The Company Dime

Corporate Travel Services Adopt Vaccination Status, Trends As Inputs

By Jay Campbell • August 2, 2021

The unvaccinated are getting and spreading the virus, and organizations are beginning to take a harder line despite the associated controversy and politics. Travel for work "generally" will not be available to unvaccinated federal employees, President Joe Biden said Thursday. On Friday, Walmart announced that home office employees and managers who travel within the United States must get shots by early October. Delta, Disney, Facebook, Google, Uber and United are among the others to recently announce new immunization requirements for parts of their workforces.

"Every federal government employee will be asked to attest to their vaccination status," said Biden. "Anyone who does not attest or is not vaccinated will be required to mask no matter where they work; test one or two times a week to see if they have acquired Covid; socially distance; and generally will not be allowed to travel for work." Biden said he would direct the administration to advance similar requirements for all federal contractors and urged business groups like chambers of commerce and The Business Roundtable to get on board.

Corporate travel professionals anticipated this day.

According to a July GBTA survey of about 600 supplier and buyer members, 55 percent said their companies would not require employees to receive a vaccine before traveling, while 18 percent said they would. [Four in five GBTA members polled said they were fully vaccinated; 8 percent were partially vaccinated and 5 percent indicated they preferred not to answer.] More than half of 700 travel managers surveyed by Wakefield for SAP Concur in April and May indicated they expected their companies during the subsequent year to require employees to be vaccinated before traveling.

In the weeks since these polls went out, the delta variant of Covid-19 has exploited uneven vaccine adoption, according to health experts, making it more challenging to monitor local and regional risks. Companies that want to travel will rely even more than before on intelligence and updates about outbreaks, regulatory changes, documentation, and masking and distancing practices — but they also may be more likely to hold back on trips.

Walmart reiterated a policy that allows business travel to stores, distribution centers and fulfillment facilities. "Business travel should be limited to business-critical travel only," the company announced Friday. "Please continue to look for ways to participate in supplier meetings, conferences, etc., virtually."

A traveler's vaccination status changes their

risk profile and the info they need to know before the trip and en-route.

In July, SAP Concur's TripIt itinerary management app announced it added within its travel guidance feature country-level information on vaccination rates and requirements, approved vaccines and exemptions for vaccinated travelers. CWT in June announced that its Covid-related search platform could filter guidance based on vaccination status.

Image: Scott Eisen/CVS Health

"While they have yet to become a mandatory condition of travel, a traveler's vaccination status is increasingly being used to determine which travel restrictions they are subject to and which services and amenities they can access at their destination," according to BCD Travel, which on Monday published a guide to vaccinations and travel restrictions around the world.

"You will need to establish the minimum criteria an employee must fulfill in order to be able to travel," Amadeus wrote in a corporate travel toolkit published last month. "This will depend country by country, but will almost certainly include the traveler's vaccination status (keeping in mind this is personal choice) and current health (e.g., tested as Covid-free)."

Travelers can store such status in their profiles.

"We're seeing more people entering health information in our secure profile system — whether they're vaccinated or not, which one they got, whether they have had one shot or two, the pending second shot date," said ATG Business Travel Management CEO Tammy Krings during a July 22 phone interview. "This is in multiple countries. It helps our team to know the restrictions that relate to them, whether they need to quarantine or not, and could result in them having a more comfortable experience."

Emphasis on could.

"Proof of vaccination is all over the map right now," said Sherpa CEO Max Tremaine during a Rocketrip webinar last week. "We're tracking that and trying to figure out how to provide advisories for destinations based on what we see from people on the ground having issues at airports. It's one of the reasons that even though lots of countries are opening up to vaccinated travelers, demand has not bounced back because you do see stories of people having issues with providing proof of vaccination in the airport of the country they're traveling to."

Providers across the board are attempting to use data to build confidence among business travelers, but it's complicated.

Mark Radford, founding CEO of GoPass Global, was expecting continued Covid flare-ups when his company launched at the start of this year. "But also," he said during a late June phone interview, "what we're seeing is some of the countries [such as] Singapore are saying, 'This is the new normal. We know vaccines aren't the silver bullet that we thought, and we can't just be sitting around waiting for something to

happen. So we're going to push forward with travel, and kind of deal with it.' It's a lot more dynamic than it was before, when the waves were coming through consistently."

Singapore-based GoPass "distills all the risk factors relevant to a flight itinerary from 35 global data sources, in near real-time, including headline destination safety factors such as vaccination rates, border restrictions, quarantine requirements and safety protocols," according to a July announcement. "It also identifies the risks associated with the trip routing, transit points, airports, airlines, aircraft type and even the choice of seat, and provides travel planners with a quantifiable risk score for each itinerary." The company is now a Sabre development partner and works with U.K.-based agency automation provider Agentivity. Last month, it announced adoption by agency networks First Travel Group, Hickory Global Partners and Lufthansa City Center.

Radford said he would like to take the data further, offering risk scores that incorporate both the traveler's health profile and conditions on the road. But "factorizing vaccination," is problematic because there is not "one version" of Covid-19, he said.

"You've got two aspects," said Radford. "What's the herd immunity within a country that makes that country safer in general terms to a visitor? And then, if I am vaccinated, how does that influence my risk of exposure, or am I just as capable to catch Covid and it's just that the symptoms are not as bad?' These are very hard pieces to put together in a reliable dataset."

Regulatory conditions also remain fast-changing. Sherpa is making an average of 55 changes per hour to its system.

Egencia is one of several travel companies using Sherpa via an API connection. "We felt that we are experts in travel but not in keeping everyone up to speed on Covid," said Sara Martinez, an Egencia manager and global platform solutions specialist speaking during a webinar co-hosted last week by GBTA's Arizona and San Diego chapters. "Custom messaging is key. A lot of clients are using that to guide essential travelers going back. We are seeing a lot of changes on the site every day based on the Covid situation."

Program managers can insert links to sites showing vaccine rates, like CDC's data tracker, said Martinez.

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Mark Radford, GoPass chief executive officer

Corporate Travel Management, which also works with Sherpa, "integrated an extra layer of travel intelligence" in its Lightning booking tool, said CTM director of business development Mark Schnabel during the same BTA event. "We have integrated border restrictions, visa information and safety restrictions directly into the flow."

He said CTM hadn't heard a lot of client demand for information on vaccine rates and so hadn't "yet" integrated it.