



Keeping Your Confidential Company Information Safe While You Travel

Those of us who travel a lot for business are familiar with this scene: you're in an airport or on a plane or train when you hear executive discussing company-sensitive information. If you're like me, you like to take what you hear and put as much of the puzzle together as you can. For example, their accent can tell you where they live, how they speak can tell you about their education; their jargon can tell you about their industry, and sometimes there's much more information.

The other day I was on a flight from Boston to Cleveland. Seated behind me was a VP of Sales who was having a loud and candid discussion on his phone about his new boss. He discussed the company's sales quotas, targets, and its successes and difficulties, and then began a critique of the new company President. Not stopping there, he mentioned the name of the previous President and his management style. If I was someone in his industry, a new prospect, or just the friend of the new President I would have gathered a great deal of confidential information about the company. Not to mention a negative impression of the management team.

A few weeks back I was headed from Boston to New York on the Acela Express. Not long into the trip the woman next to me powered up her laptop and started to work. Within 15 minutes she was on the phone, notepad out, and her screen filled with an HR review of an executive. She started discussing the compensation, benefits, and the attributes-some strong others not-of the executive on her screen. All of this was company-confidential information, but several people heard it all. Once she finished she started in on another person, and so it went for the entire ride. She had no idea who I was. What if I knew the person she was discussing? What if the information she was spewing was overheard by someone who knew the company and the people involved? Someone with a cell phone could have recorded the entire episode, and that could have meant a major lawsuit in the making.

Clearly these executives' actions could have harmed their respective companies, because they failed to consider their environments. With the advancements in telecommunications, wireless handheld devices, cloud-based applications, and databases, as well as the growing number of Wi-Fi hotspots, communications technology is ubiquitous. And there is the problem: our ability to record, to connect, to contact or be contacted by someone is almost unlimited.

With the freedom of communicating with virtually anyone at any time, coupled with devices that make it easy to work anywhere, confidentiality seems to have taken a back seat to convenience. But it shouldn't, of course. Because in today's fragile economy, where a competitive edge makes all the difference between success and failure, confidentiality must not be taken for granted. And that mentality starts at the top. It is one thing for a rookie sales manager to spout off about the latest deal. You know the type; they talk far too loud and have an air of self importance. It is another thing to have seasoned executives doing the same thing. If you don't believe me, next time you are on a flight or in transit listen to the conversations that take place and decide for yourself.

Why do some business people speak carelessly in public? In my opinion it's simple: executives and their employees have forgotten how to prioritize their work, are afraid of projecting an image that they are not accessible to clients or critical decision makers, and in the case of a bad role model at the top, they simply mimic their superiors. Some business folks are so insecure in their projected image that they risk the disclosure of confidential information rather than practice methods to safeguard it. In the end, their desire to maintain the impression that they are a "24/7" executive becomes more important than risking the disclosure of sensitive company or client information. The good news is that sloppy business practices such as open conversations or working on confidential documents in crowded public spaces is something that can be easily addressed.

In the final years of the Cold War when I was in military intelligence there were three simple rules that were drilled into me, and I use them still. Follow these common sense rules to keep your confidential information safe when you are out of the office or on the road:

- ✓ Know your environment
- ✓ Voices travel and people have eyes
- ✓ Keep your documents secured

Know your environment – As an executive recruiter the information I have regarding my clients and potential candidates is highly confidential. I will never work on this type of information while I am traveling. Whatever I need to have completed I finish before I leave for the airport or train station. For many executives they "bake in" the travel time as work time. That is fine as long as the information isn't confidential. However, many executives don't consider their environment before considering what projects need to be completed in transit. That brings us back to executives not correctly prioritizing their work. If the work is confidential it needs to be completed in a confidential area and not in a crowded public space. Just take the time to know what is confidential and what isn't and manage it appropriately.

Voices travel and people have eyes – This is straight forward. A good rule of thumb is if you can see or hear someone they can see and hear you. Remember acoustics are tricky and voices can be projected in the strangest ways. Also, when you have a laptop screen up the people behind you and to the sides have visual access to that screen as well. I know that we all get caught off-guard at times when something truly critical needs to be immediately addressed. Under those circumstances it is necessary to find the most secluded area available to make the call or get out a needed document. The key is in selecting an area with the lowest likelihood that a confidential call will be overheard or document seen. *Again, be aware of your environment.*

Last, always let the person on the other end of the phone or text message know that you are in a public space with limited ability to discuss the topic at hand. Most executives understand what that means and will act appropriately.

Keep your documents secured – In today's electronic age, where your documents tend to be in an electronic format, it is important to keep your devices secure. You need to have electronic failsafe measures. Think of the damage someone could cause if your Blackberry, Droid, iPhone, or laptop ended up in the wrong hands and wasn't locked. As a basic guard against lost information I program my devices to lock themselves if they are not being used inside of a five-minute window. If they are stolen or misplaced I am covered. Additionally, I can remotely wipe the device knowing I have backup files in a cloud environment. Recently we added further security by switching to secure USB flash drives to store our client and company information while traveling. As always, our emphasis is on protecting information and minimizing damage if something goes wrong.

TO SUM IT UP, safeguarding your material when you are traveling is easy, it just requires some common sense and a company culture that recognizes that travel time is not always the best work time. And a serious attitude about company confidentiality starts with the CEO. If the CEO is careless, then the management team will be careless. If the CEO safeguards confidential information then the management team likely will follow. If the company culture dictates working on the six-hour flight from Boston to San Francisco, then make sure the work isn't confidential. You can be just as busy without compromising company information. Like I said, it's just plain common sense.

So if you see me reading a book or watching a movie while traveling, it's only because my work is confidential and my transit time isn't.