

Elements of a Travel Safety Program

Tips for crossing distance safely

By William R. Coffey

AS AN SH&E PROFESSIONAL with more than 10 years' experience, I always viewed the discipline as revolving around guarding, lockout/tagout, confined space entry and other shop floor topics. That was before 10:00 am Sept. 11, 2001—when my flight was ordered to land with all expedience. My immediate concern was family and friends, many of whom live and work in the greater New York City area. After the immediate personal threat receded, I realized that my safety scope needed to be expanded. The tragedy highlighted the fact that travel can be dangerous.

Recognition of travel hazards is not a modern realization. In ancient Greece, when Theseus traveled to Athens to claim his throne, he was warned that "the road was infested with robbers" (Bulfinch 151). The Templars, Hospitalers and Teutonic Knights were only a few of the orders created to protect pilgrims on their treks to the Holy Land. A more modern example might be the stories of the dangerous trails traveled by stage coaches across the American West.

While dangers posed by modern travel may not be as severe as in times past, travel still poses a unique set of risks. From a classical safety management viewpoint, it involves groups that most likely have not seen much attention. Who travels today? Executives, sales personnel, IT and other service-based personnel—people who are in traditionally low-risk parts of the operation. Travel safety may also be neglected because travel is such a common practice. Since everyone travels, why spend time talking about travel safety—and why spend valuable safety resources on it? While the various risks may be small for the amount of travel an average person experiences, the business traveler's exposure may be much greater. For some workers, jaunts through airports, rental car pickups and hotel check-ins are as common as the morning commute.

Developing a Corporate Travel Safety Program

Developing a travel safety program for a company is similar to developing any other type of safety program. It should begin by identifying the extent of the risk. Is the company's travel exposure limited to service personnel driving in cars to various locations? Do service personnel fly domestically to perform work for customers? Is the sales force traveling internationally?

Answers to such questions help to determine the program's scope and depth. Once that is determined, a multidisciplinary team should be formed. In addition to SH&E and human resources personnel, the team should include the company's travel agent (who can provide valuable insight), as well as a cross-section of the firm's travelers.

To appreciate how to keep employees safe during travel, the relationship between risk and safety must be understood. Simply stated, risk is the chance of negative outcome occurring. During travel, this could take the form of violence, fire, natural disaster, medical emergency or other form of "accident" that has the potential to lead to injury or death. As in other aspects of safety, strategies developed should strive to decrease the risk of such occurrences. It must be noted, however, that these risks can never be wholly eliminated, only decreased.

This article focuses on the travel guidelines that the team might develop. The suggestions offered are guidelines only, not hard-and-fast rules. In some situations, any one, or some combination, of these items does not apply. Therefore, all guidelines developed must be based on

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company-specific needs. In essence, travel safety can be broken into four interlocking elements: preparation, mode of transport, shelter and security.

Preparation

It is easy to make grandiose statements such as "Preparation is travel safety" or to espouse folk wisdom concerning ounces of prevention vs. pounds of cure. In reality, preparation is an important component of travel safety, but it is merely one component of the entire picture. Proper preparation can prevent many problems while an employee is traveling.

Between the Internet and the established travel agent network, trips can be planned with little actual information about where someone is going. For example, most meetings, seminars and conferences arrange hotel and some travel modes for attendees. While this is a great convenience, it does not encourage the traveler to learn about the location to which s/he is traveling.

Many readily available resources provide such information, including travel agencies, the Internet (which offers an array of data, including crime statistics) and member-based organizations such as AAA. Such information is valuable for several reasons. For example, looking at a map of the area can help the traveler determine the best mode of transportation to the hotel and other places (e.g., subway vs. bus, taxi vs. rental car). Crime statistics, reviews and tourist opinions can provide an idea of the secu-

rity level within the travel zone. If nothing else, knowing about the area and what to expect will reduce the traveler's anxiety.

The traveling employee must also be instructed to provide select individuals with an itinerary of the trip. For business travel, a coworker should be informed as should those with whom the employee is meeting. This information could save a person's life if something happens during transit (USDS 3).

Medical issues are another consideration. For international travel, certain vaccinations may be required to gain entrance to a given country. An employee with a medical condition(s) should carry a card in his/her wallet that describes the condition(s). Also, an ample supply of necessary medications (packed in carry-on luggage) should be taken on the trip, along with a note from the prescribing doctor. For the international traveler, a doctor should verify that the medication(s) is legal in the country of destination. Also, the traveler's medical insurance policy should be reviewed to determine any coverage limitations; if it does not cover internationally, alternative measures must be taken to ensure that the employee will receive proper medical treatment if necessary. A copy of the medical insurance policy/card should be taken on the trip as well.

With respect to financial preparations, employees should be instructed to leave unnecessary credit cards at home, and to acquire a small amount of currency for the country of travel (which will be known



if the travel locale is researched). Finally, the employee should keep with him/her the phone numbers of all hotels, rental car companies and people with whom s/he is traveling.

Shelter

In most cases, shelter will mean a hotel. Feeling secure in a temporary domicile is even more important than feeling safe at home. Employees are in a less-known situation and have a higher stress level due to traveling. Having a safe place to stay is important in many ways. But the place must be truly safe, not merely give the perception of being safe.

Therefore, preparation is again key. If possible, the employee should work with a trusted travel agent (whether for business or personal travel) to make hotel arrangements. If no trusted agent is available, the employee should be instructed to choose a major chain because security considerations can be addressed before the trip is booked. Those employees who are members of the chain's frequent traveler program should request upgrades to concierge and executive levels, which typically have better security than other floors. A room between the second and sixth

floor should be requested; the first floor is a poor choice for security reasons and the sixth floor is the highest a fire truck ladder will reach (BCA 3). The extent of the hotel's fire alarm and sprinkler systems can be ascertained in advance as well.

When checking in, the traveling employee must know to leave no valuables in the car, especially if it is valet parked. Employees should also be warned not to idle in parking lots, garages or public areas around the hotel (indoor/underground parking garages are especially hard to secure). In addition, the employee should use bellhop service where available (USDS 11). This is prudent for several reasons: 1) The bellhop takes and assumes responsibility for the luggage (although the employee should not surrender control of laptops, travel documents, valuables or sensitive documents). 2) The bellhop can guide the traveler to the proper check-in point. 3) The bellhop will escort the employee and luggage to his/her room, open the door and turn on the light—providing a basic check of the room.

In addition, employees should be instructed to use the hotel safe for storing excess monies and other valuable/sensitive items and to never flash large amounts of cash. Most hotels issue card keys that are programmable and do not reveal the room number. If this is not the case, a room key without a room number should be requested. In any case, if a key is lost, the traveler should notify the front desk immediately and obtain a newly coded replacement (or if an actual key,

a new room). Alternate entrances to the hotel should also be identified at check-in. The traveling employee must also take care to ensure that credit card information is not compromised.

Once inside the room, the traveler should verify that the door has a deadbolt lock and a peep-hole—and both should be used. Any unexpected visitor should be asked to wait while an inquiry is made to the front desk. Employees should know to store important personal items (keys, documents, wallet) in a convenient location such as a nightstand or shelf; this way, in an emergency, such items will be in one easily accessible location. The number for hotel security and how to reach emergency services (is it 9-1-1 or 9-9-1-1?) should be kept handy. Finally, if the traveler wishes to use a hotel service (restaurant, copier, fitness room), but has safety concerns, s/he should call the front desk and request a security escort.

Fire and natural disaster are also a concern. Upon check-in, the location of fire stairs, fire pulls and any needed information about the sprinkler should be identified. All items with personal information should be accounted for before checking out of the room.

Modes of Transport

Modes of transport refer to how a traveler will get from departure to arrival. Travel by auto, air and mass transit are discussed, as these modes apply to most travel situations. Discussion begins with the automobile, which is involved in the highest incidence of workplace fatalities (BLS).

Driving Safely

It is likely that an auto will be involved in some component of travel. Therefore, any action taken to improve safe driving skills is valuable. Providing employees with a defensive driving class may be a good first step—and it may help to lower fleet insurance rates. Seatbelt use should also be stressed. A person is statistically much more likely to walk away from an automobile accident if s/he is wearing a seatbelt (Johnson, et al).

What specific precautions and practices increase the chances of uneventful travel? Let's start with preparation. Again, employees should know something about the area where they are going. Is the home office in an urban area or is the employee traveling to a rural location? For someone used to driving in a rural setting, driving in a major city is a major culture shock—and vice versa.

Weather is another variable. Is the travel zone prone to ice/snow storms, flash floods, tornados, hurricanes or earthquakes? If so, the first question to ask is in what seasons are they prevalent?

Preparing for a driving trip is especially important if traveling overseas. Employees should be instructed to contact foreign embassies, government tourism offices or the local office of the rental car agency to learn about specific driving regulations (e.g., which side of the road is driven on). Also, potential drivers should be able to drive a standard transmission vehicle, as automatics may not be available in some areas. When traveling with others, the person experienced

Dealing with Fires, Natural Disasters & Weather Extremes

Employees may encounter a variety of emergency-type situations during their travels. The following tips can help them be best prepared.

Fire

The most important advice is to remain calm and not panic. Several guidelines apply in this situation.

- Call the front desk to report the location of the fire.
- Place a palm on the door, then the doorknob; if either feels hot, do not open the door.
- If it is safe to exit the room, go to the stairs. Be sure to take the room key with you. If the corridor is smoke-filled, crawl to the exit. Again check the door before opening it, as the fire could be in the stairwell.
- If you cannot leave the room, or if stairwells are unsafe, notify the front desk that you are in your room, awaiting rescue. Notify firefighters of your location by waving a towel or sheet out the window.
- Fill the tub and sink with water. Soak towels and blankets as necessary to block vents and openings around doors to keep smoke and gases out. Attempt to keep walls, doors and towels covering vents and cracks cool and wet.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a wet cloth (this will block smoke and cool the air being breathed). Stay low, but remain alert to any signs of rescue.

Natural Disasters

- **Tornado.** Move to an interior room or to a basement inside the building. Avoid rooms with windows which can be shattered.
- **Earthquakes.** If indoors, move as little as possible. Find a safe area, drop and cover. Stay away from windows. Be aware that in a high rise, fire alarms and sprinklers will likely go off even if no fire is present.
- **Hurricanes.** Leave the affected area early, as directed by local authorities. Use a planning guide or listen to local radio stations to plan your evacuation route. Have a map available for reference if unfamiliar with the area. Avoid flooded streets as well, as underlying currents could sweep your vehicle off the road.

Weather Extremes

Ice/Snow

- In the case of an ice/snow storm, wait out the weather if possible. A few hours can make a huge difference in driving safety. If local authorities recommend that drivers stay off the road, follow their advice. Ice storms often present more severe driving conditions than major snow storms as they deposit layers of treacherous, often-invisible ice on virtually every surface.
- On wintry roads, avoid using cruise control. These settings are designed for roads in normal conditions—and the car will respond as if you are driving in normal conditions, which is not the case.
- If you slide off the road and get stuck in the snow, use higher gears—rather than gunning the motor—to get out; these gears apply less power to the drive wheels, meaning that wheels will spin less.

Flash Floods

- If you must drive under conditions where flooding is a possibility, listen to a local television or radio broadcast that can alert you to dangerous or impassable roads.
- If caught in potential flash flood conditions, avoid driving through standing water or floodwaters moving across the roadway. Even very shallow moving water can conceal missing portions of roads and bridges, or large debris. The water may also be much deeper than it looks. If water is higher than knee level, proceed with extreme caution. In faster, deeper floodwater, you could be easily overpowered by currents or injured by large moving debris.
- If traction is lost due to water on the road, the car could quickly be caught up in extremely fast currents. In these conditions, cars tend to float for a brief time, but can be quickly submerged. Although each situation must be assessed individually, it is usually best to exit the car as soon as it stalls in floodwater. Leave the car behind and move to higher ground immediately.

with the area's driving conditions and routines should drive first, with the inexperienced driver observing before assuming some driving responsibilities. If traveling alone, it may be helpful to speak to someone who has driven in the area.

Air Travel

For many, air travel has always had ominous overtones, even more so since Sept. 11, 2001. Although it is statistically a safer mode of travel than automobiles (BTS), many people are anxious about flying—some almost to the point of phobia. In the author's opinion, this is because flying involves the unnatural state of being 20,000 feet above sea level. The heightened anxiety may also be due to a lack of understanding and control. Most people know how to drive a car. Even as a passenger, a person is close enough to the driver to observe driving conditions and his/her responses. In air travel, few understand the aerodynamics involved and those in control are out of sight. The media may also play a role. Which gets coverage—the 55 car accidents a day that kill two people each or the one airplane crash that kills 150 people (BTS)?

Whatever the reason, air travel is a tense situation before crowded airports, and overbooked/delayed flights are added to the mix, not to mention hazards in the airport itself. Therefore, providing employees with safety statistics may help alleviate some concerns. Most air accidents occur during take-off/climb and descent/landing (Ranter 7). These instances are lower than cruising altitude. Also, depending on the cause, the pilot may retain some amount of control over the plane.

That said, passengers must be ready to take steps necessary to increase their chances of survival. Employees should be reminded to listen to the safety briefing—even if it has been heard 100 times. Each plane model is different and by listening, passengers will learn about that specific plane. They should focus on learning the location of emergency exits and be reminded to keep seatbelts fastened while seated. If turbulence is encountered, the seatbelt will keep passengers from becoming projectiles; in the case of depressurization and hull breach, it may protect them during a free fall. With respect to attire, employees should be encouraged to wear casual, unrestrictive, natural fiber clothing—loose-fitting so as not to restrict movement; natural fibers so as not to burn and melt. They should also be reminded to place sensitive or valuable materials in carry-on luggage and to use sturdy luggage with covered

tags (preferably with a business address but no company name or logo for security purposes) (USDS 5).

With respect to personal safety in an airport, employees should be cautioned to avoid any disturbances that may occur. In addition, they should report directly to the gate inside the security area after checking luggage. When passing through security or being selected for preboarding screening, they should always cooperate. If a problem arises during a security check or preboard screening, it is best to accommodate the security personnel. If any problems occur with security personnel, names and ID numbers should be recorded and communicated to airport security management and the air carrier once the flight has arrived safely.

Public Transportation

Public transportation—subways, buses, trains, taxis—can be a viable mode of transportation when visiting an urban area. Its use in major cities may be less hazardous than navigating in a car. In general, employees should arrive early at the station/stop to avoid having to run for a ride. Some public transportation injuries occur as a result of slips, trips or falls (MTA). Employees should also be cautioned to adjust gait for conditions, to use handrails when available, and to wait for the vehicle to stop before boarding or disembarking.

With respect to personal safety, during off hours, instruct employees to sit as close to the driver/conductor as possible and caution them against falling asleep. Remind them also that the station/stop can pose as many security hazards as the ride itself. Therefore, secluded locations should be avoided; if this is not possible, a taxi should be considered. Only marked cabs (uniform-looking cabs, referred to in some cities as Medallion cabs because of the medallion stamped onto the hood) should be used (BCA 5). Unmarked/unpermitted cabs may be less expensive, but they are not worth the risk. Employees should be encouraged to work with a travel agent or the hotel concierge to assess public transit options and to obtain cab company phone numbers. Furthermore, the traveler should know to contact local authorities immediately if s/he ever feels threatened, stalked or generally concerned about personal safety.

Security

In this context, security refers to preventing criminal or violent acts against persons or belongings. This is a very broad definition and it begs the question, "How is security different when traveling as opposed to staying home?" The issues are the same.

Let's begin with criminal behavior and the term/concept of *modus operandi*. This applies to any intentional crime—some action that is not a spur-of-the-moment assault. It is how the criminal has planned and visualized the act. Spur-of-the-moment crimes are not the norm. They can occur, but a mugging usually does not fit that mold. The attacker typically plans the crime and chooses a victim based on a set list of characteristics. In many cases, victims are selected because the perpetrator feels confident that

the crime will proceed as planned. Therefore, it is important to appear to be the type of person who will be a poor target—to be viewed as someone who will require more trouble than the crime is worth.

Spontaneous violence (e.g., rioting, drunken brawls, irate persons) can also be avoided by taking some precautionary steps. If a person is likely to be personally targeted (e.g., celebrity, high-profile executive, management of a company dealing in an international hot-zone), it is best to consult with the company's security advisors. In some instances, criminals such as terrorists will expend great effort and resources to get at this specific person.

What knowledge is necessary to protect personal security? A good self-defense class can help in many ways. And, again, knowing about the travel zone is critical. Crime statistics, maps, recommendations and other information make the traveler more aware of his/her surroundings and therefore, less of a target.

Conclusion

Travel poses a unique set of risks that sometimes may be overlooked. By training employees to be vigilant with respect to safety and to apply logic to situations encountered, safe travel can be ensured. As in any SH&E endeavor, the key is to assess the travel expectations for employees in the specific company, then to apply all available resources to develop an effective program. ■

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Developing a travel safety program is similar to developing any other safety program. It should begin by identifying the extent of the risk.

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