



International SOS, Workplace Options Fight Mental Health Stigma by Land, Sea, and Air Alliance Excellence Award Finalist Tackling COVID-19 in 2020

By Jon Lavietes

On the surface, the business case for the alliance between International SOS, a company that provides medical and security services to global organizations and employees in the corporate, nonprofit, government, oil and gas, maritime, aviation, education, and mining sectors, and Workplace Options, a company that similarly delivers mental and emotional well-being services globally, was fairly obvious when the two organizations were brought together in the middle of last decade by a broker who had worked with both organizations separately on behalf of clients. The latter complemented the former's offering—mental health is as important as any other medical area when it comes to people's overall well-being. Meanwhile, in International SOS, Workplace Options got access to a global salesforce and a large client base, as well as a chance to penetrate several new regions all over the world.

Indeed, since the formal launch of the alliance in 2017, the strategic fit has proven to be as snug in practice as it appeared on paper. The alliance's primary joint offering, the Enhanced Emotional Support Program, counts more than 1,100 subscriber companies—utilization of the program has grown 85 percent annually since its inception. International SOS and Workplace Options have collaborated on assistance cases in 100 different countries, and they now even have counselors and medical assistance personnel working side by side in co-located facilities in London and Dubai. Each organization has helped pad the other's individual customer base as well—the two companies have swapped more than 70 referrals with each other over the course of the last two and a half years.

What started as a pilot program for volunteers of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and university students studying abroad has been expanded into and sometimes tailored for other industries. Early in the partnership, Workplace Options' counseling and emotional readiness capabilities were integrated into International SOS's MedAire subsidiary, which provides specialized medical services that meet the unique needs of pilots, flight attendants, and other aviation crewmembers who may encounter cabin fires, planned emergency landings, evacuations, onboard deaths, assaults, and severe turbulence over the course of their careers. The two organizations also created Emotional Support for Seafarers, a similar service for those working at sea—workers on sea rigs in the middle of the ocean can be isolated from their friends, families, and regular lives for months at a time, thereby increasing their risk of depression, and even suicide, exponentially.

This early success in these specialized vertical markets emboldened the partners to expand their services to the rest of International SOS's client base. Today, whenever an incident arises that impacts the health or security of a group of International SOS members anywhere in the



world, the organizations work together to arrange access to counseling in person, over the phone, or via videoconference—the alliance can quickly establish a hotline to support a group of individuals, or even deploy a counselor on-site to deliver individual and group therapy sessions.

Preventing a Natural Disaster from Becoming an Emotional One

However, the alliance is more than just a bottom-line success. It has helped evacuate and treat employees who suffered injuries and the emotional trauma of losing their homes and possessions to Hurricane Dorian, the tropical storm that ravaged the Bahamas last summer. It sheltered employees from bombings, shootings, and other violence that erupted in Juba, the capital of South Sudan, for a week last July, evacuated them to safety, and provided intensive counseling in the aftermath to help those dealing with PTSD that resulted from the experience. This year, International SOS and Workplace Options are helping employees dealing with both physical and emotional suffering stemming from COVID-19.

More than that, the alliance has entered the front lines of a bigger metaphorical battle that is in many respects still in its infancy.

“Mental health has been stigmatized in many places around the world. We wanted to create that awareness and make it accessible to folks where it may not have been accessible,” said **Sally Wang**, group vice president of global partnerships and alliances at International SOS. “We have no issues seeking medical help when we need it, but mental support and emotional support is a very different thing. There’s a stigma in many countries.”

As a result of their joint efforts, the International SOS–Workplace Options alliance has been tabbed a finalist for a 2020 ASAP Alliance Excellence Award in the Corporate Social Responsibility category.

Cut from the Same Cloth, but in Need of a Common Language

When the two organizations were first introduced to each other, International SOS immediately went to work evaluating its potential partner.

“We assessed strategic, operational, and cultural fit at many levels,” said Wang. “We were cut from the same cloth.”

To get the alliance up and running, however, the two international-assistance outfits had to come up with a common language. In many instances, they used similar terms that meant different things to the respective companies. For example, International SOS called its call centers “Assistance Centers”; Workplace Options dubbed its counterparts “Service Centers.”



The teams created a definitive glossary to ensure common understanding of the terminology that would be used in the course of their tandem work.

The alliance team also planted some carrots to get the teams working together so that “one plus one equals three,” as the maxim so omnipresent in ASAP circles goes.

“We established an incentive scheme for collaboration, engagement, and referrals that took effort to get off the ground,” said Wang.

Arm in Arm and Side by Side

With the help of a relatively standard governance structure consisting of twice-a-year steering committee gatherings of senior leaders from both companies and regular touch-bases between equivalent sales and operations team members, as well as intense introductory trainings of sales and service reps on partner offerings, the two organizations were operating as one very quickly, a principle that takes on an even greater importance relative to other alliances, given the nature of this line of work.

“On the medical side, every day there are cases that involve both of our assistance centers all around the world,” said Wang. “The two companies have to work side by side with each other. In those cases where a counselor speaks to an [international SOS] member, they have to keep us updated. Is the member going to be psychologically fit for the evacuation? Can we get him home? There is a lot of coordination between the two [organizations].”

Wang cited referrals and prescriptions as examples of two areas where exceptionally close collaboration is paramount—International SOS’s doctors and Workplace Options psychologists must be in sync when the latter is recommended for joint patients.

The two companies are as tightly entwined in their collaborative selling efforts. Rigorous ongoing training of sales professionals from both organizations on the counterpart’s capabilities has successfully brought reps up to speed—they attend each other’s sales conferences in order to stay on top of the partner’s rapidly evolving offerings. Salespeople in Beijing sell together almost literally arm in arm in another co-located office. It also helps that there is virtually no overlap in their respective offerings, thus removing any potential competition-related complications from the equation.

“The direct collaboration between our sales teams is great, and our sales teams really help each other out,” said **Molly Walsh**, program manager for the strategic alliances and partnerships group at International SOS. “They are perfectly comfortable speaking to clients together where appropriate. Workplace Options is happy to join a call and speak eloquently [about how our services complement each other]. There is a lot of ongoing communication and education on



both ends. They get on a call and talk about what is involved in emotional support and how it fits into our offerings. They know International SOS offerings very well.”

Near-perfect matches in corporate cultures further facilitated synergy in conducting business together. It is the policy of both companies to address clients’ immediate needs before verifying account status and conducting other routine administrative particulars, a commonsense approach when you consider that many of these cases arise in the context of an emergency.

Adaptability Keeps Those Out of Their Depth from Drowning

As is the case with any alliance, ongoing evaluation of strategy, tactics, programs, and methods is key to this partnership’s success. Wang cited Workplace Options’ uncanny speed and adaptability in fine-tuning offerings as a principal factor in the rapid growth in joint clients. She noted that the aforementioned Emotional Support for Seafarers program was conceived because both organizations realized that sea captains were particularly out of their depth when it came to providing emotional support to crewmembers. The One Call Telehealth Counseling program, which gives any International SOS member immediate access to counseling in the moment on the very first call, was an outgrowth of the MedAire service.

Hotline Proves to Be Lifeline in COVID-19 Pandemic

This ability to innovate on a dime has come in handy as the coronavirus has overtaken the world. The partners have erected a COVID-19 hotline to help clients deal with the emotional toll the pandemic is taking on them—students in foreign exchange programs left stranded by shelter-in-place ordinances, laid-off employees in precarious financial situations, and emergency-room workers tending to COVID-19 patients day in and day out, for example.

“We had to think quick and work very cohesively, putting individual company interest aside,” said Wang. “We are looking for ways to help clients build their workforce resilience through engagement and empowerment, and help them emerge from the crisis. To be able to provide a lifeline, a helpline, a hotline that this person can speak to, and give tips and tools to manage the anxiety, and have a follow-up mechanism, that’s very powerful.”

As one would suspect, the coronavirus has forced both companies to tap all of their resources and capabilities. Consider the case of a longtime military veteran who contracted the virus while stationed in Africa. This person needed to be evacuated to another country to get specialized medical treatment, but an extended stay in an under-resourced medical containment facility, and the extra measures required to secure transit permits, retriggered PTSD from previous deployments. Fighting both extreme physical and emotional distress, this client—who came of age in an era and a macho workplace culture that discouraged addressing personal vulnerabilities—was having suicidal thoughts. In that seemingly endless period waiting for the



ambulance, Workplace Options counselors were able to ground the International SOS member emotionally in twice-a-day counseling sessions to the point where he could “go with the flow,” according to Walsh. The military officer was referred to a local psychologist who specializes in PTSD upon his return home.

What’s Good for the Client Is Good for the Partner

Clearly, this collaboration has plenty of work ahead both in the short and long terms. The two sides continue to periodically come together to evaluate potential new services and enhancements to joint offerings. But the two organizations aren’t just benefiting each other’s clients. After a successful implementation of its Awareness, Intervention, Resilience (AIR) program, which trains International SOS’s workers and clients in how to identify stress triggers and remediate potentially overwhelming situations, Workplace Options expanded the AIR offering to the rest of its client base. International SOS employees are utilizing Workplace Options services themselves. Given current conditions, many have been forced to remain in remote project sites for longer than they anticipated. International SOS has reciprocated, as it has become the go-to provider of medical and security services for Workplace Options employees and members.

In the meantime, International SOS is eager to help its ally eliminate cultural barriers to addressing and remedying mental and emotional health, and it is optimistic that the current pandemic will be a catalyst for this change.

“This has been buried for many, many years, especially in certain cultures. Hopefully with COVID, people are more open to discussing this because we are all in this together. It’s something we have in common to share our own stories, our own vulnerabilities, our own ways to go through this,” said Wang.

International SOS and Workplace Options continue to get members through tough times and remind them that triumph over adversity is a wonderful feeling.