Do Your Business Travelers Know What to Do In An Emergency?

Note: The author is chief security officer for On Call International, an organization that provides emergency evacuations and medical and security assistance to businesses and travelers anywhere in the world.

With both business travel volume and travel costs rising in 2016, creating travel compliance policies employees will understand — and follow — is key to reducing business travel risk, especially in a time when global and domestic safety is so uncertain.

Use these guidelines and emerging trends to update and communicate your company travel compliance policies:

1. Duty of loyalty

Employers are morally and legally obligated to mitigate risks for their traveling employees. However, ethical and duty of care concerns aren't solely in the hands of employers; there are additional obligations that come into play in the employee-employer relationship, known as "duty of loyalty." Duty of loyalty refers to the responsibility an employee has to his/her organization to follow the procedures outlined in the company's policies and to use common sense to avoid unnecessary risks.

Unfortunately, duty of loyalty can be vague and subjective to one's own interpretation. The key is clearly defining your company's stance on duty of loyalty in your current travel policy, committing to it and asking your employees to not only acknowledge these standards, but to sign off on them as well. With this process, employers can help develop and enforce appropriate travel risk management guidelines to protect their travelers. And in turn, employees willingly adhere to these guidelines and help protect their own health and safety while traveling.

2. Travel emergency procedures

Recent earthquakes in Ecuador and Japan, and the devastating Brussels attacks have shown how disasters can be chaotic and unpredictable. To ensure employees are cognizant of potential dangers and the actions they should take if disaster strikes while traveling, employers should educate employees on the company's emergency protocols.

One way organizations can test and educate their travel emergency procedures is by incorporating crisis response exercises into their travel risk management strategies. These exercises should address multiple hazards and consider a broad set of unexpected occurrences. Implementing a well-executed and rehearsed response program will help support company-wide adoption of the protocols should an employee emergency occur while he or she is abroad.

3. Update to accommodate the new sharing economy

From Uber to AirBnB, it's no secret that the sharing economy has increased in both availability and popularity over the past few years. In fact, recent research shows that ride sharing services have surpassed car rentals for the first time. Yet, according to an On Call International Survey, 91% of business travelers reported that their employers had not provided protocols for use of sharing economy services while on a work trip.

When educating employees on these services, highlight how crucial it is for them to verify the details (such as calling ahead and/or checking the reviews on where they are staying) and stay in touch (for example, Uber offers a "Share my ETA" option for travelers). Additionally, there should always be a back-up plan if accommodations turn out to be different than advertised.

4. "Bleisure" travel guidelines

Bleisure – the idea of combining work and personal vacations, often by adding vacation days to a work trip – is surging in popularity. In fact, a recent study revealed 67% of business travelers believe that the option of extending their business trips for leisure travel is important to them.

When addressing bleisure guidelines, it's important for employers to have specific travel risk management policies in place to protect the interests of employees and the company in the event of an emergency on (or off) the clock. For example, is there a clear distinction between business and personal expenses? Should staff use their earned time when adding days to a trip? How about traveling companions: Who is financially and legally responsible for them if they get sick or injured?

By tackling these types of murky areas head-on with clear, manageable and realistic policies, employers will not only help reinforce responsible travel habits amongst staff — but also help ensure their travelers' health, safety and well-being in the process.