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The top five excuses project teams make when traveling for work—and how to avoid having to hear them.

BY SAMUEL GREENGARD



DO YOU MEAN

# THERE'S NO WI-FI?

Virtual tools have altered the way organizations interact—but that doesn't mean project professionals don't have to hop on a plane now and then.

Getting a project team to a destination—whether it's Mexico or Malaysia—requires some travel smarts.


Here are five common excuses project managers hear all too often, and what can be done to ensure an international initiative soars:

## **"NO ONE TOLD ME THE PLAN."**

As team leader, project managers must devise a tactical plan to minimize travel-related risks, says Judi Jarosh, director of IT compliance and the global project management office at NACCO Materials Handling Group, Inc., a lift truck manufacturer in Fairview, Oregon, USA.

Ms. Jarosh, who typically travels about one week each month, suggests that the plan should include:

- Pairing travelers, particularly a travel-savvy team member with someone less experienced
- Arranging for airport pickups to the project site
- Synchronizing contacts on mobile phones
- Finding a local contact who understands the idiosyncrasies of the culture



Avoid the last flight of the day and allow at least one night for adjusting to jet lag when flying a project team to an international destination.

Hotel concierges can help with an array of tasks, including arranging transportation, finding restaurants and handling unforeseen hassles.

Prasad S. Kodukula, PhD, PMP, PgMP, founder and president of Kodukula & Associates Inc., a project, program and portfolio management consultancy and training firm in Chicago, Illinois, USA, turned to a concierge when he was involved in a traffic accident while driving a rental car in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

“A city bus hit me from behind while I was headed to the airport,” he says. “I called the concierge at the hotel I stayed at, and he sent his customer service manager, who helped me deal with the situation.”

#### “I FORGOT MY PASSPORT.”

Travel can be stressful, and security requirements have become quite onerous. But the system isn't going to change, so project professionals must know how to deal with it effectively.

Make sure everyone in the group knows the itinerary and has important backup documents:

- Do team members have their visas?
- Have they renewed expiring visas?
- Have they photocopied their passport?
- Do they have vaccination cards if necessary?

Additionally, check expiration dates, as some countries won't allow entry if a passport is due to expire within six months.

Be careful how project team members describe their reason for entering a foreign country, Ms. Jarosh notes.

“In most cases, it's best to say you are there for meetings. In some countries, when you describe your activities as ‘work,’ ‘consulting’ or ‘projects,’ additional delays and fees can occur,” she says.

It also helps to ship project and training materials ahead of time or, at the very least, find a nearby printing service at your destination, says Mounir A. Ajam, PMP, founder and CEO of SUKAD, a project management consultancy in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Keep tabs on censorship requirements, too. “In some countries, CDs, DVDs and

printed materials are likely to be checked by authorities,” he says. This could result in long delays at the airport while they're reviewed—and possibly confiscated.

#### “I'M STUCK IN NEW DELHI!”

Delayed and cancelled flights go with the territory. Sometimes, there's no way to avoid getting to a project site late or missing a meeting. But there are ways to avoid getting derailed. Call it defensive travel planning.

When possible, avoid connections through airports that suffer chronic delays—Beijing and New Delhi are notorious—and steer clear of airports affected by severe weather at certain times of the year. Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport in Texas, USA, for example, often experiences delays during its spring, when thunderstorms roll through the area.

Project teams can also run into problems due to busy travel holidays such as Ramadan and Eid al-Adha in Muslim countries, Christmas and Easter in Christian regions, and the whole of August throughout Europe.

Avoid the last flight of the day and allow at least one night for adjusting to jet lag when flying a project team to an international destination, advises Dr. Kodukula. He has visited more than 40 countries and logged more than 1 million flying miles.

Mr. Ajam has found himself and his project team coping with a cancelled flight at the end of the day. On one occasion, “We had to spend a few hours in a hotel sleeping and take the first flight of the morning. We got to the meeting two hours late,” he says, leaving their clients waiting.

“You can't play it too close,” Dr. Kodukula adds. “You must have a good manager to keep everyone coordinated and on track.”

#### “WE CAN'T GET ONLINE.”

This might be the digital age, but a lot of airlines, hotels and other facilities catering to business travelers don't seem to have gotten the memo. You know the

drill: The wireless network doesn't work, or you can't get decent reception on your mobile phone.

"Unfortunately, many airports, airlines, hotels, conference centers, etc. have failed to realize that the Internet should now be considered a utility, no different than power, water, light or telephone," says Doc Dochtermann, PMI-SP, PMP, San Francisco, California, USA-based vice president of sales at Advisicon, a project and portfolio management consulting and training firm. If you fail to plan ahead, he warns, you may find yourself faced with a steep hotel or conference room connection fee.

However, with proper planning, project professionals can stay wired almost anywhere in the world. First, check air carriers to make sure they offer outlets in seats (some airlines, such as Air Canada, are now equipping international cabins with them), carry a small AC outlet expander, and consider a second mobile phone or SIM card for the country you're visiting. Oftentimes, this approach also taps into lower international dialing rates.

Likewise, consider buying a USB cellular data device from a local phone company and buying minutes as needed. You can add a portable router and create an instant Wi-Fi network for a hotel room or conference room. Some smartphones offer tethering with a PC and can serve as a Wi-Fi router.

Another option is to set up a VPN, or virtual private network, which can connect an organization's network to a remote laptop, for example, via the web.

**It never hurts to carry two phones and redundant cords, cables and devices, Dr. Kodukula advises.**

Make sure you have a copy of any presentation you have to give stored on a flash drive and in your email, Mr. Dochtermann adds. Some project managers snap PowerPoint screen shots and have those as backups as well.

"PCs rarely fail, but Internet access is highly unreliable," he says.

That being said, it never hurts to email all necessary items to a colleague who can

get the presentation running on another laptop in case your own computer does experience problems.

### "IT WAS SOMETHING I ATE."

Almost every traveler can share a story about ending up with some sort of gastrointestinal disorder.

For starters, it's paramount that every project team member gets the vaccinations required or recommended for the destination.

As a rule, avoid tap water. You should even use bottled water when brushing your teeth—and make sure the bottle has been sealed because some hotels have been caught refilling bottles. Be careful in areas with poor sanitation, and it might be wise to stay away from uncooked food—as tempting as that ceviche might look.

"One bad decision can wreck an entire project," points out Kasper Kokkonen, project manager at Pöyry Finland Oy, a consulting and engineering company focused on energy, infrastructure and the environment, in Vantaa, Finland. He once ate local delicacies in Brazil and wound up with a stomach infection that landed him in a Sao Paulo hospital for a week.

Ms. Jarosh carries energy bars in her bag. When the local food is questionable, they're a safe alternative, she says. She also carries packets of instant coffee to perk her up in the morning when there's none available and she has a meeting scheduled.

A strategic travel plan helps ensure a smooth journey for project teams. In fact, the travel itself can be treated as its own project.

**"The better prepared the group is, the greater the odds the trip and the project will be a success," says Dr. Kodukula.** PM



## > TIP

**Get your rest on the plane—and don't feel like you have to work, says Ashwin Amin, PMP, PgMP,** project and program manager for the IT outsourcing company Tech Mahindra in Pune, India.

"Working on the plane simply increases one's stress level. It's best to arrive as relaxed as possible," he says.

And once you're at the project site, don't overschedule meetings.