

Adapt Travel Policies for ‘Sharing Economy’ Users

By Jim Hutton 7/17/2015



Permissions

Uber, Airbnb, TaskRabbit—do any of these sound familiar? Chances are, even if you haven’t hailed a ride from Uber, Lyft or Curb, you’ve heard of these up-and-coming companies. Services like Uber and Airbnb are examples of the rapidly expanding “sharing economy,” a collaborative consumption model where peers share their resources and time. In cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York, there are more than 15,000 Uber drivers, responding to the growing demand for sharing economy services.

As the reach of the sharing economy widens, greater numbers of consumers will be utilizing these services—including those traveling for business. IBM, for example, recently reversed its ban on Uber after an employee-led online petition went viral within 24 hours.

When employees use services like Airbnb or Uber during a business trip, company risk may be far from their minds, but it is an issue their employers are thinking about. Who is responsible if an Uber driver isn’t trustworthy, or if there are issues with an Airbnb rental? Though rare, unsettling issues like sexual harassment exist, and there are more common issues like disappearing reservations and lost drivers to worry employers. Altogether, there are many risks to consider.

That’s why it’s imperative for employers to adapt their policies to account for these services. Companies like Uber do their best to screen employees, but with a peer-to-peer model, incidents will continue to fall through the cracks. And, it’s an employer’s duty of care to ensure employee safety during business travel.

Why Do Employees Use Sharing Economy Services?

Before changing any policies, companies should understand why their employees are using sharing economy services. If a company puts pressure on its employees to reduce business travel costs, it shouldn’t be a surprise when an employee chooses to stay in a studio Airbnb apartment instead of a conventional hotel chain. Conversely, some companies encourage sharing economy use, whether it be for meetings or as an alternative to hotels.

On the flip side, if employees are using sharing economy services because it’s easier and more convenient than conventional methods, the company’s policy should consider this when determining how, when and if sharing economy use is appropriate. With Airbnb setting its sights on the corporate market, increased business travel use is likely to follow.

Have a Plan in Place

Regardless of motivations, companies should have a policy for employees who choose to use sharing economy services. Safety precautions should be communicated to employees before they begin traveling, and should be reviewed as necessary. While so much of safety is common sense, a company policy reinforces how vital safety is, and protects both the employee and the company.

Five years ago, taxis ruled the transportation world. Now, it's Uber. Five years from now, there may be a whole host of new sharing economy services. By making a commitment to review business travel practices annually or even biannually, companies can ensure their policies adapt to the current landscape rather than becoming irrelevant or obsolete.

Best Practices

While every company is different, we recommend integrating these sharing economy safety guidelines into your current travel policy:

- Make sure it's legal. When using a service like Airbnb, keeping rules and regulations top of mind can help avoid potential headaches later on. Check local laws and regulations surrounding sharing economy services—for example, in many cities it's illegal to have paying guests for less than 30 days; unless, of course, the property is a licensed hotel, bed-and-breakfast or other similar business.
- Read the listings carefully. When using these services, it's important to check the fine print. Does an apartment only allow a certain number of guests? Or, a listing may have great amenities, but is located in an unsafe area. When participating in a sharing economy service, it is even more important to perform due diligence before booking.
- Safety first. If using a new service, be sure there are reputable reviews and recommendations. When employees use a service like Uber or Lyft, they should be sure to remain alert at all times, checking that the name, photo and license plate on the app matches the driver who picks them up. Employees can also check in with a co-worker or manager when taking Uber at night, using the "Share my ETA" option the app offers.
- Have a backup plan. If anything goes wrong, there should always be a backup plan, whether it's a small issue like a ride not arriving, or a larger issue like an unsafe apartment. Employees should be prepped on company safeguards and third-party emergency resources, and always have a reputable taxi or hotel in mind just in case.

With a proactive plan and safety measures in place, both employees and their companies can safely and easily take advantage of the sharing economy.

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