

## Op-Ed: Now Is The Time To Get Serious About Mandates

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**JUNE 22, 2009** -- In countless meetings over the past two decades plus, I've heard the same disappointing response to questions about travel policy enforcement. No matter how logical a best practice in travel management may seem, the refrain of "we don't mandate" or "we're not a mandate culture" basically means "we don't manage travel" or "we don't really manage travel."

To manage travel, like any other corporate activity, corporations have to require—aka mandate—certain standard operating procedures. Companies do this all the time with almost every other corporate process and purchase, and nobody even thinks about questioning those mandates.

Can you imagine an employee saying, "I know you get supplies at Vendor A, but I think Vendor B really works better for me?" Or, "I spent hours on the Web last night and I found a PC that's cheaper than our internal price! Don't worry, we can work out those compatibility issues later." Or my personal favorite, "I know I'm only due three weeks vacation, but I'll be more productive with four."

Of course, this doesn't happen, and anyone who tried these tactics would be escorted from the premises. For some reason, however, everyone feels free to question travel policy. They don't question the arcane stuff, either, like whether a two-hour departure window is better than 90 minutes. They go right to the jugular by asking why the company manages travel or requires use of a single agency and a single charge card.

There's no logic behind these challenges, as anyone who understands travel management, which so often is confused with knowing a lot about travel, will explain. If travelers follow simple rules and travel through the authorized agency, companies gain several important benefits. They get data to negotiate discounts, and they get point-of-sale controls to help travelers use those discounts. Of course, companies also get reports when travelers buy unreasonably expensive trips, as defined by each company policy. OK, maybe that last part is a bit Orwellian, but does anybody seriously think it's inappropriate in a business environment? Despite all the advantages, many companies still cling to their "we don't mandate" approach.

The justification I've heard for avoiding mandating travel policy is that restrictions could make it harder for travelers to get business done. Ostensibly, they fear that having any mandates will force them on triple-connect red-eye flights the night before a big presentation. Some cynics, however, wonder if such concerns really boil down to frequent flyer flexibility.

Logical or not, this squeamishness about managing travel has been around for a long time. It's surprising, though, that traveler safety concerns haven't pushed some companies to mandates. Nobody disputes that immediate access to traveler records could provide invaluable and immediate information if companies need to locate travelers quickly.

Despite earthquakes, fires, bombings, crashes, terrorist occupations of hotels and even tsunamis, they still don't seem to mind if travelers book wherever they want. Maybe they plan to call travelers on their cell phones. Of course, if there's a disaster, cell phones probably won't work.

Swine flu might finally force companies to get serious about requiring the use of the designated travel management company. With H1N1, companies really needed to know which travelers had recently been to Mexico or other infected areas.

For travel management companies, reporting on all travelers who booked travel to or from a destination in a certain timeframe is a piece of cake, unless travelers booked through "myfavoriteairline.com."

Safety really should outweigh frequent flyer concerns, or even the occasional small savings available on a web fare. Companies really don't want to defend a lawsuit where a traveler has been injured or worse and help was delayed because the company did not know where the traveler was.

With standard practices in place at so many companies, it is hard to imagine employers claiming to meet their duty of care toward their employees who travel if they don't have rules—mandates—requiring employees to book all business travel through designated channels. Let's hope more companies see the light and start managing and mandating travel the way they do so many other functions.