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Who's minding your business

By Rose Smith (Filed: 21/02/2006)

A new tracking system aims to put a stop to the unwieldy behaviour of business travellers who breach corporate travel policy while working abroad.



10pc of business travellers break the rules

The Employee Travel Monitoring System (ETMS), launched at the end of last year, claims to tackle some of the misdemeanours the Institute of Travel Management calls corporate delinquency, which is estimated to cost companies millions.

One traveller in ten is guilty of misdemeanours such as booking trips outside mandated channels and using airlines and hotels of their own choice, according to a survey by the institute.

The package, designed by the Anvil Group, allows a security manager or head of department to open a website and see the location of all staff travelling abroad as well as check who is en route to a certain destination. It also keeps archive records and tracks the maximum number of employees allowed to travel together.

But the system can also be used as a tool to dictate travel policy to employees. As soon as a journey is booked through a corporate travel agent, ETMS automatically e-mails the traveller a copy of the company's travel policy, assuming it has one.

A survey by National Car Rental found that half of 400 small and medium enterprises polled didn't.

"If a member of staff then chooses to make travel arrangements outside this policy and something happens to that person, the company can show they complied with their duty of care obligations," said Matthew Judge, technical director, the Anvil Group. The question of duty of care is currently a grey and thorny area for businesses.

The draft corporate manslaughter legislation, currently under consideration, "will make it easier for companies who have shown little or no regard for the safety of their workers to be prosecuted for a specific and serious criminal offence," says the Office of the Leader of the House of Commons.

In practice, a company sending an employee away on business must exercise just as much duty of care to that person as if they were working in their UK office, says Martyn Day, senior partner, Leigh Day solicitors.

"The employer has to do the same amount of due diligence to ensure working conditions are safe and secure as they would in this country. And it is the standard of the care offered by a company that the courts are interested in when looking at negligence claims and potentially criminal cases under the new legislation," he said.

Mr Day admits that most cases of employees suing their employers because a business trip went badly wrong is usually dealt with quickly by the company and often covered by an insurance policy. But the need to show sufficient care has been taken to safeguard employees is another reason for the emergence of employee monitoring systems.

In the case of the ETMS package, every time a company books corporate travel, they will also receive a report compiled from government and news sources on the threat level of that destination. It is then up to the employer to assess the risk and make a decision.

"Under the duty of care, if a company is sending someone to a high-risk area, it isn't sufficient for the employer just to point out the threat," said Mr Judge.

"They might need to employ a chaperone to escort the traveller from the airport to their hotel or offer close protection at all times. The employer has to be seen to be doing as much as possible to protect that person."

The Anvil Group is not alone in offering monitoring services - travel management company FCM Travel Solutions has a SMS-based tracking system called Irridis and more products are likely to follow as companies take more interest in reining in the behaviour of their "delinquent" travellers as well fulfilling legal and moral corporate responsibilities.