The Diary of a Covid-19 Safety Supervisor

Introduction

Covid-19 has had a devastating impact on television productions and still presents major challenges for safe operations and successful business. At the height of the pandemic, worldwide television and film production experienced a near total cessation of activity. In March, The Guardian predicted that 170,000 film and television professionals would be out of work as a result of the pandemic. Some shows and films are back in production and media workers are now having to navigate how to keep people safe and how to manage any covid infections. Doing all this in the UK is daunting enough, but try doing this abroad.

Joel Whittaker, Head of Security at ITN, recently returned from a 10-day production in Europe, where he was acting as a Covid-19 safety supervisor. He found that all involved, from the crew, to the production management to the commissioner are raring to get things going again, but extremely cautious about any risk.

Here are some key considerations that may help anyone embarking on a production.

Planning and Preparation

- **Pre-travel risk assessment and brief**
  As with all major projects a comprehensive risk assessment should be the starting point. All risks should be assessed, not just the issues to do with Covid-19. Prior to departure, all involved should have oversight of the assessment and specific risks discussed. This will avoid any unexpected surprises down the line.

- **Understand the ground truth**
  Hospitals, clinics and pharmacies may be closed, or operating a reduced service; and medical stocks in-country may be low so ensure you are self sufficient, especially with prescription drugs. So treat foreign locations as if you are working in a remote or fragile environment and fully research what is accessible or not.

  If you test positive in-country or the country you are in implements new movement restrictions, you may be there longer than expected, so pack enough medication to last you at least double your intended time and have a self isolation plan.

  Medical evacuations are now possible for Covid-19 cases, but these remain incredibly complicated. So talking this through in detail with the medical provider is a must as is making sure everyone is comfortable with this new complexity.

- **Pre-travel health clearance**
  It is crucial to avoid any unnecessary medical emergencies in the field. All crew should have comprehensive health checks before departure, including vaccinations and, of course, a Covid-19 test.

- **Testing**
  There are commercially available tests which can be self-administered by the team before they depart, but investigate what the commercial testing facilities are in the

country you are going to visit. If your Covid-19 protocol states the whole production grinds to a halt if one person has symptoms then getting everyone tested quickly is clearly important. Check the availability, speed and accuracy of any private tests so that you know this contingency works well.

- **Flights**
A study indicates that a commercial airliner's ventilation system and HEPA filters make an airplane a safer environment than most private residences.

  However, you should still ensure physical distancing and mask wearing in the airport and throughout the flight. Quiz your airline on their Covid-19 protection measures; for example, spacing on the flight which could compromise distancing rules.

  Do not assume that the airline will seat you with adequate distance from others. All check in together and request to be spaced out. This is difficult to change once on the flight as changing seats is not easy.

  Distancing may not always be possible. Scenario plan this with the crew in advance to avoid anxiety and to be forewarned if someone will decide not to fly.

- **Itinerary**
From restrictions at hotels, to driving around, you will find most countries are operating at a reduced capacity, even in traditionally well administered regions. Inspect every element of your trip and phone ahead to confirm that what is advertised on the website is still fully operational and certain services, such as catering, is still being provided.

- **Equipment**
Ensure any day-to-day safety equipment is to hand at all times. For example, if you're on a flight and find yourself packed in, having FFP3 masks ready to give your team may avert a panic and stress. The same is true with alcohol hand sanitiser and cleansing wipes for equipment.

On Task

- **Culture**
Each country will have varying levels of diligence around Covid-19. Regardless if others are lax, do not let your guard drop. On the other hand, if the location you are visiting has more stringent rules than you are used to - make sure you comply to avoid upsetting your hosts.

- **Compliance**
I found that by explaining the risks Covid-19 posed to the success of the whole production, people were inclined to follow the rules closely. Maybe it was easier to imagine a Covid-19 outbreak closing down a production, rather than picturing one's own ill health, that made staff on set much more compliant.

- **Monitor changing risk**
It is important to keep across the ever changing Covid-19 risks in both the host country and also back home. Infection rates constantly fluctuate which can lead to a

changing of the rules for returning travelers. The crew look to you to understand the quarantine rules and keep them informed. The [FCO](#) is a good source of information, as is the [IATA Travel Centre](#).

The Return

- **Testing**
  If there is a requirement for testing at the end of the shoot, aim to do this in your home country. If one or more of the team tests positive and has to self- isolate, it will be far easier and kinder to manage this situation at home than in a distant hotel. That said, your airline may insist that all passengers on the return flight prove they are Covid free.

- **Mental health**
  Working in a Covid-19 environment adds extra strain to everyone so factor in lots of down time and also check in on people's mental health. Ask them how they are feeling and take your time to listen to their reply; their responses may include subtle hints about how they are really coping. It is a good idea to have an Employee Assistance Programme in place or specialist counselling service available.

The Future

Until vaccines are rolled out universally, the role of the Covid-19 supervisor is here to stay.

The longer we stay on a task the greater the risks because as humans we naturally look for the easiest options. Over time people can become complacent and could start to look at their team as a kind of Covid-19 secure bubble; symptoms of this include food sharing, close physical contact and lending personal items: something that humans have done for millennia.

A dedicated Covid-19 supervisor is there to prevent this happening and shutting down production. The good news is that it is pretty easy to get the training. I did a course with [Beyond Dispute](#), which I would recommend. [ScreenSkills](#) are also offering a basic awareness course that is good for all members of the production.