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Five things to consider when consolidating your travel program

In the [first segment](#) of this two-part series, we covered what consolidation means in the context of managed business travel. I also outlined some key benefits of taking a consolidated approach, which is why it's widely considered a best practice for corporate travel programs.

Still, I like to think of consolidation as a journey rather than a destination. It requires planning and preparation, as well as some fine-tuning along the way.

As you start to lay the groundwork for consolidating your program, here are some important factors to consider:

1. Balance standardization and localization

An important part of consolidating a travel program is to standardize processes and policies across different geographies, as it makes the program more efficient. But while having a globally consistent approach has many advantages, ignoring market-specific nuances can be a big mistake.

For example, having an integrated visa offering may not be a priority for employees in Singapore, but it would be a key priority for local employees in India as they require visas for most of their international travel. Similarly, having a standard tax reclaim process will not work across offices due to different regulations.

Striking the right balance between standardization and localization is key, especially in a region as varied as Asia Pacific.

2. Understand cultural differences

Related to the previous point, you also need to factor in cultural differences – both organizational culture, as well as the diversity in markets.

Corporate culture – which impacts employees' expectations and behaviour – can vary widely between companies, and so an approach that works for one organization may not work for another. For example, trying to enforce stringent pre-trip approval processes in an organization where employees are generally given a lot of autonomy and freedom to take decisions probably won't be well received.

Similarly, practices that are successful in one country may not translate well somewhere else. In some countries, travelers are very comfortable using self-servicing tools, while in others there is a greater expectation for high-touch service.

These cultural differences will impact how much of a change you can make and how quickly you can implement it. Take inspiration from previous large-scale projects that involved a global effort in your organization, such as the transition to enterprise resource planning (ERP) software or expense partner changes. Be patient and work on charting out the stages of transition depending on each location's ability and speed to adapt, while being sensitive to the cultural and local norms along the way.

3. Get organizational buy-in

Travel is inherently emotional and personal, so having support across the organization is vital to the program's success. It's not just buy-in from the C-suite that is important, but also from other stakeholders like finance, risk management, legal and compliance, HR, administrative assistants and/or travel arrangers, and of course the travelers themselves. Equally important is having an efficient mechanism to collect and action on feedback.

As countries continue to grapple with controlling spread of the virus, in many ways the travel experience will probably be less seamless than it was before the pandemic – at least until a vaccine becomes widely available or a treatment is developed. This makes it more important than ever for companies to focus on the wellbeing of their traveling employees and find opportunities to simplify the travel experience where possible.

4. Review your technological capabilities

In some countries, online booking tools may not be common, and the types of services provided typically comprise traditional booking methods with high-touch service. Different countries may also have their own preferred global distribution systems, and are subject to differing airline rules, regulatory limitations and fare filing mechanisms. Employee preferences also play a big role – in China for example, employees prefer using mobile devices to complete their tasks while those in Japan prefer using their desktops.

Gain an understanding of where the levels of technology are in each of your markets. Find out how many systems or programs are being used to ensure the smooth operations of each market, and then work out the process of aligning these technologies across all your locations, so you can improve the overall workflow and easily retrieve information from a central system. Most importantly, remember to ensure that robust data protection measures are put in place to keep all your information secure.

5. Visualize and align on what success looks like

Having a clear and aligned view of success will help you prioritize the non-negotiables and keep you focused. Develop a clear timeline and have a list of short- and long-term KPIs to keep you on track.

Discuss with your major stakeholders and develop a list of requirements when consolidating your travel program, such as duty of care, employee wellbeing, cost savings, policy compliance and sustainability.

There's no doubt that consolidating a travel program can be a complex endeavor, and perhaps the biggest mistake I've seen companies make is to underestimate the preparation that's required. If you do your research, gain deep insights into your organization, and work with an experienced partner who can help you draw up a roadmap and guide you on how to implement these changes, you will set yourself up for success – and the results will be

worth it. You will create a better travel experience for your employees while simultaneously improving efficiencies and saving money.

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