A new traveller in a new world - how will business travel programmes evolve?

As business travel recovers it's important to note that the needs of companies - and that of their travellers - have changed. Traveller confidence, budgets and ease of travel have all taken a knock.

For travel managers, it's important to rethink every facet of their travel programme, from approvals to expense management and duty of care, as their team gets back on the road.

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"Anyone wanting to give their travel programme a 2021 shake up, will need to keep a few important changes in mind," says Bonnie Smith, FCM General Manager. She outlines the following four important elements:

1. **Up-to-the-minute information**

"The biggest pain point for travellers today? The 'fluidity' of international travel. Things can change on a daily (if not hourly) basis and travellers are concerned about the status of their flights, border closures, new Covid protocols and restrictions as well as quarantine requirements," says Smith.

According to an IATA survey, more than 80% of travellers are as concerned about potential quarantine restrictions and 'getting stuck' in a destination due to border closures as they are about the virus itself.

Travel chatbots, like FCM's travel bot Sam :], for example, have evolved to meet traveller's changing needs and provide travel alerts and a 24/7 chat function so travellers can ask for advice and support any time, any place.

2. **Health & safety will remain in the spotlight**

Top of mind for any travel manager is duty of care. The burden of keeping travellers safe and healthy is felt keenly by decision-makers and travel bookers, and travel managers are under pressure to enforce policy compliance, ensure travel is approved and do everything in their power to facilitate a safe journey.

Smith says: "Companies today – more so than ever before – want to be able to track their travellers while they're on the road. They want to know exactly where their travellers are if they need to bring them back. They want a professional travel agency to be able to flag any potential risks, alert travellers (and the team back home) to any developments and actively liaise with local consulates and embassies should the need arise."

3. **Smooth approvals**

Another change Covid has delivered? Heightened scrutiny on a company's business travel and the need for an additional layer (or layers) of approval. Companies have started scrutinising whether the planned trips are absolutely essential. They will first explore whether the meeting can be done virtually.

Even pre-Covid, a clunky approvals process could delay travel and add unwanted stress and frustration into the mix. That is why companies and travel managers will increasingly look for systems that will allow all travel requests to come into one dashboard, with updates and approvals going directly to the traveller on their mobile. They want approval solutions that integrate country risk ratings and border restrictions. Whenever a traveller tries to book a high-risk destination, their booking needs to be flagged for approval.

4. Flexibility takes on a new meaning

One of the biggest challenges in air travel at the moment is flight delays or cancellations. Always a pain point for travellers (think adverse weather conditions, the knock-on effect due to a delayed aircraft, or strikes), the situation is compounded by airlines suspending or limiting services into a country due to changing Covid directives.

Companies are increasingly turning to their travel management company (TMC) to support them if they need to make changes to their itinerary.

Smith concludes: "There's no doubt travel behaviour has changed. Travellers are looking for a safety net; structure; a seamless booking experience; and the peace-of-mind that only the expertise and support of a strong TMC can bring."

For more insights on business travel in a Covid-19 world, check out the latest FCM Whitepaper.