

Addressing Expatriate Emergencies Before They Occur

Vince Cordova

Social, economic, and political circumstances in many countries with large expatriate populations can change very rapidly, producing threats to the safety of expatriates and their families. Failure to take account of these risks can lead to unnecessary costs and disruption of business – and might very well endanger employees.

In every locale, no matter the conditions, expatriates need to strike a delicate balance between the concerns of establishing a home abroad and the vital requirements of the job assignment. Tied to this balance is the need for security. Employees who feel safe are more inclined to remain on assignment and work to the best of their ability.

Human resources and corporate security managers have a responsibility to assist expatriates in this endeavor and provide adequate emergency support. But responsibility also falls on the international assignee, who shares the burden of preparation and caution.

An Ounce of Prevention, Supplemented by Policy

Critical steps from the organizational side include a thorough evaluation of employees' medical and psychological conditions before the assignment. While minor medical conditions can escalate into serious emergencies in remote or dangerous locations, the same risk holds true for personal problems the employee may be experiencing.

Employers also need to develop, review, and maintain current and detailed security policy and evacuation plans for all foreign operations. While addressing risk in those locations where political and economic uprisings, war, or natural disasters are realistic possibilities is a first priority, criminal activity in so-called "safe" locations suggests it is imperative that companies have precise emergency and security plans for them, too. A formal policy should detail the conditions under which evacuation or other actions may take place, along with provisions related to transportation, living expenses, and employee property loss or damage.

Yet only 17.7 percent of participants to the 2011 *Worldwide Survey of International Assignment Policies and Practices* have a formal program in place. Slightly more than that, 20.3 percent, have implemented broad guidelines for security.

Comprehensive Plans = Peace of Mind

Next on the agenda is the development of contingency plans, with responsibilities clearly allocated to appropriate parties. Ideally, a company should have several plans for particularly difficult or dangerous locations. Among the important, practical steps to consider are these:

- Appointing a lead contact in the event of an emergency or evacuation.
- Implementing procedures to keep in touch with evacuated or threatened employees and their families.
- Developing thorough plans for transporting employees and their families to more secure locations.
- Determining an order of evacuation and deciding under what circumstances certain essential personnel, if any, will remain at the work site.
- Maintaining emergency funds for employees and their dependents after arrival at the evacuation point.
- Setting guidelines for transferring money, obtaining visas, and buying tickets for unscheduled flights.

Security Innovations in Employer Policies

- Introduced/improved evacuation procedures (66.9 percent)
- Introduced/improved security briefings (61.1 percent)
- Improved security in all locations (42.9 percent)
- Introduced assignment tracking (24.6 percent)
- Repatriated employees from unsafe locations (19.4 percent)
- Changed host destinations (3.4 percent)

Source: 2011 *Worldwide Survey of International Assignment Policies and Practices*

In support of employer plans, expatriates should do the following for themselves and accompanying family members:

- Protect passports and travel documents, which should be kept current and accessible for immediate use.
- Maintain a reasonable emergency fund of local and, if appropriate, hard currency used in the area.
- Register at the local embassy or consulate representing the home country.
- Keep up to date records of household and personal effects to substantiate possible loss claims and provide a copy to the employer.

Understanding the Risk

Policies and contingency plans are useless without comprehending the specific risks involved in the assignment location. The assessment process must be thorough and identify both real and perceived problems. Only then is it possible to develop practical preventive procedures, which can be integrated with current measures and supporting activities. Chart 1, "Security Innovations in Employer Policies," cites measures introduced by participants to the 2010 Worldwide Survey.

Employers should analyze the political, economic, and social environment of their business operations to narrow down the likely victims of terrorism. Though criminal activity or terrorism is sometimes directed solely at damaging infrastructure, it is never wise to exclude employees and expatriate families from any risk assessment.

Basic steps, involving an analysis of the situation and dissemination of this information, include:

- Assessing the location by obtaining advice and guidance from reputable outside sources, repatriated employees, on site surveys, and periodical and industry literature.
- Researching changes in foreign laws and information about the host country's political, social, and legal systems. It is important to distinguish between spontaneous events and systematic policy measures that may threaten company assets, trading position, or reputation.
- Conducting a formal analysis of current security systems at both company facilities and the homes of high risk employees. Often, an employer can provide satisfactory protection for expatriates by improving internal procedures.

- Preparing expatriates to handle security hazards with instruction on maintaining a low profile and reacting to a variety of incidents. All expatriates and family members should learn the peculiarities of their assignment locations.

To make the best use of resources and facilities in an inhospitable situation, it is also advisable for employers with similar emergency needs to coordinate their efforts for preventing terrorism and implementing emergency programs.

Prepared and Forewarned Is Best

Assignees can fare better and feel more secure if the employer focuses on proactive steps. These actions include carefully selecting expatriates, developing and continually reviewing policies and practices, establishing contingency plans, identifying the role that expatriates play in their own security, assessing critical factors inherent in the assignment location, and educating employees, their families, and management about the risks of the particular assignment.

Preventive action aimed at safeguarding employees and company property is critical. Once a terrorist act or kidnapping has occurred, it is too late to establish company policy and contingency plans against identifiable risks. Whatever strategy management finally implements, it should provide to both expatriates and HR administrators an understanding of their joint responsibility as they endeavor to make the international job assignment a success.

Vince Cordova, a Principal of Mercer, is based in New York.