

August 2017

viewpoint

Warning! Business travel can damage your health

The benefits of frequent traveller programmes

Business travel is often seen as glamorous and a perk of being successful in your career, but the reality – especially for employees who travel a lot – can be quite different. Indeed, frequent, and particularly long-haul business travel can have a negative impact on a company's most important asset: its people.

It might still be considered essential for economic development and global trade, but the inexorable growth in business travel is leading to real questions about the health and well-being of the staff undertaking the trips and the impact that frequent business travel has on both their mental and physical wellbeing.

For these reasons, broader company consultation may be required when making corporate travel policy decisions. This means including HR and wellbeing teams in designing and managing business travel programmes and policies, as well as the procurement and travel management departments that do this today.

It is frequent long-haul air travel, in particular, that is now understood to have greater detrimental effects on staff than previously realised. And while jet lag is the most commonly cited physiological impact of frequent business travel, it is not widely realised that the condition can persist for up to six days after flying. Nor is it

understood that fatigue from jet lag, combined with travel stress, may turn chronic and has been termed 'frequent traveller exhaustion'.

Other impacts can include psychological, social and physical effects, including accelerated ageing, heightened risks of stroke and heart attacks and deep-vein thrombosis.

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So, what should international companies and, just as importantly, their staff do to try and reduce the negative effects of frequent business travel? Part of the challenge is that the requirements for each person will differ depending on variables such as number of trips, length of stay and distance travelled so a single cover-all solution won't help.

And those with young families or elderly relatives will probably also have different pressures than those without these same emotional ties. But it's also important to note that assuming employees are always free, willing and able to travel is no longer acceptable.

Here are some suggested steps employers can take:

1. Help employees to help themselves

Companies can look into employee education programmes on stress management and strategies to help improve diet and activity while travelling.

This could include encouraging employees to explore alternative modes of transportation – such as taking the train instead of flying. If there is no way around flying, it is preferable to fly direct instead of taking connecting flights that will contribute more to tiredness and jet lag.

There may also be opportunities to substitute face-to-face visits with teleconferencing – often it is necessary to meet someone for the first time in person, but after that, videoconferencing can be an acceptable substitute.

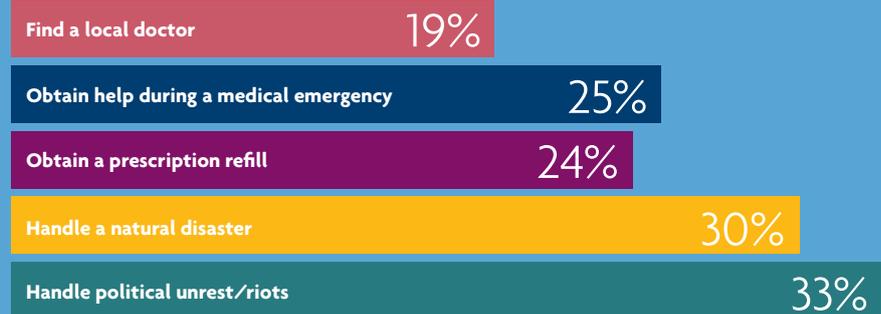
2. Create a corporate travel policy

As more and more people travel for business, it is becoming increasingly important from an HR and duty of care perspective to consider the impact on staff well-being and health, not just in terms of the physical impact of long-distance travelling but also the mental and emotional aspects such as stress and being away from family and normal routines.

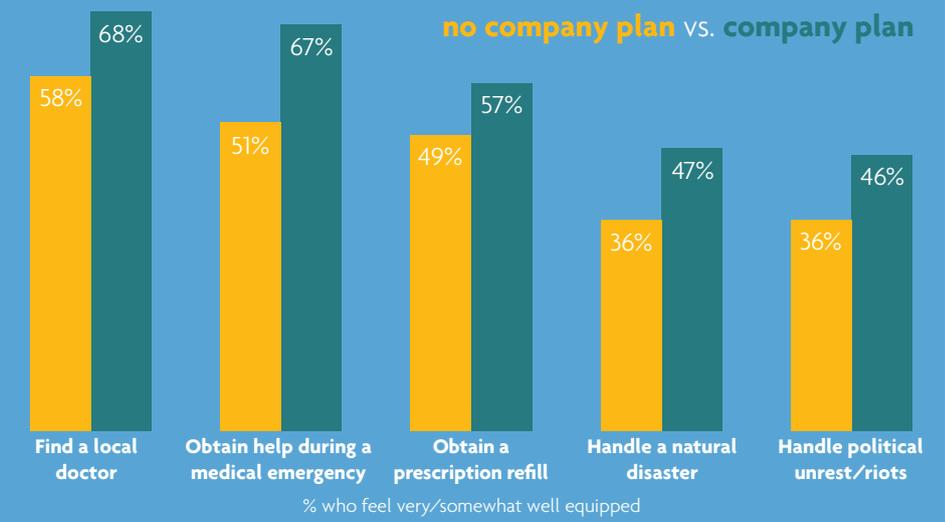
With corporate travel having a significant impact on employees' well-being, morale and productivity, it is critical for HR departments to be involved in the process of developing a company's travel programme. They can make

It is important to note that many employees do feel unprepared for issues that could impact their health and safety¹. For instance:

% of people feeling very / somewhat prepared



But those with a corporate duty of care programme feel more prepared for these issues.¹⁴



sure that duty of care policies reflect the changing global sentiment towards business travel and the pressures that can result.

HR departments can also help to boost productivity by influencing the organisation to create policies that enhance the traveller

experience and reduce stress. For example, if employees are often required to travel on weekends, HR may work to create a policy that allows travellers to extend their stay for a few days after completing their work and enjoy some leisure time at their destination.

3. Create a travel wellness programme

A travel wellness programme needs to focus on specific environments that physically impact employees by encouraging certain less healthy behaviours: choosing unhealthy eating choices and getting limited quality sleep. These and other behaviours all increase the average physical stress load individuals would experience under normal working conditions.

A travel wellness programme can include advice on eating healthily when travelling, taking the right exercise, healthy flying, sleep, stress management and boosting the immune system. Companies can consider booking rooms with hotel chains that have gyms, and provide rewards for employees who exercise while travelling.

The easiest way for employees to adopt travel wellness best practices is for employers to provide them with a list of recommended or preferred restaurants, hotels, or airlines that support travel wellness objectives and meet company expectations and travel wellness criteria for healthy food, exercise, and stress and sleep management.

4. Use the power of technology

Advancements in technology and the development of new communications solutions are giving business travellers and corporations more options when it comes to long-distance communication. Huge investments are being made by some of the world's leading technology firms making it easier to take part in meetings,

events, conferences, discussions and even pitches, virtually – and it is expected that this focus will intensify as digital capabilities continue to improve.

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A recent report on the BBC looked at some of the new technologies focused on making travel less stressful. From hotel concierge services offering online check-in and room service at the touch of a button, to wireless Bluetooth padlocks for luggage, tech innovations are being developed at quite a pace – including in the exciting area of Artificial Intelligence.

- **Teleconferencing solutions**

Teleconferencing solutions and other remote technologies increasingly offer companies, their employees and HR departments a workable option to business travel.

- **Instant translations**

Many well-known companies are working hard to perfect instant translation software that removes the need for costly human translators and that means more international meetings may be possible via videoconference or phone. Combine instant translation with virtual reality and Artificial Intelligence and there may soon be no reason to take an international business trip ever again.

- **Virtual reality in videoconferencing**

According to a leading multinational technology company, wearing a virtual reality (VR) headset means participants can ‘combine virtual and augmented reality into one experience’ and that everyone in a business meeting can sit in the same room together, no matter where they are physically located. Participants can even share virtual whiteboards. Could the VR headset be the technology that finally replaces business travel?

5. Revisit work conditions

As well as looking at overall travel wellness programmes, organisations can consider amending working terms and conditions.

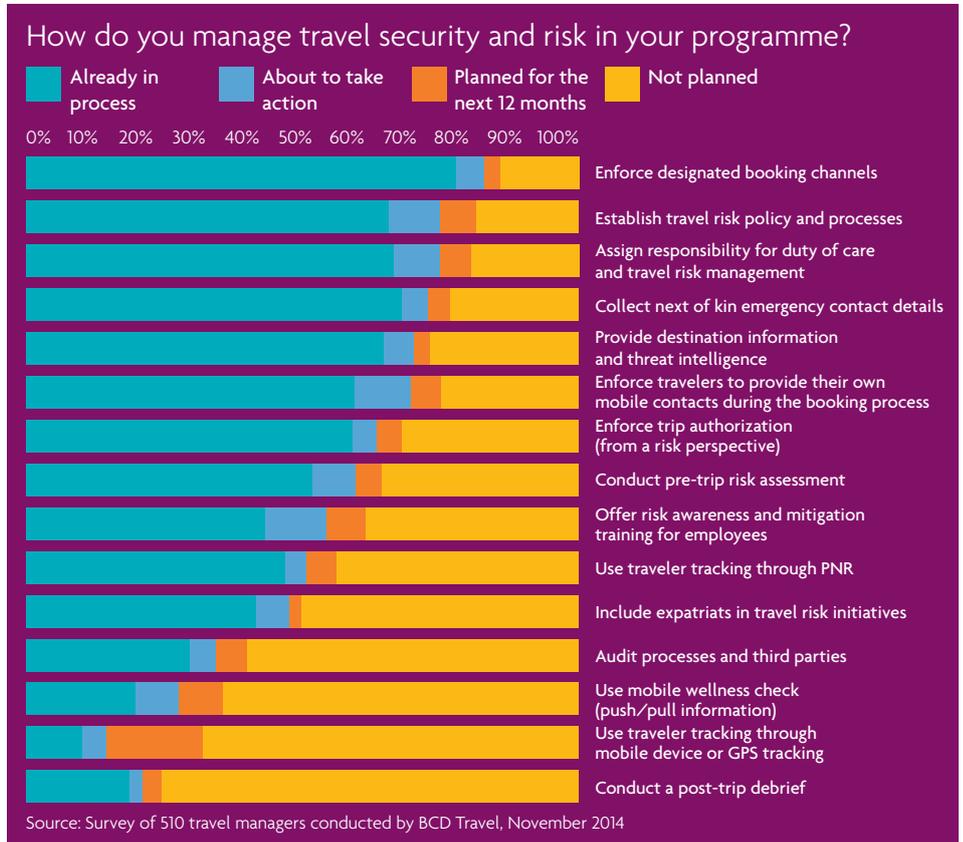
Bearing in mind the fact that jet lag can affect travellers for six days, organisations could also allow staff to work from home, offer more flexible hours following a long-distance business trip, or space out long-distance trips around minimum rest periods. This way a frequent traveller can also avoid the stresses that a lack of family time can create.

Finally, employers should establish guidelines whereby employees would be allowed to fly business class on long-haul trips or book first class seats on trains when travel time exceeds five hours.⁵

6. Manage travel risk

The events of 9/11 acted as the catalyst for introducing many standard travel risk procedures today, such as systematic traveller tracking.

Over half (51%) of companies provide no traveller safety or travel risk training to their employees³. In a survey by BCD Travel, travel managers were asked how they managed travel security and risk in their programmes – the results can be seen here.



Evidence suggests that using business travel to meet face-to-face definitely results in a net positive for multinational companies, but we cannot ignore the science that tells us there can also be losses in the long term if all too frequent travel has a negative impact on their employees' health and productivity.

Frequent, long-haul and lengthy periods of business travel have been shown to increase the risk of a variety of mental and physical health problems, as well as exposing employees to security and safety problems. Unhealthy, tired and stressed employees who lack free time, rest periods and time for a personal life will ultimately affect a company's bottom line.

To read more on this subject, download our Whitepaper 'BUSINESS TRAVEL – GOOD FOR BUSINESS, BAD FOR HEALTH?' at maxis-gbn.com/knowledge-centre/whitepapers

1. Europ Assistance USA, 'International Business Traveller Study', July 2012
 2. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-39139958>
 3. Business Travel News, 'Taking On Travel Risk Management Survey', February 2017

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