

International Meetings



BY CHRISTINA PAPPAS



Avoiding Risks Abroad

Planning an international meeting can be a rewarding but sometimes stressful experience, especially when you are working in an unfamiliar destination. Certain risks and challenges come with working in new territory. Knowing how to avoid key issues

abroad can save time and unnecessary headaches.

Language barriers. Even if you are dealing with your international counterpart in English, there is still room for **misinterpretation** that may prove to be disadvantageous. When negotiating pertinent aspects of a meeting, a single word can have different cultural interpretations, even in an English-speaking country. For example, in Scotland the word “cot” is the equivalent to our “crib.” If you’re trying to secure additional sleeping space in each room, requests for cots would not be a good idea unless they were for small children.

In order to avoid miscommunications, go over every aspect of the contract and clarify the details. It is always better to be over-prepared than to make assumptions about what you will be getting. Plan a face-to-face meeting to discuss details of the contract. This also will allow you to see firsthand what you are committing to.

Budgets. A well-planned budget is a key component of any successful meeting. More than likely, international meetings are going to be more expensive than meetings within the U.S., so be prepared for unanticipated costs! That means doing your research ahead

of time on all costs associated with every aspect of your event.

One of the more daunting aspects of planning is constantly fluctuating **exchange rates**. To help avoid the risk associated with these, ask your supplier to negotiate in guaranteed U.S. dollar rates, or fix an exchange rate at the beginning of negotiations. While this doesn’t guarantee the lowest possible cost, it will solve the issue of trying to figure out the actual cost of the meeting, given fluctuating rates.

If you can’t get this guarantee, or if you are seeking to limit costs, you will need to monitor exchange rates daily. Sign your contracts when rates appear to be at a low point. Sites like oanda.com can give you long-term rate estimates. These rates are just predictions, however, so consider giving yourself a 5 to 10 percent buffer to avoid any unexpected variances.

Also, keep in mind the **slight differences in the way countries do business**. For example, conference fees in Europe are calculated on a per-person, per-day basis. This can include everything from chairs to bottled water and pencils. Be aware that if you ask for any extras, there may be an additional cost associated.

Planning for increased **shipping costs** is a necessary step, as well. Get cost and delivery estimates on packages you’re sending ahead of time. Remember that anything shipped has to

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The Sickness Surprise

Getting sick is never a welcome surprise, especially when you are traveling and preparing to manage a meeting. Adopt these best practices:

- Check health insurance coverage with your carrier, and specifically identify whether or not you are covered while traveling abroad. If not, you may want to consider purchasing a short-term health insurance policy.
- Keep your health insurance identification card and a claim form with you while abroad. Also, be sure the information page of your passport is completed. This will provide the name, address and telephone number of someone to contact in case of an emergency.
- Don’t forget to pack medications you take in their original, clearly labeled containers.
- If you need to find a doctor while traveling, the U.S. Department of State website provides names of local doctors and hospitals. For major emergencies, U.S. companies like On Call International Travel Assistance offer emergency travel assistance when you need it most.
- Pass all this information to your attendees. Helping everyone at the meeting be prepared is the best way to make your event run smoothly.

— Christina Pappas



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Next-generation Learning

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generations will be able to create their own curriculum and personalize their degrees to their hearts' content without ever setting foot in a traditional classroom. (Don't worry, face-to-face learning — just like face-to-face meetings — will not become extinct. But the landscape will shift dramatically.)

The classroom, too, is getting a makeover. As learning becomes more decentralized and technology-based, the environment is morphing into small work groups. This is much like new office designs, where technology is integrated seamlessly into the room and furniture. There is no more "front" of the room. Every space is a potential workspace — everyone a teacher, everyone a learner.

New competencies will replace older ones. Networking, leadership skills, digital literacy, presentation skills and, most importantly, collaboration will become the currency of the new workplace, replacing today's KSAs. In this economy, knowledge will truly equal power, and only the smart will survive.

What can industry organizations do to lay the groundwork for next generation learning?

■ **Build an actual curriculum around the basics of meeting professionalism.** Use the industry standards or come up with something better, but stop doing these blind calls-for-presentations. Your customers need courses and sessions that align with clearly defined curriculum paths. No more of this jumping around to multiple sessions and speakers to piece together what they need to know to be more successful.

■ **Once you've determined your critical KSAs, develop your courses, sessions and webinars using sound instructional design principles — or hire experts.** You wouldn't hire a non-meeting professional to run your meeting or event, so why are you allowing non-professionals to develop your education? That's one reason your efforts don't result in much actual performance improvement. Learning professionals know how to design learning programs that impact performance.

■ **Be aggressive about introducing tomorrow's competencies into your curriculum.** Networking, leadership skills, digital literacy, presentation skills and, most importantly, collaboration — these are what will distinguish between

successful and not-so-successful professionals in the near future.

■ **Don't become enamored with technology.** It's important enough to repeat again and again: Technology is just a tool — a means to an end, not an end in itself. Without quality content, technology is simply an empty promise.

■ **Develop train-the-trainer programs or — even better — facilitator programs** to teach others how to deliver educational content effectively. Nearly anyone can learn a new skill. But right now, there's too much variability in this area, and your audience is suffering because of it. Just like designing learning, delivering learning is best left to the professionals. Don't trust your quality education program to a novice. Set a standard.

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The bottom line is that your educational programs should be focused on helping people perform better — not simply learning for learning's sake. Most industry learning programs are focused on delivering known skills to solve known problems. Next-generation learning must focus on developing new skills to solve unknown problems. ■

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go through customs, so make sure you fill out the proper paperwork and give enough time for your items to arrive, in case they get stuck in customs for a few days.

Safety. Insuring your attendees' safety is crucial to holding a successful international meeting. Many attendees will be unfamiliar with both the location and the language, making some uncomfortable. Providing **transporta-**

tion to and from the hotel, meeting and special event sites is one way to make them more comfortable about traveling in a new place.

If your attendees choose to go out on their own, providing them with a map and pointing out popular routes throughout the city is another way to help them feel more at ease. Remind them not to wear their conference badges when traveling around town, as

it can draw attention to the fact they are not locals.

Additionally, caution them to stay alert about their surroundings. Being aware of people around you is key to safety when traveling in a new place. Also, tell them to keep passports and important documents in a safe place. A stolen or lost passport can add a lot of unnecessary stress to what otherwise might be a great meeting! ■