One-Quarter of Business Travelers Admit to Bad Behavior

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By: Kathy Gurchiek

Some U.S. business travelers behave irresponsibly while traveling for their jobs, with more than one-fourth admitting to binge drinking, according to a recent survey examining the risky behavior employees engage in while on the road.

The survey also found that nearly 11 percent of U.S. business travelers admitted to "picking up" a stranger in a bar. The findings are from a survey of over 1,000 respondents conducted in December 2014 and commissioned by On Call International, a provider of customized travel risk management services.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines binge drinking as the consumption of five or more alcoholic drinks for men and four or more drinks for women within about two hours.

More than 38 million U.S. adults binge drink, and those who do average about four times per month, according to the CDC. Binge drinking "increases the chances of getting hurt or hurting others," such as in car crashes, the CDC notes on its website. It's also associated with health problems such as sexually transmitted diseases, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases.

Among the On Call International survey findings:

- More than 27 percent of respondents admitted to binge drinking while on a business trip—17 percent said they have done this once or "very rarely," 5.6 percent have done this two or three times in the past year, 2.5 percent have done this four or more times in the past year, and 2.2 percent report binge drinking on every business trip.
- Roughly 11 percent of respondents said they had picked up a stranger in a bar, with about 7 percent saying they did this once or "very rarely," 2 percent saying they've done this two or three times in the past year, and 1.4 percent reporting they do this every trip.

Activities like binge drinking and engaging in one-night stands have business repercussions that include lost productivity and the potential for physically threatening situations, as well as the potential for lawsuits and damage to an organization's reputation, On Call pointed out in a news release.

"While it certainly appears that the allure of a one-night stand without the constraints of being close to home is tempting to many business travelers, letting one's guard down in an unfamiliar setting can easily lead to dangerous situations for an individual," said Jim Hutton, the company's chief security officer, in the news release.

These possible situations include assault, robbery and otherwise avoidable incidents leading to serious bodily injury.

"While responsibility ultimately falls on the business traveler to act in a responsible and safe manner, [an employer needs] to be proactive by setting appropriate parameters and being clear about the expectations it has of its employees while they are out representing the organization," added Hutton.

Mitigating Risk

The flip side of the survey's findings: Nearly three-fourths of respondents said they have not overindulged in alcohol and 89 percent said they have not hooked up with a stranger while on a business trip. Additionally, 92 percent said they have not lied to their employer about their activities during a business trip.

Still, there is a need for companies to address employee personal conduct while traveling for business. "You have to walk a careful line," Hutton told *SHRM Online*. "You can make a case [for responsible behavior] under the framework of the company providing a duty-of-care and wanting to do the right thing."

Training employees and establishing clear policies are two important ways in which an organization can help mitigate risky behavior, according to Hutton. Some organizations, for example, have a policy of not covering the cost of alcohol during a trip so as to discourage overconsumption, he noted. It's important that employers clearly communicate policies and that employees understand.

He has seen successful training programs that include case studies incorporating real-life examples of risky behavior by travelers—and the resulting impact on the employee or the organization. Hutton suggested bringing in someone from a sister industry or from a geography similar to where the employee will travel to deliver the training as well. He also recommended including people from the organization's risk management or security teams or its vendor/supplier community, where appropriate.

During the training, when reflecting on past real-life examples, "talk about choices people made and what the outcomes were," he said. That is more effective than a list of travel do's and don'ts, he advised.

"We think that's especially true with our less-experienced travelers," he added, noting that Millennials want a certain level of customization in training sessions.

Also, "there is a companion responsibility on the part of the traveler to educate him or herself, to access the tools that may be helpful to them," during the business trip, Hutton said.

An online training session for a less-experienced business traveler, for example, could be part of an employee's mandatory travel preparations.

The idea, he said, is "not to scare people [but] to help them make better decisions going forward."

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