great resource for required

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This all may seem a little daunting, but the key to developing a professional, effective program for foreign travel is to start as soon as it seems likely your staff will travel out of the country.

vaccinations can be found on the Center for Disease Control website (www.cdc.gov/travel/content/vaccinations.aspx). To see if there are any new or unusual disease outbreaks in an area to which your staff may travel, consult the World Health Organization as well.

Disaster Preparedness

Nearly every area of the world is at risk for unexpected natural or civil disruption. Human Resources must understand and plan for this type of unlikely event. Find out when hurricane, tornado, and tsunami seasons occur and make staffers mindful of paying attention to weather predictions. Is the area prone to earthquakes? What is the plan if one strikes? While no one can predict natural disasters, being able to find employees and establish contact as soon as possible after an event is important. Finally, when an employee is traveling abroad it is the responsibility of HR and Security to monitor the host country for war and civil unrest. In nations where this seems like a possibility, arm employees with open-ended tickets so that at the first sign of war or civil unrest, they can leave.

This all may seem a little daunting, but the key to developing a professional, effective program for foreign travel is to start as soon as it seems likely your staff will travel out of the country. Research online assets before you need them, and bookmark them in a special folder. Some suggested sites are: for passport and visa information www.travel.state.gov; for vaccine information, www.cdc.gov/travel/content/vaccinations.aspx; for disease outbreaks, www.who.int/ith/en; and to monitor civil unrest www.travel.state.gov. Cultural information can be found by doing an internet search and will vary depending on the country. For example you can learn about Saudi Arabia at <http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Saudi-Arabia.html>.

That way, you'll be ready the day a senior executive walks into your office with a smile and announces he is traveling far away from the safety and familiarity of the office. It's a grand adventure and excellent professional development for staff; with the right tools, it will be your professional adventure as well. ✨