

## International work-related travel and assignments

Recent years have seen considerable growth of international work-related travel and assignments. Mobility is increasing due to globalisation, new markets and the need for services. Studies have shown that 50% additional growth in mobile workers is expected by the year 2020<sup>1</sup>. International travel is a large component of many organisations to such an extent that the definition of the workplace is evolving, integrating travel and assignments abroad. The responsibilities of the organisation to employees involved will remain an important topic.

In the past, concerns and measures of protection focused on the 'executive traveller'. However, today there are many types of working travellers. They can be a senior executive who is travelling to close an important deal, a consulting technician who is travelling to service a system, a manual labourer working with a large group building a road through a jungle, or a domestic person hired abroad to work in a household. At any given time, there are many types of workers travelling around the globe.

## Assessment of risks before travel

The risk for a worker travelling or working abroad can cover a wide range of issues in addition to 'traditional' occupational safety, health and security considerations, e.g. latent health issues such as cardiovascular diseases, quality and accessibility of adequate health care, location-specific infection risks, lost medication, lost travel documents, the quality of state security and emergency services, road traffic accidents, political unrest, violent crime, terrorism and conflicts, major accidents, natural disasters, and cultural and legal complexities. Most often, a situation can be dealt with locally with on-site advice, but sometimes more complex intervention is needed. A global framework for success in managing and recovering from an event requires a proactive approach to prevention and mitigation in order to minimise both the probability and impact on the individual and the organisation.

Such events should be part of the pre-emptive OSH risk assessment and management of employees. Insurance that covers financial and medical risks may not provide adequate assistance as it is a mechanism for transferring risks and not preventing them. Organisations should ensure that adequate health, safety, security and legal protection measures are in place for their workers on international travel assignments because:

- Prevention, response to, and mitigation of incidents reduce costly interruptions to business activities and potential litigation, improve morale and strengthen productivity.
- Adequate identification of threats and hazards, and the management of risks during an incident, may allow for the continuation of activities, or the development of new opportunities, which could have otherwise been lost.
- It is important to ensure that any relevant legal obligations are met.
- Meeting the duty of care is an important part of corporate social responsibility.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pwc.com/talentmobility2020>

## Defining the boundaries and risks from business and personal travel

When staff travel on international business, they may combine it with some elements of personal travel. If the company is only prepared to cover the risks associated with business travel, then the boundaries should be made clear and the employee advised of the need to make arrangements for managing risks arising from the personal elements of the trip.

## Support before, during and after travel and assignments

While practical enforcement of criminal law across national boundaries may be challenging, case law and civil liabilities are putting pressure on employers to manage all work-related risks to employees wherever they may arise so employers should take a systematic approach to

- Assess the health status of employees before travel and the risks of likely illnesses or injuries during travel and stay abroad
- [Provide information](#) and training to the employee on how to stay healthy, safe and secure during the trip, remembering that some risks, such as snake bites, are more prevalent in rural areas in developing countries and are not normally encountered in the developed world
- Provide immunisation programmes for the countries to be visited, in accordance with [international guidelines](#)
- Provide basic first aid kits, possibly including syringes and dental accessories, and information and training on use in the event of minor emergencies
- Provide information and training on what to do in the event of sickness or injury during the trip
- Provide information and training on what to do in the event of an emergency or disaster
- Provide insurance relevant to the risks
- Provide means of communication to ensure situations can be monitored and up-to-date information provided
- Provide information to and monitoring of the employee on return from the trip to share experience, and to improve and update situation reports

While the perceived wisdom is that staff normally based in developed countries can be exposed to exotic and challenging infections, pathogens and illnesses when travelling in the developing world, it has to be appreciated that all changes of location will involve challenges to persons immune systems from pathogens to which they have not built up immunity. The health effects of crossing international time zones can also challenge both mind and body. Jet lag cannot be prevented but there are ways of reducing its effects.

### Travel by road – a high risk area

Statistically, road traffic accidents for cars and particularly motorbikes account for the greatest risk of death or serious injury. The safety of vehicles, conditions of roads, extreme weather conditions affecting infrastructure and the driving standards of other drivers vary hugely worldwide and some or all of these can be particularly poor in some developing countries. Lack of familiarity with the conditions will add further risks to the travelling employee. In such circumstances it is advisable to consider carefully the relative advantages of using public transport, hiring vehicles or employing local drivers. Drivers and passengers should observe best practice ensuring, where relevant, they check the vehicle, wear seat belts, follow highway rules, avoid distractions and never drive when under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

### Theft, assault, terrorism and kidnap

Theft and personal assault may always be present in any country, but people travelling abroad should be particularly alert and security conscious as they are more obvious targets because they may be disorientated and conspicuous. They should be particularly vigilant about keeping money, valuables and personal documents safe. Employees may be at risk from kidnap in certain countries where the rule of law is not adequately enforced, and staff of multinationals may be seen as a potential for ransom. All employees travelling to countries where this may be the case should be trained to minimise the risk of kidnap. Civil

unrest, war and terrorism can flare up at short notice in some areas and advice should be sought as to the latest [information and recommendations for travel and precautions to such areas](#).

### **The employers' position on obligations to employees on work-related international travel and assignments**

Even though there may not be any specific law or practical enforcement, sending employees abroad is a business investment decision and the associated risks and opportunities should be managed to maximise the outcomes for the individual, their dependants and the business.

### **Learning from experience to inform future risk assessments, control measures and employee support**

On return from work-related international travel, employers should have arrangements to debrief employees to get up-to-date information about the situation in countries that were visited. It can inform future risk assessments and enable employers to evaluate whether the present advice, information, resources and support that are provided to employees, who travel on work assignments, are adequate. Particularly, attention should be paid to the possibility of late onset of diseases contracted abroad. Some diseases have prolonged and variable incubation periods. Employees should be informed to be vigilant about any symptoms and to inform their doctors of their travels so that they can be alerted to the possibility that symptoms may be due to diseases not regularly encountered at home.

### **Sources of assistance**

The IOE publication - [Helping employers manage risks to employees from International Travel for Business Purposes](#) and the [Global Framework: Safety, Health and Security for Work-Related International Travel and Assignments](#) published by The International SOS Foundation provide more information and advice.

### **For more Information and Answers to your Questions**

Please visit the [the OSH](#) of our website [www.ioe-emp.org](http://www.ioe-emp.org). If you do not find what you are looking for, please contact IOE Adviser, Pierre Vincensini: [vincensini@ioe-emp.com](mailto:vincensini@ioe-emp.com) call +41 22 929 00 15.