

IMPROVING INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL HEALTH

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
COPYRIGHT PAGE.....	
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. BACKGROUND.....	2
III. ANALYSIS	4
IV. METHODOLOGY.....	7
V. PREDICTED RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.....	10
VI. SUMMARY.....	12
REFERENCES.....	14

ABSTRACT

Company X in San Diego does business with foreign customers and requires frequent international travel to several different countries outside of the continental United States. As the travel schedule gets more demanding and as employees are traveling on a regular basis to support different activities, the need to accommodate these travelers also needs to be looked at more closely. This paper identifies a couple of the main human factor problems that international travelers have to deal with and the countermeasures for those problems.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For organizations that do business with foreign customers (like company X in San Diego, for example), international travel is either one of the requirements that have to be satisfied, or it is highly recommended. Unlike some other organizations which have done business on a regular basis with foreign customers and have defined processes, company X had not done much business with foreign customers. International travel is new to company X, and the travel process which involves making travel arrangements (flight, hotel, car, and preparing necessary documentation for travelers for different lengths of durations) is constantly being modified and improved. Among the things that need to be added to the list of improvements to be made is the need to ensure the comfort of travelers during the long flights. According to a recent survey conducted with the subjects being the frequent travelers from all different departments of the company, discomfort during long flights and jet lag after trips are the two most popular human-factor problems that employees of company X identified.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND

Although the Company X has been around for over ten years, it had just started doing business with some of the Asian countries (Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam for example) about three years ago. The range of experience level of employees of company X is a wide range (anywhere from zero to over thirty years of experience). The sign-up process for employees to do international travel is not a selective process. Given the right skill set for the job, any employee who wants to go overseas can sign up to go. In general, the younger and single employees are more eager to support international travel and are more willing to stay for longer periods of time than the more experienced employees who have family and children.

In the beginning, there were not a lot of activities overseas, and so not a lot of traveling was required. This had been the case for the past couple of years. However, recently, starting in 2009, there have been a lot of more activities and the need for employees to support those activities is high. When there was not a lot of international traveling going on, there were not a lot of complaints about the discomfort during the long flights and jet lag since employees did not have to travel so frequently. A survey was developed in June 2009, and every employee who had ever traveled internationally was asked to participate to help identify human factor issues or problems experienced

during long hours of travel. These human factor problems were recently pointed out and company X is encouraged to do what it can to help those employees who travel to Asia.

CHAPTER III

ANALYSIS

Since there is no direct flight from San Diego to any of the Asian countries, all travelers have to first fly to either Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) or San Francisco International Airport (SFO) from San Diego. The lengths of the flights (with or without connections) from San Diego, California to an Asian country can range anywhere from thirteen to twenty hours. These are some of the longest flights in duration (not taking delays into account).

One of the two most popular human factor problems identified by the travelers is their discomfort during long flights. About ninety percent of all employees from the survey complain about comfort. For most travelers, the seats are too small and the seat pitch, defined as the distance from one row of seats to the next, is too short. Tall travelers can hardly be comfortable when their knees almost touch the seats in front of them during the long flights. One of the common seating configurations is the 2-5-2 configuration which adds to the discomfort if the travelers have to sit in the middle which prevents them from getting in and out of their seats easily. This is an issue because the human body is “built to move about, not to remain still”. (Kroemer, Kroemer, and Kroemer-Elbert, 2001) There is not much a traveler can do sitting in a seat that is small and uncomfortable with little leg room. Sitting for prolonged periods in seats (as

confining as airline seats) promote decreased blood flow and can lead to swelling of the legs and feet and other serious medical difficulties. One example is blood clots. Blood clots can form if a person is inactive for a long period of time. (www.webmd.com) When traveling to the lungs, blood clots can be life-threatening, and it is more common in travelers who are on the plane for more than six hours. (Sanford, 2008)

Airline seats in economy class do not recline completely. Therefore, it is difficult for travelers to get comfortable sleep during long flights. Lying down is the least strenuous posture and not being able to lie down is a physical effort which creates strain. (Kroemer, Kroemer, and Kroemer-Elbert, 2001) Even though there is no external load, the body muscles are strained by maintaining a posture through muscle tension. On top of that, during a long flight, if travelers do not get to be well rested, it is common for them to be cranky and tired when they reach the destination.

In addition to the long hours of being on the plane, traveling to and from Asia has a big effect on travelers because it is also an east-west travel. While discomfort during long flights is something almost every traveler complains about, jet lag is the most popular problem identified by travelers, and it is a problem that every traveler complained about. Jet lag occurs when people travel across several time zones causing their biological rhythm to be out of synch with the new destination time. It is the inability of the body of a traveler to immediately adjust to the time in a different zone. Traveling east or west, as in the case for employees of company X, has more of an

effect than traveling north or south. When traveling east or west, the sun sets at a different time, travelers feel out of sorts for the duration of their stay in the foreign land, then they synch to the local day-night cycle only to repeat the pattern all over again when they return home. (Sanford, 2008)

Jet lag is a temporary disorder that causes fatigue. As the body struggles to cope with the new schedule, other symptoms of jet lag such as anxiety, constipation, diarrhea, daytime sleepiness, nighttime insomnia, irritability, and inability to concentrate may set in. (Sanford, 2008)

Symptoms and effects of discomfort during long flights and jet lag after the long flights need to be addressed. Employees' health, attitude and overall performance can be greatly affected. With regards to discomfort during long flights, muscle strain causes fatigue and blood clots can be deadly. With regards to jet lag, daytime sleepiness and the inability to concentrate will prevent employees' ability to do their jobs effectively.

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

Company X needs to find ways to make sure that its employees are better accommodated when they are traveling internationally to help them ease their discomforts and cope with jet lag. There are some actions that company X can take that will make a big difference.

One of the actions that company X can take is to provide brown bag sessions where healthcare professionals are invited to make employees aware of the different symptoms employees experience during and after travel. At these brown bag sessions, employees also learn ways to minimize those effects. For example, with regards to discomfort associated with small seats and short seat pitch during long flights, it is uncomfortable and tiresome for travelers to maintain the same body position without change. To ease the discomfort, travelers are encouraged to move around and take a short break every couple of hours when the seatbelt sign is not on. During these brown bag sessions, in-seat exercises and stretches are demonstrated and recommended to increase blood flow and promote relaxation.

Current travel policy requires employees of company X to fly economy class. One thing for company X to consider is to allow all employees to travel business class when they are traveling internationally. According to the current travel policy, only Vice

Presidents (VPs) or higher-level leaders are allowed to travel in business class.

Everything is better in business class than economy class. In business class, the seats are bigger and the seat pitch is longer allowing employees with more movement. The seats also lie almost flat. This is especially necessary for employees who are tall and big. There is also more aisle room in business class (one common seat configuration for business class is 2-2-2) so it is easier for travelers to get out of their seats and walk around without bothering other people. Allowing employees to fly business class will help ease travel discomfort so that employees can be better rested and be able to perform their jobs better. Additional perks to travel business class also include employees spending less time waiting in lines to check in and going through security. Business travel will help make the travel experience pleasant for employees.

Since jet lag cannot be prevented, brown bag sessions set up to help travelers cope with jet lag should focus on ways to reduce its effects. Jet lag makes travelers more susceptible to colds, flu, and stomach upsets. Employees should be advised to limit the consumption of alcohol and caffeine, to expose to daylight, and to exercise. All of these activities help reset the body clock.

Current travel policy on company X requires employees to report to work the next business day after international travel. With less than twenty four hours to adjust to the new location when the time zones are so different, employees do not have enough time to adjust and to perform at their best. One of the things that company X can do is to

allow employees an extra day to rest and try to reset their body clocks as much as possible. This way, employees will be more ready to go to work and are more motivated.

One other thing that company X can try to work on is to allocate travel time more wisely among its employees. Currently, some employees travel constantly while others rarely travel. The company should try and reallocate travel time so that it is balanced among employees.

When sending employees on international travel assignments, it is best for company X to make sure its employees are taken care of the best way possible. When these employees are in the presence of the foreign customers, they need to be at their best for they are representing the company. It is crucial that they perform well to make the customers happy.

CHAPTER V

PREDICTED RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Having the brown bag sessions frequently will raise employees' awareness about travel health and provide a guide for employees to take care of themselves better.

Having the travel health knowledge will also help employees have more confidence in traveling. The brown bag sessions would be open to everyone for informational purposes. It is predicted that employees will find these brown bag sessions extremely helpful. More importantly, it is predicted that these brown bag sessions will cultivate a sense of loyalty in employees for they know that company X cares about its employees and their wellness. Employees are also encouraged to provide feedback on the brown bag sessions continuously to cater to travelers even more.

It is predicted that traveling in business class for international travel will take some time to eventually be approved. The leadership of company X needs time to decide whether business class travel is worth it. The reason is because business class is so much more expensive than economy class although it would be so much better for travelers. If approved, business class travel will provide an incentive for employees to travel overseas. It will definitely provide so much more comfort for travelers, and it will ultimately increase employees' satisfaction.

It is predicted that employees will be given an extra day to rest after a long international travel trip. Employees will not have to report to work the next business day, but the day after that. This will give them more time to get their body clock back in synch with the new locations. It will also give employees the chance to perform at their best and provide customer satisfaction.

It is predicted that by allocating schedule time better among the employees who are able and willing to travel internationally, meaning reducing travel time for those who travel over fifty percent of the time and increasing the travel time for those who only travel about ten percent of the time, company X will provide employees more time to take care of themselves and perform better in the workplace.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY

Travel by air is not a natural activity for humans. The human bodies need to move around and not stay still. (Kroemer, Kroemer, and Kroemer-Elbert, 2001) Unfortunately, when traveling internationally, travelers are forced to remain seated for long periods of time in small and uncomfortable seats. Also, jet lag is something that cannot be prevented when traveling east to west or west to east over several time zones but have serious effects on travelers. The discomfort and serious symptoms related to international travel are unhealthy to employees, can cause damages, and forces employees to perform at a lower level than what they are capable of. This can certainly decrease employee job satisfaction.

Employee job satisfaction has been linked to internal quality of work life (Heskett, Sasser Jr., and Schlesinger, 1997) where internal quality is measured by what employees feel towards their jobs, coworkers and the company as a whole. Employees of company X have expressed their concerns about the lack of quality in international travel processes and policy through the survey identifying their discomfort during long flights and their difficulty dealing with jet lag. It is not easy to recover from an uncomfortable long flight, to adjust to the new environment and at the same time, to provide the best performance. By providing brown bag sessions, upgrading

international travel to business class, giving employees an extra day to adjust after international travel, and reallocating resources, company X can help employees travel more comfortably and adjust better to their new environment. Employees will feel better about their jobs, and they will have better job satisfaction.

One of the existing rules in the company travel policy is that employees have to travel economy class for both domestic and international travel. Business class is approved for VPs or higher only. Another rule is that employees have to report to work the next business day after international travel. One rule prevents employees from being comfortable during long flight hours. The other rule prevents employees from fully adjusting their body clock to the new time zone. Both of these are considered Blue rules. (Performance Research Associates, 2007) Company X needs to revise these Blue rules to improve the travel health for employees on international assignments.

In the end, when the brown bags are given, the Blue rules have been revised, and the travel time has been reallocated, employees will be able to perform better. As a result, not only internal customers are satisfied, but also external customers.

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