Abroad Alone: Business fails to protect vulnerable staff

Half of all business people regularly travel to dangerous places but few believe their firm would be able to help them in the event of an emergency, according to an inaugural survey by Control Risks, the business risk consultancy.

In the biggest survey of business travel security, Control Risks found that 59% of respondents had little confidence that their firm would be able to give them the correct advice in the event of an outbreak of violence, political unrest or a natural disaster.

Increasing danger

More than half (53%) of the respondents predict that the world will become a more dangerous place for business travellers over the next five years and 40 per cent think they are more likely to be targeted than other travellers by extremists or terrorists.

"Despite a perception by travellers that the world is becoming more dangerous, some companies have not attempted to redress the balance by putting a credible support structure in place" says Hannah Kitt, Director of Travel Security Services, at Control Risks.

No research

But just as the firms do not seem to be taking security seriously, nor do the travellers themselves. Nearly two-fifths of the respondents (38%) said they never did any research on the political or social climate of the countries they visited and a similar proportion (40%) said they would have no idea who to call if they were caught up in an emergency. Indeed, 72% said they never carried an emergency phone number and that figure rose to 83% for those employed by small firms.

Legal obligation

These figures tally with the findings that almost two-thirds (61%) of UK companies that send staff abroad have no clear travel security policy and 56% of business travellers have no support systems back home either provided in-house or by an external specialist. This is all the more surprising when taking into account comments by the respondents that they had little choice about where they were sent and had to simply brave the risks and that 86 per cent believed their firm had a legal obligation to support them while they were away.

"For many employees, the nature of their jobs requires that they travel to high risk destinations. If companies do not have a proper travel security programme in place to support travellers, this is a clear breach of duty of care," says Ms Kitt.

"Increasingly, companies from all sectors face a potential legal responsibility to demonstrate duty of care towards employees," says Ms Kitt. "Creating and maintaining a robust travel security programme is critical as it will ensure the safety of employees while helping the firm to avoid costly legal and reputational fall-out if something goes wrong."

Case study: Abandoned, arrested and alone

An engineering company recently approached Control Risks after an incident which underlined how their lack of preparedness had left their travellers exposed.

A new employee was sent in his second week to two countries in Central Asia and given a dedicated driver as transport. Two days into his trip, the individual asked his driver to stop so that he could buy a bottle of water from a roadside shop. When he left the shop, he realised that the vehicle had disappeared along with his mobile phone, laptop, passport and other documentation.

The shopkeeper drove him to the nearest police post which happened to be on the border. This in turn created further complications when the border police demanded his documentation. He was arrested.

The traveller had been given no briefing on the country he was visiting and no emergency number to call.

The company realised two days later that their traveller was not attending meetings but found they had no contact information or itinerary details for the traveller. Eventually, the authorities in country were able to resolve the issue with the individual's embassy.

The individual was deeply distressed and threatened legal action against his company. The individual was given compensation but is still deciding whether to take legal action. An HR manager lost her job, confidence in management was rocked and the company lost business while employees refused to travel to the country concerned for a month until travel security measures were put in place.

Key findings of Control Risk Group's inaugural travel survey

- 59 per cent of business travellers have little confidence that their firm would be able to help them in the event of an emergency

- 38 per cent of business travellers never do any research on the countries they visit

- 40 per cent of business travellers would not know who to call in an emergency

- 72 per cent of business travellers never carry an emergency phone number

- 61 per cent of UK companies that send staff abroad have no clear travel policy

- 56 per cent of business travellers have no support systems back home

- 53 per cent of business travellers think the world will become a more dangerous place for them over the next five years

- 40 per cent of business travellers think they are more likely to be targeted by extremists or terrorists than other travellers.

- 86 per cent of business travellers believe their employer has a legal obligation to support them while abroad.

For the full survey results, including US responses, please contact: Nicola Hudson (details below).

Notes to Editors
The fieldwork was carried out during May/June 2007. In total, 1,039 business travellers were interviewed by phone, 501 in the UK and 539 in the US.
Control Risks is an international risk consultancy whose aim is to enable clients to take risks with greater certainty and precision and to solve problems that fall outside the scope of mainstream management resources. Founded in 1975, Control Risks provides governments, Fortune 500 companies and others worldwide with political and security risk analysis, corporate investigations, pre-employment screening, security consultancy, crisis management and response, and information security.

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