SATSA checklist for travel businesses

There is a lot of uncertainty at the moment with regards to the COVID-19 pandemic – no more so than when it comes to travel and tourism. This is an unprecedented event that has left the travel industry, as a whole, reeling. The business and operations problems that COVID-19 and South Africa's recently announced containment measures have triggered are frightening and complex to many in the industry.

In helping you to remain in control during this time of crisis, here are measures you should have in place to, first and foremost, protect your staff and guests, as well as safeguard your business to the best of your abilities in what are challenging times.

1. Ensure that you are sourcing your information from reputable, confirmed sources

Any decisions you make need to be based on the most up-to-date, accurate information.

Reliable sources of information include the World Health Organization (WHO), Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Keep current with what's happening in South Africa, by following the **South African government COVID-19 service**, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD), the Association of Southern African Travel Agents (ASATA) and of course our SATSA coronavirus page.

To receive updates to your phone, WhatsApp HI to 0600 123 456, the SA government's official COVID-19 support service.

More than ever, it is important to remain calm and not give credence to fake news, unverified information or social media stories that may lead to unnecessary panic. Be sure that your staff and any guests know where to find accurate information.

2. Assemble a small, senior team to manage the crisis and make decisions

You may need to make some difficult decisions, quickly in the following days and weeks. Assemble a team of senior employees who you trust to help you navigate through this time of crisis. This will help to ensure that you are not bogged down by internal bureaucracy. Together with the top decision-maker in your organisation (e.g. the CEO), this team should comprise a broad scope of abilities and expert knowledge, with specialists in the following areas :

- Products or service
- Customers
- Operations
- Technology
- Finances
- Legal

If your organisation does not have in-house specialists in one of these areas, make sure that you have access to external advice.

3. Conduct scenario planning

As a team, you need to consider and analyse different scenarios of how the next weeks and, possibly months, could play out.

McKinsey & Company have proposed two scenarios: **delayed recovery** and **prolonged contraction**, and outline what each means in terms of epidemiology and economic impact.

Consider what each scenario means for your business in terms of finances, customers, products and services, sales, marketing, your workforce, your infrastructure and your supply chain. To the best of your ability, considering the many unknowns at the moment, create short- and long-term action plans that address each of these areas.

4. Identify critical staff members

This is very difficult, but as a team, based on the current state of your business and the scenarios above, you will need to identify who your critical staff members are. This will help you in planning for both the long and short term, including proposals such as reduced working hours, salary cuts, unpaid leaves of absence, and finally, possible restructuring and retrenchments.

SolomonHolmes Attorneys, specialist employment law advisors, has compiled a guide to assist employers in maintaining functional and safe working environments during the current pandemic and also some guidelines on planning for the future. You can download this guide here.

5. Identify critical capital inputs

Identify what tools and resources your employees need to carry on working to the best of their ability. Is there certain equipment, software, hardware, infrastructure, or inventory that your business can't do without? If it is possible for your staff to work remotely, this may entail laptops or Wi-Fi access.

6. Prepare for a possible transition to remote work

If moving your team to remote work is an option available to your business, you need to be prepared for this transition. It can be a challenge to keep up efficiency, motivation, and a sense of team – especially during an already uncertain time for the industry. There is a specific methodology – that includes intentional planning, discipline, and self awareness – for how to best introduce remote working to your team. This methodology, plus several tips and tools for achieving success with your remote team, will be offered next week in a webinar hosted by SATSA, together with an expert consultant on the topic. More details and a link for subscription will be made available to all members in due course.

7. Identify critical service partners

Identify who your essential service partners are and evaluate their capabilities to keep your business up and running. This could be network service providers, technology companies in the travel sphere (GDS, data companies), external communications and marketing, etc.

By identifying what is critical, you have already identified what is not. This will help you to prioritise going forward.

8. Train your staff about coronavirus

Travel and tourism staff should receive training on how to identify the symptoms of COVID-19, what to do if there is a suspected case on the property and what daily measures to employ to prevent the spread of viruses in general. WHO has several resources available on how to protect yourself, including a guide on Getting your workplace ready for COVID-19.

9. Prepare internal communications for staff

You don't have all the answers at this time – that's ok. Just be sure to keep your staff updated with what you do know and what measures you're taking. Your staff will appreciate the transparency. Reassure them that you're doing everything you can as a business at the moment, but don't make promises you're unsure that you can keep.

All of this should be formally communicated to staff, along with updates from reliable sources and best practices for hygiene and guest engagement. Arm your staff with information to help combat the fear and anxiety they are surely feeling.

10. Prepare communications for guests or clients

As with your staff, your guests or clients, current or prospective, need to know what is going on. Prepare communications that provide reliable, relevant information and any reassurance you can give at the moment. Again, it is critical that any information you give is verified. Rather than provide answers that may not be true, it is better to tell guests that you don't have the answers to their questions at the moment, that you're working to find the answers, and you will communicate as soon as you have more clarity. Be sure to strike an empathetic tone – this is a difficult time for all.

11. Create your healthcare call list

The NICD and many healthcare facilities at the moment are being inundated with queries. Try not to add undue strain to the health system, which will need all its resources and phone lines free to deal with the current caseload.

That said, be sure to have the numbers of your local healthcare facility (if there is more than one in your area, have a list of a few) and the NICD hotline number 080 002 9999 readily on-hand. If you have a suspected case (someone showing symptoms), do not hesitate to phone and seek advice on what to do and where to go to get tested.

12. Prepare a holding statement for the first case

Hopefully, this is something you never have to use. Nonetheless, you should be prepared with a holding statement for the possibility of your first case of COVID-19 amongst staff or guests. As with your previous

communications to staff and guests, stick to the facts, empathise with those affected, and outline what steps you are taking as a company, based on the recommendations from WHO, NICD and local health authorities.

13. Act together, act now, act decisively

Many businesses and people will not have a choice but to face the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. And it is undoubtedly a frightening time for many. Face this fear by sourcing accurate information, doing what you can to prepare, and remaining calm. It's more important than ever for the travel industry as a whole to come together and work as a united front.

Best said by President Cyril Ramaphosa in his address to the nation on Sunday, 15 March 2020:

"This epidemic will pass.

But it is up to us to determine how long it will last, how damaging it will be, and how long it will take our economy and our country to recover.

It is true that we are facing a grave emergency.

But if we act together, if we act now, and if we act decisively, we will overcome it."

SATSA is updating its Coronavirus Microsite throughout the day using official and credible sources. WHO updates, informative news articles and other important information is posted continuously.