

CWT Podcast episode 4

COVID-19: Business travel in the time of coronavirus

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Christine Kashkari (CK): Hello, and welcome back to this month's episode of business travel on the fly, the podcast that dives into issues affecting those of us who spend a lot of time up in the air, out of the office and away from home on business trips. I'm Christine Kashkari.

On this episode, we'll talk about the number one issue affecting business travel today. COVID-19 has been designated a global pandemic by the World Health Organization. The new Coronavirus has so far infected more than 200,000 people in over 150 countries and territories. In response, governments from the US to India are imposing travel restrictions, while countries in the EU to Latin America are shutting down borders. In these unprecedented and unsettling times, we reached out to the International SOS, the global experts on health, safety and security for traveling employees.

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Matt Bradley (MB): I don't think it's time for panic, it's time for preparation.

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CK: That's Matt Bradley, regional security director for the Americas at International SOS. To help determine whether when, where and how to travel safely during this time, or what to do if you're on lockdown, we reached out to Matt to help business travelers navigate this rapidly evolving situation. Thank you for joining us, Matt. Your clients are mainly business travelers. With so much travel restrictions and varying levels of curfew or outright lockdowns, how much business travel is actually still going on. In your estimation,

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MB: I think the total amount of business travel is 25% of what it was. I don't have official statistics on that. But if I had to estimate, I would say that 75% of the business travel has dried up. And my expectation over the next couple of months is it'll dry up completely.

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CK: And what are the circumstances by which people are still traveling?

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MB: So if anybody's still going on a trip today, it would probably be in a service industry to be able to continue to you know whether they're servicing equipment, it could be technicians or engineers, I know the oil and gas industry is still in most of their locations, which are remote anyway. And they feel like that's a controlled environment. And they're controlling the people who are coming in and out of the site anyway, so that oil and gas mining operations are still continuing. And the people who need to rotate in and out of those sites, after being appropriately screened, they are still traveling. I think we see some expats who are returning from the location where they're at. But many of them are also writing it out. Some of the business travel is people who were you know, on a trip and then you know, the trip was disrupted, and they're coming back. A student, lots of students from our scholastic clients, programs are being canceled and they're being returned to their country of origin.

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CK: You're still getting a lot of questions from clients, how have those changed nearly three months after this all began? And what's your advice?

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MB: So a lot of the questions now are coming from countries where there were no restrictions before. Those countries are in Latin America and Africa. Business travel was probably still continuing in Latin America, because they didn't have as many cases of COVID. Or at least they didn't know it. So that all changed over the last three or four days, as they detected more cases, and governments started to close the borders. So the questions are almost always the same. It's somebody who's trying to leave a country wanting to know if there are restrictions on their exit. And then they're wanting to know what restrictions might be on their destination. What are the restrictions on my travel? Meaning Can I still go back to the country I need to go to? And when I get there, what am I going to find? And so we talked to him about the screening process that's in place at the US airports or the airports of their destination, whether or not they will be subject to a mandatory quarantine, even if they don't have symptoms. And then if they do have symptoms, what type of quarantine they might face when they return.

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CK: So for business travelers who still need to travel at this time, what are the main considerations they should be thinking of before they make that decision?

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MB: We actually sent out an alert recently that said we're recommending that people defer all non essential travel to all countries of the world. That would be vacations, that'd be personal travel, and then non essential business travel. So if somebody has what they deem to be an essential business trip, meaning you're an engineer who has to go work on a piece of equipment, then we

give some advice before you go. And the first thing is to make sure that you will be able to get into the country that you're planning to travel to just because you have been in an essential business trip doesn't mean that it's feasible, right? It may not logistically be possible. So the first thing is to determine whether or not you can get into that country. If it's possible to get into that country, then we do say, you know you need to be flexible. On your itinerary you need to be alert for fast moving changes in the environment that could be restrictions on your ability to move around the country or your ability to leave the country whenever you want to. And then the other thing is you need to be able to determine whether or not the business that you went there for is still going to be doable, right? If you were supposed to make a couple of visits to different cities or move around to different locations within the city, is that still possible in the country where you're going? The other thing is to minimize your movement. But here's the hotel where you're staying. Go do your business and come home and minimize all non essential movement. Outside of that.

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CK: A lot of major events are being canceled. What are you advising those still planning conventions or conferences a few months from now,

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MB: You're trying to project a couple of months out and say, Okay, well, you don't have a case that's confirmed today, two months from now, you almost certainly will, because almost every country in the world will ultimately have a case that's confirmed. It's really around, okay, what are the dates that you need to be making decisions? Because if you're thinking that you're going to go ahead with this, you still have to have a contingency planning around? What are the triggers that are going to say, you're now going to you're going to suspend it or canceling?

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CK: What if you're a person whose trips are frozen indefinitely? Or face the possibility of being quarantined? Or locked down? What are some of the things you should be doing right now?

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MB: From a COVID-19 standpoint, I think it's important for people to prepare for the effect it will have, the disruption that it will have on their daily life. I don't think it's time for panic, I think it's time for preparation, think about the disruption of being stuck in your house or schools closing or large gatherings being prohibited and say, Okay, what are the things that I need to start preparing now, in case this ultimately gets to the place where I'm at? That's the one thing that I would encourage people to do, you do need to think about what's going to happen if my daycare center shuts down, what's going to happen if my kids school has to shut down for a temporary amount of time, if they get exposed and they're sent home or their school is closed down for it's now 28 days, not 14 days, the incubation period. If you had to stay home with limited movements for 28 days,

what would you need? What stocks and supplies might you need to have on hand, medicines are probably the most important thing, make sure that you have 28 days worth of medicines, because maybe you're not able to go to your doctor to get it or you're not able to get to the pharmacy to get it refilled. This is preparation, so it's not panic.

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CK: And how can companies help these road warriors transition from working on the road to working from home?

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MB: Most organizations already have some group of employees that work from home. So you know, the most important thing is to have a policy and then have a process to transition other employees who are not used to working from home to work from home. And that obviously means equipping them. And that means they need a laptop, they may need a second monitor, they may need other accessories to go along with that. Ensuring that they have the internet bandwidth connectivity to be able to connect to remote systems, make sure they have information security protections in there, you know a place to lock up the laptop and the other equipment, and that they have a safe space or a peaceful place to work.

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CK: In times of crisis when you're looking to your company for guidance and care, but even in normal circumstances, what can business travelers expect from their employers when they are sent out to travel, especially overseas?

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MB: Companies owe a duty of care to their employees. And duty of care means that they are required to protect their employees against foreseeable risks when they're outside of the office on business travel as much as they protect them when they're in their home office. Right? So if your home offices in Minneapolis, you may have a guard at the front of the door and you might have some security precautions, access control and cameras. Well, that same level of care is required when you send a business traveler overseas. Now, it's not the same measures of mitigation, but you must mitigate against foreseeable risks. Right? So again, that's why it's important to understand the risks of the destination, because then the mitigation will be for those foreseeable risks. So that's the duty of care of each organization when sending someone overseas. So that means they are responsible for providing them the information about those risks, as well as the mitigation and then if that mitigation requires them to implement certain things around certain hotels or ground transportation, or restrictions on activities, then the company has to provide that as well.

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CK: But it's a two way street right, when it comes to the mutual goal and responsibility of protecting travelers while they're on the road. Can you talk about what employees owe their companies to help ensure their health and safety while traveling?

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MB: That's a good point duty of care is the company's responsibility. Duty of loyalty is the employees responsibility, to utilize the resources that the company has provided. So if the company provides ground transportation for you, from the airport to the hotel, then you don't just hop a cab when you get to the airport, you take the transportation. If they advise you to stay in certain locations, or certain hotels or observe certain activities, your duty of loyalty is to do that on that business trip. It's also your duty of loyalty, to provide as much information about your profile to the person who's giving you advice. And our advice is confidential. Every one of the travelers who calls us has to give us consent, before we can notify their company that they called us. So if you want to call us and tell us about your concerns, traveling to Latin America, as a female traveling alone, and you're not sure if you want to make that trip, we can have that whole discussion with you. And if at the end, you say you don't want us to tell your company we will not tell, to the extent we know their profile, we can provide that specific advice, then they can go back to their company and discuss it as to whether or not they want to go. What you want to do as a company is set up a system that allows people to get educated. One, so they might feel comfortable about going if it is necessary, but also so that there is no feeling that they've harmed their career if they decide that they don't want to go.

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CK: Needless to say, it is an incredibly stressful time for a lot of people and entire communities and societies. I know you work on the security side. But on the health side of the equation, do you have any advice on how travelers can take care of their mental health?

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MB: Yeah, that's a good question. I think mental health is the is the shift in the focus now, right? As people are working from home, especially if they haven't worked from home in the past. It's around helping them adapt to working at home and creating an environment that allows them to continue to be productive, and then also working with people on mental health due to social isolation. So I would encourage people to use the Wellness Department or the employee assistance program at their place of work to identify those resources that are available, and ask them what do I do so that I can avoid social isolation, or depression as a result of social isolation?

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CK: I know you're not in the business of predicting the future in terms of when this all ends. But can you tell us how you think business travel will change once this is behind us?

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MB: As a result of this, people are going to have a different idea about what an essential business trip means. At this point, you're forcing everybody to have virtual meetings. And so people will recognize that there perhaps were things that they thought they can only do in person in the past, that they that they want to do virtually. But I do think that as soon as people feel like it's safe to travel again, or their restrictions are off on travel, there's going to be a boom on travel, right? Because there's all of these clients and suppliers and providers and co-workers that you haven't seen in person for months and months and months. People are going to want to get out of their house, they're going to want to get out of their office. And whether it's going to see people for business or it's going to take a pleasure trip people are going to get out. It certainly is a difficult time right now because people can't travel. As soon as the restrictions are off, people are going to be traveling like never before.

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CK: And it's on that note that we want to end our conversation with Matt. I've spoken with Matt a number of times for this episode. As the situation keeps changing. I thank him and the International SOS, CWT safety and security partner for all that they do to keep our business travelers safe and sane.

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MB: And just in case you need more tips for your next trip, whenever that may be, we haven't forgotten this month's Top Tips. It's all about staying healthy anytime you're on the road from one season traveler from Down Under.

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My name is Narelle and I'm based in Melbourne, Australia. I travel around six times per year for business and would love to share with you the essentials I pack to help with my health and well being whilst traveling abroad. The obvious thing like workout gear is the first thing that goes into the suitcase. I want to make sure I have no excuses for some daily exercise whilst traveling. Medication is another must for me to pack. I never leave home without items such as headache tablets, cold and flu tablets, antihistamines, and anti gastro medication. Whilst this medication can be found in other countries, I find packing it gives me the peace of mind that if required, I don't need to go and find it. And let's just say that it's come in handy on some trips. On more recent trips. I've also packed hand sanitizer and antibacterial wipes. I found myself doing a quick clean of

the area. I'm sitting in on the plane and using the hand sanitizer after every meeting, after every time I've been in an elevator, after I've touched door handles etc. When it comes to travel, my motto is safety first.

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CK: And that wraps up this month's episode of on the fly, in view of what's happening in the travel market today, when there's little actual travel going on. We will pause here indefinitely and catch up with you again on the fly. We hope you enjoyed our show. And remember, we are all in this journey together. Until next time, when we talk to business travelers on the fly.