



The Sharing Economy And Discrimination Concerns: What Can You Do?

Insights

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Recent studies have reported that race and gender disparities are not uncommon in the sharing economy. For example, it's been reported that some gig workers were discriminating against customers with names that "sounded Black." Women and workers of color are more likely to garner negative reviews from customers. And now, a recent study found that people with disabilities are more likely to be rejected through Airbnb than their comparators without disabilities. The study, conducted by Rutgers University, found that 75% of travelers who made no mention of a disability were granted pre-approval. For those who mentioned a disability, the pre-approval rate dropped from anywhere between 25% to 61% depending on the disability.

So what's going on? There are a couple of possible explanations. In many cases, the accommodation is a private residence, not subject to the requirements of the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or its state equivalents. Because a private residence is not subject to the ADA, the accommodation in question may not be accessible to someone in a wheelchair or with limited mobility, and the rejection might be a legitimate and permissible act.

Sometimes, however, the rejection may be a matter of illegal bias. Although Airbnb as an organization may not be biased, its design allows individual property-owners to act on their biases. Airbnb is certainly aware of the problem and has taken significant steps to curb the potential for bias, including introducing a non-discrimination policy in September 2016, and taking steps to better handle complaints of discrimination. Nevertheless, discrimination persists because bias continues to exist.

What does this mean to you if you are an employer? For corporate travel programs learning to embrace the sharing economy, it's important to keep potential discrimination issues in mind when developing travel policies. Although most workplaces don't require employees to use Uber, Lyft or Airbnb, any such policies should be examined to ensure that no employee is forced to use a service they believe subjects them to discrimination. If your workplace does require employees to use a sharing platform for corporate travel, it is important to have procedures in place so that employees can seek help addressing any discriminatory treatment and assistance remedying any such problems. Finally, corporate travel managers may want to do their own research to provide employees with options. The website for Accomable, for example, says it has over 1100 listings for accessible accommodations in over 60 countries.

Taking affirmative steps to address bias and discrimination will go a long way towards demonstrating to your workforce that you take their concerns seriously, and will ultimately lead to a more satisfied workforce (not to mention keeping you out of hot water as well).

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Danielle S. Urban, CIPP/E

Partner

303.218.3650

[Email](#)