



# CLOSE QUARTERS

**Bernardo Chernitzky** explains the benefits of utilising executive protection services for SME business travel

**F**or many businesses travel is central to the success and growth of their operation, be that as a way to meet clients, to negotiate with vendors or to expand into new markets. Of course, it also comes with a broad range of risks, both for those travelling to safer countries as well as comparatively more high-risk destinations. Yet, outside of major multinationals, government organisations and large NGOs, many business leaders routinely travel relying

purely on insurance policies to compensate them for difficulties after the fact, rather than trying to prevent them from happening in the first place.

One of the best ways that business leaders can take a more proactive approach to managing these risks is by utilising the expertise of an executive protection service. At present, far too many businesses view these services as unnecessary extravagances meant only for the ultra-rich, powerful and famous. In doing so they are not only going without one of the most effective

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routes to minimise physical danger to their person and their personnel, but also for ensuring that they are getting the most out of every mile they travel.

Having served on and trained the close protection details of prominent members of the Israeli political leadership, ranging from the Prime Minister to the IDF Chief of Staff, I have experience protecting dignitaries and VIPs in some of the highest-risk regions around the world. I also know that there are some common misconceptions about executive protection, and that many businesses are not aware of the business benefits that come from seeking advice from security professionals for your business' travel. As an industry, I believe it is important to demystify these services and explain precisely how the best in the business go about their trade.

Before we dive into the details of how executive protection can help mitigate the risks of travelling, it's worth taking time to articulate the reasons why these risks are well worth taking in the first place. International travel remains an essential part of doing business. The depth and quality of in-person insight, the speed with which you can make decisions, and the ease with which you can coordinate and collaborate are all compelling reasons to do business in person. It's also important from a team and culture-building perspective. Visiting different departments, sites or in-country operations is not simply a case of showing face, but a powerful way for senior business figures to engage with junior members of staff and gain a better understanding of the challenges they face day to day. Ultimately this makes for a more cohesive and effective organisation.

It's clear that businesses recognise these upsides, and not just major multinationals with pockets deep enough to pay for regular long-haul business class travel, bespoke risk assessments and in-house security teams, but also SMEs – who have to be thrifter and more strategic in how and when they travel. According to American Express Global Business Travel, SMEs' travel booking activity is recovering very strongly post-pandemic, reaching 80 percent of 2019 levels today as compared with 72 percent across all businesses. In fact, it says that much of the growing demand for air travel is being driven by SMEs.

With a growing number of firms seizing the opportunities presented by doing business abroad, it's worth asking whether they are as well equipped to manage the associated risks. Any SME executive or manager concerned with these risks should not overlook securing the advice of a security professional, with expertise in executive protection.

The ultimate objective of any executive protection adviser will always be to protect you from harm, but what's interesting is how exactly we go about this. Popular culture would have us believe that protecting your principal is purely a case of being physically intimidating enough to deter assaults, and providing a physical barrier between any threat, real or potential. According to this widely held view, protection agents are only there as a last resort. Certainly, having a large physical presence will lend you many advantages but it can only take you so far. The best executive protection services do their work largely in the background, heading off threats before they even have the chance to crystallise.

Bodyguarding is an entirely different service to executive protection. Rather, bodyguarding is just one of the tools that we use in executive or close protection to ensure safety. I would go as far to say that if your bodyguards are being called into action, it's a sign that something has gone wrong with your executive protection processes further up the chain.

A better way to conceptualise the role of the close protection officer is in terms of anticipation and prevention. Accompanying a principal generally only involves being in close proximity in the most extreme situations: a dense crowd, or while travelling together in a vehicle. In other situations, it is up to the close protection agent to act more strategically – conducting advance reconnaissance of the routes and sites to understand everything from traffic flows to the proximity of medical aid and drawing on local intelligence to help them anticipate threats and issues. Once on the ground, it then becomes a case of putting plans into practice.

## THE OBJECTIVE OF ANY EXECUTIVE PROTECTION ADVISER IS TO PROTECT YOU FROM HARM

Everything comes down to accurate assessment of risk; a far cry from the excitement we generally associate with bodyguard roles, but far more effective in practice. Not every businessperson needs a constant, rotating cover of close protection agents to keep them safe, and not every executive protection detail will be numerous and heavily armed. Analysis of all life-saving close protection interventions in defence of high-value persons over the last 100 years found that firearms were a decisive factor in just 4 percent of cases. Nevertheless, most statistics point to the fact that medical emergencies present one of the main dangers to any principal. On the vast majority of business trips the most consequential risk you will face is inevitably going to be road traffic accidents and having agents highly trained in emergency medicine is an invaluable asset.

Often, the best protection comes from discretion. I was once assigned a solo protection detail accompanying a high-ranking member of the Israeli military to South America. The principal was an active person who liked to go running in the mornings. However, we were also accompanied at all times by a squad of soldiers from the host country. Needless to say, this would have placed undesired attention on us moving through a heavily transited area in a foreign country with a high risk of opportunistic crime. Based on the knowledge I had from performing a site survey on the hotel and considering the close protection fundamentals, I decided to avoid coordinating this with our local support team. We moved down a back exit I had identified, and we were able to leave the hotel premises unnoticed, allowing us to complete the morning run and return undetected. Sometimes, discretion really is the better part of valour.

Even where plans or circumstances fail – as they always will in the field – it is not so much a case

of improvisation, as calling on another type of preparation: our training. In stressful and dangerous situations, a good close protection agent falls back on the muscle memory of best practice to react effectively and proportionately. This muscle memory is essential and can only be built up through many hard hours of training and real-world experience.

## MANY ARE NOT AWARE OF THE BENEFITS OF SEEKING ADVICE FROM SECURITY PROFESSIONALS

By anticipating dangers, and taking steps to head off risks, we can protect our charges and help their trip run smoothly. Indeed, this may need not even involve physically accompanying you on the trip. Depending on your risk profile and budget, executive protection can still offer you remote support, whether that be a rapid-reaction team on stand-by to guide you through any difficult situations or advance support with planning and guidance. We frequently conduct detailed mapping and analysis of routes and itineraries in advance and offer professional advice based on local sources and decades of military and security experience, which SME partners would otherwise struggle to access elsewhere. In fact, as maintaining our networks in high-risk areas around the world is part of our job description, business leaders find that executive protection services also come with access to a

valuable array of potential business connections that they can draw on.

Moreover, protection does not need to be a recurring service. In many cases, businesses will be regularly travelling to a limited number of specific destinations – an office or manufacturing site in another country or the site of a major client, partner, or project. Yet the knowledge and skills businesses gain from taking professional advice on how to conduct these journeys and visits, and the training they receive from working alongside us, can all be incorporated into the policies and practices of any organisation. This allows businesses to benefit from fundamental executive protection principals long into the future, even if a constant service is not the best fit for their needs.

Once we see past the misconceptions about close protection, we can see that there is clearly a lot of value for small businesses in seeking the advice of executive protection agents to advise on their company's travel arrangements. In fact, we should reframe the way we think about executive protection services and consider them as an extension of travel insurance – which all responsible businesses will have. Except, unlike insurance, which can only compensate you for setbacks after they occur, executive protection can eliminate many of these problems in the first place. Seeking professional advice from an executive protection specialist for your own travel arrangements is about far more than just giving you peace of mind. Rather, it is a worthwhile business measure that helps you and your team avoid obstacles, smooths bumps in the road, and sets you up to succeed in your business ventures ●

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