

When bad things happen *It pays to be prepared in any location*

BY STEPHEN CRYNE

The exotic attraction of a foreign assignment often overshadows the need to be prepared for bad things. Whether its political instability, natural disasters, health emergencies, terrorist attacks or even criminal incarceration, it pays for organizations and employees to have an emergency evacuation plan in place to manage through such events.

So where are the hot spots when it comes to security concerns?

"They're really anywhere. Today you can't let your guard down and whether you've got people in London or Jakarta, the risks are the same," says Steve Sproule, team lead of health, benefits and retirement at Husky Energy.

More needs to be done to assess the risk involved in a foreign assignment, according to Andrew Harris, a consultant with Global Mobility in the United Kingdom, who points to the U.K.'s Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act, which toughens laws around corporate responsibility for the health and safety of employees.

"Some companies are good at risk management while others don't understand the scope of responsibility and potential liability when care is not taken," he says. "When an employee is injured or killed overseas, there will now be greater scrutiny on the company to show that it was sensible to send people into that area."

As part of this, there is a need for integrated planning, says Antoinette Viscione, director of HR at Montreal-based SNC-Lavalin, an engineering company that practices extensive due diligence before beginning a project.

"It is a multi-discipline approach that includes personnel from risk management, project management and HR," she says. "This team will look at all aspects of the region, including political stability, the environment, housing, schooling, medical support, logistics and evacuation options, before making a decision on the employees selected for the assignment."

There is also an important role for HR in establishing the business case around pre-planning. Ensuring the right supports are in place

provides an organization with a competitive advantage, says Viscione.

"If you address these issues upfront, cost it properly and sell it to the business units before employees are on the ground, there are significant cost advantages," she says.

It's also about knowing where your people are. The painful lessons learned from Sept. 11 have been indelibly cast in many corporate cultures.

"Best-practice companies with international arrangements will insist all travel arrangements are made through a corporate travel provider. That way there is a central database of information if things do go wrong," says Harris. "There's responsibility at an individual level. You can't have people taking side trips on the way to the assignment without you knowing about it — people must understand that."

Sproule recalls a painful lesson from a former company, where an employee died while vacationing in Kiev, Ukraine, during a posting to the Middle East.

"It was a tragic situation and we had to break the news to the family" he says. "When a tragedy like this occurs, our thoughts were immediately on the family and repatriation, but we also needed to verify this wasn't a hoax — something we'd never even considered in our planning."

Managing through these situations takes careful planning and preparedness. With the Mumbai terrorist attacks in November 2008, for example, 59 companies and more than 200 employees were directly impacted by the attacks, says Tom Griffin, director of International SOS Canada. The company, which specializes in responding to emergency situations, helped secure communications between the local security authorities and 13 employees trapped in a hotel. When security forces freed the hostages, it ensured the safe transfer of the workers to safe houses.

When working with service providers, figure out the needs of the organization in the calm of planning rather than in the middle of a crisis, says Sproule. And when responding to an emergency, communication and accountability are important.

"You need to have consistent messages and

that means having someone taking the lead role immediately," he says.

As with any emergency, it's difficult to anticipate what can happen so evacuation plans must be integrated with business continuity plans and have flexibility, says Sproule. There should be a travel departure checklist that reviews things such as visas and work permits, medical fitness, the equipment necessary for the location, destination supports and ensures insurance and medical services are already in place.

Many companies don't see the hidden dangers and enormous costs that can be avoided, says Griffin. Risk can be mitigated with simple measures such as health pre-screening and ensuring employees have access to online tools for medical preparations.

As an example, an employee with elevated blood pressure and high cholesterol was relocated to Kazakhstan with no preventative cardiovascular care. He subsequently had a heart attack and had to be repatriated. The medical cost totalled \$96,000 before any underlying costs (such as business disruption), says Griffin, and the nominal investment upfront of a simple screening would have allowed corrective action.

"Pre-assignment medicals are critical," agrees Viscione. "You can't send an employee or family member with a cardiac condition into Qatar where it's 52 degrees with 90-per-cent humidity."

Organizations must also have regard for the impact an emergency or early repatriation can have on the family.

"When expectations don't meet reality and things go wrong, whether it's for medical, business, safety or security reasons, repatriation is hard for kids, too. It's a difficult time for the whole family," says Liz Perelstein, president of School Choice International, a global educational consulting company.

"Having professionals worry about the logistics frees the parents to look after the needs of the children. When mom or dad lose that international posting, there are many things to take care of. Some children will have emotional issues such as shame and dealing with peers to contend with."

Stephen Cryne is president and CEO of the Canadian Employee Relocation Council (CERC). The views expressed in this article are the personal views of the author and may not always reflect those of CERC. Visit www.cerc.ca for more information.