

In for the long haul: the quest for more sustainable business travel

Covid-19 and COP26 are changing how and where we work. How can business leaders develop travel policies that pass muster environmentally?

Jonathan Weinberg

The spread of the omicron variant of Covid-19 has thrown commercial travel plans back into disarray, just as overseas business trips had become an option again for many people. For leadership teams, it's presenting deeper questions about the true benefits of racking up thousands of air miles.

With the recent reopening of air routes and the introduction of vaccine passports, many of us were getting back to some sort of normality. But the global movement of employees looks set to be restricted once more by border closures and strict quarantine rules. Before the pandemic, attending meetings, conferences and trade shows in another country was the norm. But, after nearly two years of restrictions, many firms are wondering whether such travel is beneficial, either environmentally or economically.

They are thinking about adopting more sustainable travel policies instead, influenced by COP26 and changing attitudes to greenhouse gas emissions, particularly among younger employees.

Based in Abingdon, Oxfordshire, Intralink is a consultancy that helps western firms to expand into Asia. Before the pandemic, its employees took a lot of flights on business. But, when it examined the Covid-enforced reductions in their mileage, it found that these had had no detrimental impact on the number of deals they'd made. In fact, the annual total has risen from 75 in 2019 to 166 over the past 12-month period, with the firm organising virtual roadshows and trade missions instead and using local proxies to represent clients at in-person events in Asia.

As well as the environmental benefits

this change has brought, Intralink's travel costs have been slashed, while employees no longer suffer from jet lag and can spend more time with their families, reports its CEO, Greg Sutch.

"You might expect us to be balancing these huge environmental benefits against a marked downturn in business, but that isn't the case," he says. "This is down to increased efficiencies and how the pandemic spurred Asian firms to embrace virtual communication."

Intralink will resume some business travel in future, Sutch adds, but more selectively "now that we know what we can achieve without it. I sincerely hope other firms do the same, for the good of the planet, as well as their bottom lines."

The results of a recent survey by Trainline Partner Solutions suggest a growing appetite for change. It found 75% of business travellers want to reduce their reliance on flying for work because of its environmental impact, while two-thirds expect their employer to make sustainable travel options available.

Moreover, 53% felt that firms were irresponsible before the pandemic based on their levels of unnecessary business travel, with 70% saying that those companies not offering sustainable travel options were setting a bad example for future generations. One-fifth of respondents aged 16 to 24 said they would consider leaving their firm if they disapproved of its travel policy.

As the co-founder and CEO of climate action platform Ecologi, Elliot Coad has seen his business grow by 650% over the past nine months, thanks primarily to a

greater desire among individuals and businesses to become climate positive. He believes that the travel restrictions have prompted firms to consider new approaches based on necessity, rather than "convenience and extravagance". Such restraint should be maintained if they are serious about being more environmentally responsible, he argues.

"Cutting out needless short-haul and internal flights while encouraging employees to use more efficient forms of transport instead is one way forward," Coad says. When combined with guidance on accessing the best virtual collaboration tools to minimise the need for face-to-face meetings, this "can help to reduce carbon emissions in line with what is needed to reach global net-zero targets".

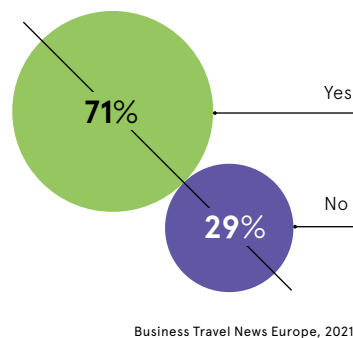
Business travel and commuting is included within the so-called scope three definition of carbon emissions, meaning those that come from a company's supply chain and customers. Experts suggest that a new sustainable outlook should include everything from hiring electric vehicles when abroad to 'workcations' that roll in leisure and holiday time. Embracing technologies such as virtual reality is also an option, with slower travel by train and sea other considerations.

Florian Hübner is co-founder and CEO of Uberall, a technology company specialising in the customer experience. He thinks that business travel must now be considered by boardrooms when they discuss corporate sustainability. For example, Uberall no longer requires every new recruit to visit its Berlin HQ.

"We've significantly decreased the amount of business travel we undertake, changing

BUSINESSES ARE WORRIED ABOUT THE CARBON FOOTPRINT OF TRAVEL

Percentage of commercial travel buyers who say they are concerned



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in-person employee inductions and customer meetings into remote ones," Hübner says. "We have even transformed our annual summer party into a 24-hour 'world tour', where we book venues in each city so that almost no one needs to fly."

He adds that, given that the company has hundreds of employees and seven offices worldwide, such adjustments make a notable difference to its carbon footprint.

Those servicing the business travel industry are also looking at more sustainable ways of working. Green Tourism, a membership body promoting sustainable travel, has introduced a 'Green Meetings' standard that enables venues to benchmark their performance against sustainability metrics.

Business accommodation specialist AltoVita, meanwhile, is developing a platform feature that shows which hospitality operators have implemented sustainability practices and/or gained sustainability certifications. This enables companies to choose accommodation that fits their values. Its co-founder and CEO, Vivi Cahyadi Himmel, expects to see fewer but more important business trips overall, with some lasting longer than usual, so that travellers can do more with the time while reducing the need for multiple flights back and forth.

Adam Kerr, founder and CEO of business travel platform Tripism, believes that firms need to look beyond "token gestures" to create sustainable business travel policies based on changing employees' attitudes. Giving travel teams a baseline of data showing the impacts made by what they book can create an "increased understanding" to support more sustainable choices.

"Through a collaborative effort", Kerr says, "the end users of business travel can demand more sustainable options and push for the corporate travel industry as a whole to become greener." ●

