

Crew travel and data protection

For crew travel it's all about data – and sometimes with contradictory requirements, as **Felicity Landon** found out when talking to **Ed Berrevoets**, managing director of the International Maritime Travel Group.



Ed Berrevoets, md IMTG

Not so long ago, clients would email photocopies of seafarers' passports to travel companies. If that happened now, the system of crew travel agent VCK for one would simply reject the email. Complying with the new GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) is all about training your staff – and also your customers, says managing director Ed Berrevoets. And it has required a vast amount of work.

'We have a data privacy officer. It has taken us two years to get to ISO 27001 (the Information Security Management standard) certification for VCK Travel,' he says. 'We believe that the data we have – and we do have an extreme amount of data – should be very carefully dealt with.' VCK Travel is one of the leading members and the major shareholder of the International Maritime Travel Group (IMTG), where other members are following the same route and sharing lessons learned, he adds.

Crew travel data includes all the personal details that one would expect for itinerary planning. With 'all the data breaches and hacks you read about,' says Berrevoets, 'we would welcome the day that we would not actually have to have that information – and that is our philosophy, we want to have as little information as needed to do our job, to minimise the risk.'

'People used to send us photocopies of their passport – especially seafarers from various countries to make sure we spelt their names correctly. That is something that we have now forbidden. It is a very simple example.'

IMTG's process agreement documents specifically describe what kind of information it requires in order to make a reservation, where that information will be sent and what is being done with it, he says. However, the same obligation must be required from suppliers if it is to mean anything.

'It is hard to comply with,' he says. 'Imagine a small hotel in the middle of nowhere and you confront them with 'I would like to make a reservation but need you to sign this processing agreement' – they probably don't know what you are talking about and we might end up not using them.'

The most important priority, says Berrevoets, is breaking people's habits and getting them to understand that they can't just go on doing things the way they always have.

While GDPR compliance is tough, he says IMTG members have an advantage over very large crew travel operators. 'Global players take care of reservations on a global scale. Being a smaller company may seem a disadvantage but at the moment it is not because we are faster, and our solution is as

a member of the IMTG, working with other independently owned companies.'

One trend that has a potential impact on all travel companies is the shift by airlines towards NDC (New Distribution Capability), which enables individuals to bypass the GDS (General Distribution System) used by travel companies and organisations, to book direct with the airline. British Airways adopted NDC in October and KLM started to implement it in April this year.

This move is like 'going back to no transparency at all', says Berrevoets. 'Travel companies have a total overview of the content. If, as an individual, you call BA, you get an overview of what they offer – but if Virgin was flying to the same destination, BA would probably not tell you that.'

It's also well known, he says, that an individual looking up flights with a company is being tracked – if they return two days later, the system recognises them and can push up the prices. 'That is the kind of thing that companies like us are able to prevent.'

'There is a general belief that middle men can be done away with, regardless of the industry you are active in. It is important for us to demonstrate to our customers the value that we bring – including 24/7 support, duty of care, emergency assistance and procurement. Clients often think they can 'do it themselves' – but many clients have come back to us, having had their fingers burned.'

Many clients, meanwhile, are looking for closer connections, he adds. 'It is a major change, and it is increasing fast. Companies want to connect our system to their crew planning system. That requires a high level of trust – but it is possible even to connect to each other's systems without actually having their data.' ●