

[EXTRACT]

The foreign office: why retailers should support staff working abroad

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Business trips abroad, often to emerging markets, can be daunting and stressful for staff who do not have the right support. Joanna Perry explains why retailers must consider their duty of care

It's one thing flying long haul on holiday to a luxury resort, or taking a well-trodden traveller route. But the demands on today's retail buyers and some other members of retail staff often see them heading off the beaten track.

As the experience of one ex-buyer shows (see panel), it can be a lonely and stressful time for staff if they are not provided with appropriate support when travelling to countries where the culture and security considerations can be very different to those in the UK.

Security firm Red24 provides travel advice, assistance and security services to companies, including several high street retailers, to try to prevent staff being caught up in any trouble; and to help them if unfortunately they are. When Retail Week spoke with its operations and special risks director Neil Thompson, he was in South Africa and just about to arrange the repatriation of one of his customers' staff, who had unwittingly found themselves caught up in civil unrest and a political crisis in Madagascar.

Thompson says that different retailers treat their staff quite differently when it comes to overseas travel security – from those with in-depth travel policies and support in place, to those that leave their staff to travel in complete isolation. He adds that while chief executives who travel abroad will have all the support they need, buyers are often left to their own devices, even though they are likely to go to the most undeveloped and hostile countries.

He explains: "A lot of buyers fly to Pakistan, but you shouldn't just fly there to meet a factory owner. India is the same. Before anyone goes abroad they should know the risks, and the company should mitigate that risk. It is good for line managers, and also the staff member's family."

Ron Reid, partner at law firm Shoosmiths, says that retailers have a responsibility to their staff, whether they are working in the UK or overseas. He says that while UK-based companies are less likely to be pursued by overseas authorities for health and safety infringements, they still have responsibilities to their staff under UK law. He explains: "If you fail to do a risk assessment in this country you could be liable. And if you employ more than five people, it should be a written risk assessment."

Thompson agrees. He says: "If you send a buyer out to an emerging country and they are injured, or even killed, you will get sued for not having done a risk assessment." He says that the cost of doing this is minimal compared with the potential cost of an incident.

Stay informed

At the very least staff should always visit the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website before planning a trip abroad, to stay up to date with the latest advice being given for any country that they might travel to. Registering with the local consulate in a country is also a good idea.

Thompson explains that Red24 uses a risk-grading matrix to rate the safety of every country its clients visit in terms of factors such as crime. He gives the example of Haiti, which is graded as extreme for crime, and Pakistan, rated extreme for terrorism.

And ratings can differ depending on which part of a country you visit. While visitors to tourist areas might be safe, going further afield might be riskier. Thompson says: "If you go to China, in the last few days we have had reports about certain provinces being barred to foreigners, despite Chinese officials saying that they are open."

Red24 updates its threat assessments constantly, and Thompson says that another issue is that different governments will give different advice. When the Ivory Coast was branded unsafe by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the French government was still declaring it safe.

Things can also change quickly. For instance, Thailand, long considered a relatively safe country, has recently had political problems. Thompson says that the situation could change overnight again, for the worse, when the country's King dies – he's 81 at present.

Reid says that in addition to the assessment that should take place before a staff member travels, line managers should have regular contact with them, and supervise what they are doing irrespective of where they are working.

He says that retailers should ensure that someone in the UK is keeping abreast of what is happening in countries that staff have travelled to, and communicate any issues to them. Travellers can have updates on the security situation sent to their mobile phone by Red24, not just for the country they are in, but more specifically as updates on the city where they are staying. Thompson says that a business traveller can phone a security expert at any time of the day or night for advice.

When the main airport in the Thai capital was closed due to political protests last year, Red24 evacuated its clients' staff to a military airport, where lots of companies had chartered aircraft to get their staff out of the country.

And when the terrorist attacks happened at several hotels in Mumbai recently, there was a knock-on effect on staff who were due to be flying to India in the following days, who were then frightened to proceed with their trip.

Other unofficial advice that might be offered includes, for example, not detailing all your personal possessions on South African immigration forms, as this leaves you open to robbery.

Thompson adds that staff are actually more likely to encounter problems when they are abroad but not actively working. "A lot of the problems that we get are when businesspeople finish their tasks for the day and relax. When you walk the streets or have a drink, that's when you are at your most vulnerable," he says.

However, Reid says that while you can offer advice, you cannot actually proscribe what staff get up to in their own time.

Despite the margin pressures and budget squeezes that many companies are coming up against, when it comes to taking care of staff, out of sight should definitely not mean out of mind.

CASE STUDY: The buyer abroad

One female buyer, who spent many years working for several high street chains, shares her experience of travelling to China alone for work.

“I would travel to meet with manufacturers at their factories in China. Sometimes, I would stay in Hong Kong and travel into China each day, but I often stayed alone in a Chinese hotel, in an industrial area near the factory. It could be isolating, but you accepted it as part of the job.

“On one occasion I had to travel alone to my next appointment in a car with a male Chinese driver provided by one of the factories. He spoke no English and was unclear about where we were going. It could be very ad hoc.

“Visiting new countries could be exciting, but when you are on your own in an unstable country or unfamiliar culture it can be stressful and unsettling. All the normal rules of safety you would apply back home seem to go out the window because you are on business, and also due to the cultural differences.

“Our department budgets were tight and it was not common practice for the company to provide mobile phones, and this seemed to be accepted across the trade. Laptops and BlackBerrys were simply not an option. My manager once lent me a company mobile to take to China, but otherwise it was up to me to make my own communication arrangements.

“It could be a little daunting when you are a young woman alone in a very strange country. As a newly promoted buyer on your first trip to the country, it can be extremely tense and you are under pressure to deliver, as well as remembering to keep safe.

“Companies have a duty of care to their employees, but that doesn’t seem to extend beyond travel insurance and a business class seat if you are lucky. The practical elements of staying safe abroad just don’t seem to be a priority for retailers who are struggling with margins and travel budgets.”

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Source: Retail Week website (29 May 2009)

<http://www.retail-week.com/in-business/a-foreign-office-why-retailers-should-support-staff-working-abroad/5003141.article>