Illustration by Michael Austin

Travel Safety Goes Global

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When Ewa Bujak woke up on April 26, she was shocked to learn about the 7.8 earthquake that had struck Nepal and the subsequent avalanche on Mount Everest. Bujak, who is the public relations manager for home-automation company Fibaro, immediately leapt into action; Fibaro was the primary sponsor of mountain climber Mariusz Malkowski's attempt to summit Mount Everest without oxygen or a guide, and he was on the mountain when the avalanche occurred.

Bujak helped organize a rescue panel, which was divided into the main crisis team and the communications team. They were able to contact Malkowski, who had been at a camp above where the avalanche occurred. He was uninjured and making his way to Mount Everest's base camp, which had been directly hit by the avalanche.

"The base camp was totally damaged, many people were injured, some were trapped, and some were missing," Bujak says. "Malkowski helped the rescue team at the base camp bring injured people to Gorak Shep, a small town below Everest."

Fibaro's crisis team worked with a local private airline that agreed to fly a helicopter to Malkowski and other injured climbers in Gorak Shep. Aftershocks and bad weather complicated operations—the helicopter had to delay its trip, and the team had to attempt to make contact with Malkowski after every aftershock to make sure he was okay. During this time, Bujak's communications team was working to keep Malkowski's wife, as well as social media and news outlets, updated on Malkowski's well-being.

The helicopter eventually took advantage of a half-hour window of calm weather to pick up the climbers and fly them to Kathmandu, where Malkowski boarded a plane to New Delhi and then back home to New Jersey. The entire rescue operation took less than 72 hours, which were "very stressful but very successful," Bujak says.

"We knew that the trip was risky from the beginning," Bujak notes. "But we had a crisis plan and established crisis team before the expedition. Therefore, we were able to start the operation very quickly. It was amazing because some people had to stay [in Nepal] more than a month before they were rescued."

Whether it's a natural disaster, a terrorist attack, or political unrest, companies with employees on international assignments have a responsibility to plan for, prevent, and mitigate the risks associated with employee travel. This legal and moral obligation is increasingly important as more companies embrace globalization, but many organizations don't know how to develop a robust travel management program, according to the International SOS Foundation, a nonprofit organization that promotes travel safety.

"This topic fills a void, as it has mostly been neglected in the literature on employment matters, in spite of its significant implications for employers," states an International SOS white paper, Duty of Care of Employers for Protecting International Assignees, their Dependents, and International Business Travelers.

One of the biggest challenges to developing a well-rounded travel safety program is collaboration within the organization, according to the white paper. Various decision makers, including senior management, corporate security managers, insurance managers, legal personnel, and human resources, all share responsibility for duty of care.

"One of the biggest challenges facing companies is that duty of care [for travel safety] is considered everyone's responsibility and cannot be relegated to just one functional group," International SOS states. "Therefore, the greatest cost…lies within planning and implementing best practices, rather than the costs associated with taking care of employees."

How can companies provide well-rounded travel security to employees? Daniel L. Richards, CEO of Global Rescue, tells Security Management that the two primary aspects are to disclose to employees the risks of traveling to a certain region, and to provide support while the employee is traveling.

Educating employees on their travel destination "can be as simple as entry and exit information, but it could be as complex as what vaccinations should be obtained, or what parts of a particular geography should be avoided due to a high rate of infectious disease," Richards says. "To not warn an employee that they may encounter a very dangerous situation puts the company in a position of liability for not warning its employee or allowing them to make their own decision about whether to enter the region."

Employers should instruct employees on a travel destination's inherent risks, such as crime, disease, travel sickness, or political instability, as well as current events, including strikes, protests, or weather events. It's imperative for employers to keep tabs on regional risks while the employee is traveling, in case, for instance, a protest turns violent or a hurricane is approaching the area, so they can alert the employee if necessary, Richards says.

For example, during the Arab Spring protests in 2011, a large peaceful protest in Tahrir Square quickly turned violent, and an alert was sent out through Global Rescue. "The onus was on the enterprise to warn and notify their travelers that something bad was occurring, that the change was dramatic, and they needed to take action to avoid being caught up in what ended up occurring there," Richards explains.

"For the unprepared enterprise, we often see them have employees that stumble into these situations," he notes. "Ideally, you have employees who are aware of what's going on and are actually able to avoid it so they don't get caught up in the crisis."

Keeping travelers updated on potential risks, as well as tracking their locations, can be done electronically, thanks to GPS. For example, Global Rescue has a GRID system that allows employers to track traveling employees' locations via their mobile device's GPS signal. The software also sends location-based risk alerts to users' phones.

If an employee does run into trouble during international travel, it is imperative for companies to have an established emergency action plan to respond in an organized and efficient way. The plan should address any financial issues, who should make decisions on behalf of the client, deployment of personnel, what to do next, contacting next of kin, and keeping families apprised. The prepared organization works that out in advance, Richards says.

In situations where employees may need to be evacuated or to receive advanced medical care, companies often need to organize outside help, according to International SOS.

Richards agrees. "What you find is a company's crisis management response professionals are so busy communicating internally within the enterprise that they have no ability to actually effect change on the ground in the place where the crisis is occurring," he explains.

For the Mount Everest rescue, Bujak says the crisis team had already established ties with the Polish ambassador in nearby India—Malkowski is Polish—which was indispensable in arranging the climber's evacuation.

A strong travel security program not only meets a company's legal and ethical responsibilities, but it also promotes employee well-being, business continuity, and reduced costs for expenses such as medical care, according to International SOS.

"The responsibility for developing an integrated risk management strategy that truly embeds itself into a corporate culture cannot be delegated or outsourced," the white paper states. "Prevention and mitigation of risks to international assignees is the responsibility of an enterprise…To ignore this issue is to ignore legal, commercial, fiduciary, and social responsibilities."