

GLOBAL BUSINESS TRAVEL



On the road to wellbeing

Five steps to understanding and managing the impact of business travel on employees



Business travel has significant impacts on employee wellbeing. Combining HR data, such as job code or tenure, with travel data gives employers deep understanding of how travel impacts individuals. With this insight, they can identify travellers at risk of burnout and put in place targeted improvements in traveler experience. This capability will be critical to protecting employee wellbeing as business travel returns as the pandemic recedes. On the road to wellbeing sets out a five-step framework for greater visibility over traveler wellbeing, with advice on how travel managers can share valuable insights on employee wellbeing with peers across the organization.

Wellbeing as a strategic business issue

The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified the growing corporate focus on employee wellbeing. Over a very short period, organizations migrated many of their employees to remote working. To support these new homeworkers, they have introduced more flexible working patterns, mental health support services and employee assistance programs to help employees experiencing isolation, depression and other issues relating to the pandemic.¹

Employee wellbeing is on the business agenda. However, while many travel managers routinely talk with their stakeholders across the organization on topics such as policy, cost, and traveler service, only a minority engage stakeholders on the topic of employee wellbeing. And when wellbeing is on the agenda, discussions tend to be limited to the business trip itself – rather than considering the wider impact of the trip.

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Understanding how travel affects different individuals

Most employees have regarded traveling for work as an important and rewarding part of their job. Many believe travel is the best way to connect with customers: while the pandemic has seen many meetings move to virtual platforms, more than three quarters of regular business travelers would still prefer face-to-face meetings over online formats for sales and pitching.² Work travel allows employees to cement relationships, progress their careers or simply see more of the world.

However, travel and being away from home impact the traveler's wellbeing. Many of these impacts are positive: being trusted to represent your organization can boost self-esteem. Travel can contribute to achieving personal goals, as well

as corporate ones. Building relationships with colleagues and clients is both useful and satisfying. Most travel buyers believe good traveler experiences positively impact corporate retention and employee turnover.³

But frequent business travel can have negative impacts on employee wellbeing, ranging from tiredness and stress to loneliness and anxiety, as well as impacts on physical health. The extent to which they affect a traveler will depend on factors such as the individual's gender, whether they have responsibility for children and/or parents, and their age and experience. The table presents some of negative impacts reported by international business travelers.

How international business travel impacts travelers.⁴



Frequent traveler perspectives - the impact of the travel shutdown

"It's now 270 days since my last flight. I cannot remember a time when I didn't travel."

Vice President, technology company

"I miss traveling for work, but at the same time this has allowed me to spend more time with friends post lockdown and re-explore Singapore. I think those who travel a lot get into a routine. When you take something away, versus lessening it, the impact is felt a lot greater."

General Manager, logistics company



The return to travel and the impact on individuals

The arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, effectively shut down business travel. The return of travel, enabled by the distribution of effective vaccines, will add an extra dimension to the profile of impacts on individual employees.

For many employees, the resumption of travel will be welcome: they are ready to get back on the road once government restrictions, such as quarantines, are relaxed. GBT data from China shows business travel volumes rebounding to pre-Covid levels when domestic travel restrictions were rolled back.

The picture becomes more complicated at the level of the individual. An employee may have enjoyed the frequent traveler lifestyle, appreciated that

work travel benefits their career, and even resented the sudden travel shutdown. However, it cannot be assumed that this employee will welcome a return to their pre-Covid travel patterns. In fact, they may feel apprehensive about the prospect.

Everyone will have their own experience of the pandemic, the travel shutdown and their impact on his or her professional and personal lives. A simple thought experiment can provide insight into those experiences and suggest how they might shape attitudes about the resumption of frequent travel. The table on page 4 explores how an employee's attitudes to travel could shift through different stages of the shutdown.

How might employee sentiment shift during the travel shutdown?

1. The arrival of Covid-19

The immediate impacts of the pandemic were fear and uncertainty. With the effects of Covid-19 largely unknown, many employees will have been concerned about the safety of their families and friends, their colleagues and communities. Concerns about the pandemic's impact on businesses and the economy will have been a significant source of stress for many.

2. The travel shutdown

Almost overnight, the travel shutdown turned frequent travelers into remote workers. Instead of a life on the road, these employees now found themselves bound to a desk, sometimes in a dedicated home office but more often in a spare bedroom. This could be a double wrench: as well as having to forgo the functional benefits of travel, for many employees being a road warrior is part of their identity. Initially, many regard the shutdown as an unwelcome imposition on their working lifestyles.

3. Adjusting to homeworking

Working remotely requires employees to make adjustments, both practical and emotional. Replacing face-to-face meetings with virtual options is not ideal but allows them to maintain work relationships. Many employees will welcome the chance to step back from the rat race and enjoy a better diet, better sleep and more time with the family. But, cut off from colleagues and familiar work patterns, they may also experience feelings of isolation and anxiety.

4. Return to travel on the horizon

The rollout of effective vaccines makes the return of business travel a question of "when" not "if". Many employees will welcome the prospect and look forward to getting back on the road. But some will feel apprehensive. Over several months they adjusted to remote working and the shutdown will have provided an opportunity to reflect on the impact of frequent travel on their lives. The imminent return of travel will crystallize the issue for many who will be asking: do I really want to return to my pre-pandemic travel patterns?



Frequent traveler perspectives - adjusting to working at home

"The 'surrealism' of doing concalls in a shirt and pajama bottoms wore off after 2 weeks. Working from home doesn't allow separation between home/work life. It merges the two, whereas the office allows a psychological separation of work and normal life."

General Manager, logistics company

"I'm the fittest I've been in 15 years. I've had the ability to exercise regularly. I've lost kilos, I've been eating at regular times and doing less entertaining. Being able to spend more time with the family brought us closer - but I also enjoy time apart."

Vice President, technology company

"The adjustment was fairly easy, I already occasionally worked from home and had good facilities with a proper home office. This made a difference. But it wasn't the same for everyone and was challenging for some of the team."

Head of Travel, technology company

The thought experiment, opposite, focuses on the individual employee. But organizations will also have been making adjustments and considering what they will do when travel restarts. Greening travel remains a top priority for most organizations.⁵ To support sustainability objectives, many will be asking if they want travel to return to pre-pandemic levels. Other organizations may conclude that they need to do more travel than previously, for example to drive sales.

Frequent traveler perspectives - the return to travel

"I'd like to think - safety permitting - we'd go back fairly quickly to intra-Asia travel. I'd be happy to jump on a plane as soon as it's deemed safe."

General Manager, logistics company

"I'm excited... I want to get back in front of the customers before someone else does. People buy from people. But I will miss the simplicity of being at home. Routine exercise. I will miss my family too. Travel takes a chunk of time."

Vice President, technology company

Supporting travelers through to the return to travel

As travel returns, travel managers will need to consider how they can support the wellbeing of the returning travelers:

- In the pre-recovery period, when vaccines are beginning to be distributed but travel remains largely shut down, employees will start to think seriously about their future travel plans. Travel managers could survey employees to gauge travel sentiment and carry out an analysis around trip reason, type of trip (long / short haul), destinations, etc.
- As travel returns travel managers can help employees get to grips with any new conditions for travel such as the introduction of new policy rules.

Frequent traveler perspectives - future travel lifestyle

"I want to be deliberate about travel. In future, my travel will be more structured and planned. Cost and economics will also play a more important part of the decision."

Vice President, technology company

"I will be doing less travel than before, it will be balanced."

Head of Travel, technology company

Beyond the return to travel

Looking further ahead, there is an opportunity for travel managers to position themselves as a strategic partner for HR, tackling initiatives such as improving employee health or supporting talent management strategies. These initiatives are most successful when implemented holistically, with the relevant stakeholders from across the business working in partnership.

Travel data is the key to travel becoming a strategic partner to HR, and to the organization as a whole. Travel managers have access to vast amounts of travel data. By connecting this data to other data sets, such as those owned by HR, travel managers and HR managers can define insightful traveler wellbeing Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Most corporates do not have specific KPIs related to traveler wellbeing.⁶ Without them, travel managers cannot effectively report to the organization on how frequent business travel impacts areas such as retention, employee absence and talent acquisition.

Five steps to implementing a wellbeing framework

Travel managers are in a unique position to provide insight to their organization about the impact of business travel on employee wellbeing, down to the level of the individual. This section sets out a five-step framework to help them capture these insights as traveler risk profiles, and then communicate them meaningfully to their peers.



Agree which aspects of business travel have most impact on employees

Some aspects of business travel have a bigger impact on employees than others. Factors like journey length, time zone difference and same-day travel, for example, are important when trying to identify the degree of impact on an individual's wellbeing.

Traveling to high-risk destinations and weekend travel put a strain on the employee, and on their families. In turn, strained relationships at home can impact the traveler's physical and mental health.

A travel management company (TMC) should be able to provide data reporting that can help identify what aspects of an organization's business travel is impacting travelers' physical and mental health, and to what extent.

A single trip will not tell the whole story. To truly understand the impact of business travel on employee wellbeing, it's necessary to look at the full number of trips across a year.





Identify the impacts on travelers: traveler risk profiles

Business travel impacts different travelers in different ways. Developing traveler risk profiles can help travel managers understand how, and to what extent, travel impacts wellbeing of particular travelers.

The key advantage of traveler risk profiles is that they bring together travel data – such as travel frequency, length of trip, information about destinations – with HR data such as job code, tenure, or age. Combining the data sets makes it possible to spotlight travelers most likely to be impacted by travel.

The travel manager works with peers in HR to agree which aspects of HR data are relevant, next to the travel data. After which the traveler risk profile can be created. Key elements to consider include:

	Job/role	Tenure	Trip frequency	Trip length	Trip impact
Impact	Travel intensity levels per job/role	Split employee base by length of employment in current role	Split by number of trips annually	Split by long and short haul	Multiple time zones in a single trip Travel departure and arrival times Time between trips High-risk destinations

Traveler risk profiles provide objective data insights that can help organizations identify which travelers are most at risk of travel fatigue or burnout: with an understanding of the red flags, organizations can take mitigate impacts and reduce the stresses on travelers, both physical and mental. These same insights can inform the design of roles, helping drive retention and recruitment strategies, and supporting initiatives such as the Great Place to Work audit and certification scheme.

Note: by its nature, this kind of reporting will include personal information that should be restricted to line managers.



Review the travel policy

KPIs are pivotal for embedding wellbeing in the travel program and make it possible to provide insights to the business. While many travel managers aim to build wellbeing into the program, only a minority measure traveler wellbeing through specific KPIs.

Check that the policy includes:

- Travel insurance
- In-trip travel assistance
- Vendor selection subject to safety and quality assessment
- Allowances designed around travel schedules: for example, for purchasing food and drink on flights longer than 2 hours

It's important to make sure the travel policy does not contradict initiatives that support employee wellbeing. Ideally, the policy will help raise awareness about the impact of business travel on employees.

Review any policy rules or guidelines which can be improved to support employees' health and wellbeing:

- Introduce traveler-friendly rules around departure and arrival times for same-day travel
- Put a maximum time limit on layovers for indirect flights
- Reduce same-day travel by offering virtual alternatives
- Recognize the impact of long-haul night flights by introducing more comfort: allow Premium Economy instead of Economy, Business Class instead of Premium Economy
- Introduce 'time for time' compensation for long-haul return flights that take place during the night
- In an Economy-only travel policy, allow Business Class travel for frequent travelers who have reached a certain number of total flying hours.
- Use traveler profiling to distinguish between traveler types: understand which employees travel most intensively to target them with the appropriate service and amenities.



Introduce KPIs to measure and communicate on wellbeing

KPIs are pivotal for embedding wellbeing in the travel program and make it possible to provide insights to the business. While many travel managers aim to build wellbeing into the program, only a minority measure traveler wellbeing through specific KPIs.⁶

It may not be straightforward to identify meaningful metrics but, as the saying goes: you can't manage what you don't measure. **It's therefore important that travel managers select KPIs which will assist them in further optimizing their travel program in support of travel wellbeing.**

Examples of metrics in support of traveler wellbeing:

QUANTITATIVE METRICS

- Reduce the level of same-day travel (especially internal trips)
- Manage travel intensity (travel intensity = annual number of hours spent traveling divided by annual working hours)
- Introduce Traveler Risk Profiles (in cooperation with HR)

QUALITATIVE METRICS

- Aim to increase employee satisfaction scores for business travel
- Add traveler wellbeing elements to line manager reporting
- Identify travelers at risk of travel fatigue or burnout
- Reduce the number of travelers at risk of travel fatigue or burnout



Measure employee wellbeing

A direct way to learn how business travel is impacting travelers is to introduce wellbeing into the traveler satisfaction survey, if not included already.

As well as providing useful insights, adding questions about health and mental wellness sends a message to travelers that their welfare matters to the organization.

Example questions include:

- How do your business trips impact your wellbeing?
- To what extent does the travel program support your wellbeing?
- What defines wellbeing in business travel for you?
- Thinking about your experience traveling for business, what could we do to improve to support your wellbeing as a traveler?

Start a conversation with your peers

This paper sets out an actionable five-step approach to help travel managers put employee wellbeing at the heart of the travel program. Our aim is to elevate traveler physical and mental health, and provide useful talking points that travel managers can use to initiate conversations with their peers across the business on this important topic.

By working through the five steps, travel managers can raise awareness of the impact of business travel on employees using traveler risk profiles. Adopting the KPIs described earlier will allow travel managers to demonstrate to peers that travel management is a source of valuable insights. Ultimately, these insights can be used to drive people-centered initiatives that have impacts across the entire organization.

Putting health at the heart of the travel program

A multinational mining corporation asked the Global Business Consulting (GBC) team at GBT to help it align the travel program with an organization-wide drive to improve employee wellbeing. A key focus: senior executives who regularly flew long-haul, with frequent last-minute international flights.

The senior executives' punishing itineraries often involved weekend travel and were a growing source of stress. They complained about tiredness from late night and 'red eye' flying. Travelers would be flagged as non-compliant when they tried to book daytime flights. While less tiring for the travelers, these flights were more expensive than night time options.

GBC's plan to align travel with employee wellbeing focused on the online booking tool (OBT). Red eye flights would be removed from the OBT's lowest logical fare calculations. Additionally, GBC recommended updating the backend fare calculations to alter thresholds and layovers, minimizing the frustrating time a traveler might have to spend connecting between flights.

For many international organizations, flying is a necessary part of the job. With GBC's adjustments to the OBT, the corporation's senior executives would be seamlessly guided to flights that would be less tiring and stressful. Since the improved tool was deployed, compliance with the travel policy has gone up. The client has recently extended their GBT contract for a further four years.

Global Business Consulting (GBC) at GBT

The Global Business Consulting (GBC) team at GBT works with companies and organizations to create travel programs tailored to achieve specific goals. Our extensive capabilities and results-oriented approach allow us to build and implement strategies that streamline processes, deliver savings, improve compliance and reduce risk.

We are a leader in developing traveler care and wellbeing strategies that help companies and organizations keep their employees safe, engaged and productive.

About American Express Global Business Travel

American Express Global Business Travel (GBT) is the world's leading business partner for managed travel. We help companies and employees prosper by making sure travellers are present where and when it matters. We keep global business moving with the powerful backing of travel professionals in more than 140 countries. Companies of all sizes, and in all places, rely on GBT to provide travel management services, organise meetings and events, and deliver business travel consulting.

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Acknowledgements and references:

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