



Coronavirus Impacts Business Travel

By Nancy Cleeland

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To go or not to go: As the coronavirus spreads, more and more companies are opting to cancel long-planned conferences and tours, ditching all but the most essential business travel, and even warning employees to rethink their vacation plans or be prepared for an at-home quarantine.

Nestle made news last week when it announced plans to halt all international travel and limit domestic trips, but it was one of many companies to do so. A survey of member companies by the Global Business Travel Association, released Feb. 27, found that 65 percent of the 401 respondents had already cancelled at least a few meetings or events. More than half had nixed international travel to places beyond China, including some European countries. To keep a handle on the rapidly evolving situation, 43 percent of respondents had instituted new trip approval procedures.

"I think the major takeaway is that safety is the main concern for all travelers," said association spokesperson Meghan Henning. "Once companies feel that the virus has been contained, we are confident that travelers will be back on the road."

So far, though, the virus is not contained, and employers are scrambling to keep up. On Feb. 4, National Symphony Orchestra Executive Director Gary Ginstling announced the cancellation of performances in China for an upcoming Asia tour, but he said he was confident the Japan leg would be unaffected. "We'll be there for eight or nine days," he assured the public and NSO musicians. However, only a couple weeks later, on Feb. 28, the Japan tour was eliminated as well.

SHRM RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Managing Communicable Diseases in the Workplace (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/communicable-diseases.aspx)

Should They Stay or Go?

Feedback

The difference between a reasonable response and overreaction seems to change hourly. How can employers ensure they are making responsible decisions? Management specialists recommend the following:

- Frequently check travel advisories from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices>) (CDC) and the World Health Organization (<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/travel-advice>) (WHO).
- Update internal travel approval procedures to make sure managers know where all employees are travelling.
- Communicate clearly with employees about travel decisions and listen to any concerns they might have.
- Be prepared to be flexible.

Employers are obligated under the Occupational Safety and Health Act to provide a workplace free of known safety and health hazards, and workers have a right to refuse work (<https://www.osha.gov/right-to-refuse.html>) that they consider to be dangerous under certain circumstances. That could include travel to destinations at risk for the coronavirus.

Beyond that, companies would do well to err on the side of caution, said David Michaels, a professor of public health at George Washington University and assistant secretary of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) for seven years during the Obama administration.

"Every employer has to consider whether or not the risk [of travel] is warranted—not just the destination but the plane trip itself," Michaels said. "It's a moving target right now. If you can avoid [having employees travel] as much as possible, you're going to be better off because when you minimize employee exposure, you improve your ability to function in the long run."

Courtney Harrison, chief human resources officer for San Francisco-based tech company OneLogin, said employee travel decisions are being made there individually, after consulting the CDC and WHO websites. "We are not mandating any restrictions at this point," she said. "We will work on a case-by-case basis with each employee to assess the safest path for that person."

Harrison said one challenge is ensuring the safety of colleagues and customers when an employee returns from a virus-prone area, whether for work or vacation. "[Our policy requires that], when an employee returns from an at-risk geography, they self-quarantine themselves for at least 14 days and they stay in close contact with HR," Harrison said. She noted that the company, which is in the business of providing secure login platforms, is well-positioned for remote work. "It might be the right time to reframe this challenge and use it as an opportunity to learn and practice a new way of working."

When Travel Is Part of the Job

For some, of course, travel is an integral and unavoidable part of the job. Take, for example, flight attendants, who not only travel globally but also interact with passengers along the way. The Association of Flight Attendants (AFA), the union that represents attendants at 20 airlines, has been posting the latest CDC alerts to its website and pushing airlines to provide greater protections (https://www.afacwa.org/afa_actions_stop_spread_of_covid_19) and even curtail some flights. "AFA leaders at each airline are working directly with airline management through our contracts and other means to mitigate the impact," the union announced on its website.

The Allied Pilots Association also has been actively monitoring the coronavirus response. In late January, the union filed suit against American Airlines to stop all flights to China and encouraged pilots to refuse to fly there. The following day, American, which had already curtailed some flights to China, announced that all were canceled.

As employers scramble to get ahead of the fast-changing travel landscape, they must also consider when travel bans should end. At this point, that's one of many unanswered questions. The WHO website (https://www.who.int/ith/2019-nCoV_advice_for_international_traffic-rev/en/) cautions against indefinite travel bans, saying they "may only be justified at the beginning of an outbreak, as they may allow countries to gain time, even if only a few days, to rapidly implement effective preparedness measures. Such restrictions must be based on a careful risk assessment, be proportionate to the public health risk, be short in duration, and be reconsidered regularly as the situation evolves."

Until then, monitoring public information sites and communicating with employees are key. "Our industry's first priority is the health and safety of the business traveler," said Scott Solombrino, executive director of the Global Business Travel Association, "and our members are being appropriately cautious and proactive in their approach to the situation."

SHRM Conferences

Have you registered for a SHRM conference or are you considering doing so?

SHRM is committed to ensuring the health and safety of our staff, members, conference attendees and partners around the world. We have been monitoring and will continue to monitor the COVID-19 situation closely, following guidance from the World Health Organization, the UAE National Emergency Crisis and Disasters Management Authority, India's national health agency, and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

At this time, SHRM's Advocacy@Work Conference, scheduled for March 15-17, will move forward as planned in Washington, D.C., with the fullest precautions to prevent the potential spread of the virus.

As SHRM continues to assess the situation, we will notify attendees as necessary. For questions about affected areas in the U.S., please visit <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-in-us.html> (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-in-us.html>).

Feedback

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