



**GLOBAL
BUSINESS
TRAVEL**

WHY BUSINESS TRAVEL IS THE CENTER OF THE NEW COMPANY CULTURE



Abstract

A major lockdown legacy is the breakdown of traditional work and travel habits. As the economy and society adjust to a new era, American Express Global Business Travel (Amex GBT) and CULTIQUE assert that a company's ability to thrive will now largely hinge on its ability to manage people movement. To help organizations succeed, corporate travel managers should now start thinking of themselves as Chief Journey Officers. In this white paper, we explain why the strategic management of business travel, meetings and mobility will be essential for cultivating winning cultures and achieving business goals.

The post-pandemic era has brought new challenges: adapting to distributed work, employee burnout, tight labor markets for attracting and retaining talent, and the ongoing volatility within national and global travel networks. However, with challenges come opportunities. By embracing change, travel managers can emerge as cultural leaders. They must reframe how their company views travel: no longer as a commodity but instead as an investment in creating everyday resilience and meaningful connections that future-proof “how we work” in ways that align with culture’s changing course.

This paper will also unpack emergent cultural terminology surrounding work and travel, and will feature quotes from key leaders of the Amex GBT Client Innovation Council (CIC) to shed light on insights and approaches industry wide.

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Introduction:

Early in the pandemic, some short-sighted commentators predicted the demise of business travel. However, we're now seeing the opposite — the sector is now positioned to play a central role in enabling organizations' recovery and success.

Looking beyond the pandemic toward recovery, it's clear that *how* and *where* we work is changing — and travel is inherently tied to that evolution. As workforces become increasingly distributed and the travel landscape continues to shift, Amex GBT is focused on expanding its capabilities to better support clients as their roles and companies' needs change.

To this end, Amex GBT and its strategic cultural advisors, CULTIQUE, have partnered to help clients decipher these shifts and act on the opportunity to reframe business travel from a transactional mechanism to a transformational tool. Viewing travel as an impactful way to refocus business goals and reinvigorate fragmented company cultures can jumpstart an organization's ability to thrive in these uncertain times.



Cultural Context:

NEW CHALLENGES, NEW POSSIBILITIES

Just a few months before the pandemic sent work trips to a grinding halt, beloved travel guru Rick Steves — enveloped in a “Sound of Music”-esque landscape — graced a *New York Times Magazine* cover, sending a clear message that travel can dramatically enrich lives. Little did the world know at that moment how void of travel people’s lives would soon become. Yet when abilities are stripped away, appreciation and innovation can be quick to follow.

Ongoing volatility within global travel networks combined with unprecedented labor market pressures stemming from The Great Resignation have left companies — big and small, hybrid and remote — questioning their approach to people, work, and travel. The wellbeing and productivity concerns that have emerged in recent years have created a universal demand for organizations, including those that never stopped traveling or commuting, to rethink *how we work* and *why we meet*.

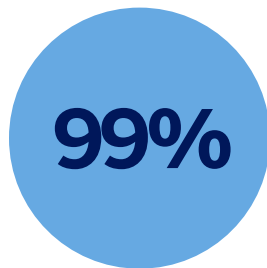
As recent history attests, industry leaders see changes in cultural tides as opportunities to course-correct their management strategies. “We’ve witnessed the emergence of Chief Data Officers, Chief Diversity Officers, and even Chief Wellness Officers — all roles demonstrating a clear reprioritization of new areas,” stated CULTIQUE co-founder Sarah Unger. “These moves represent a powerful way to address and elevate essential workplace needs.”



Refocusing business goals:

Business travel was once a world shrouded in the minutia of expense lines, compliance and duty of care. Now travel managers' quickly expanded roles require more agility, planning, awareness, and intention behind every booking. As a result, travel managers have the chance to rethink travel programs within the context of higher-order company priorities, and inclusive of historically-neglected, internal travel needs. Seen via other inspired pivots — think Airbnb's debut of online experiences or Disney's shift from box office to streaming — periods of change are both inevitables and opportunities.

Reinvigorating fragmented cultures:



99% OF LARGE COMPANIES¹ HAVE COMMITTED TO HYBRID WORK PLANS REDUCING THE TOUCHPOINTS THAT ONCE CONVEYED COMPANY CULTURE, AND LEAVING MANY EMPLOYEES FEELING DISCONNECTED AND CONFUSED ABOUT THE FUTURE OF WORK.

Yet for all companies, including those which never went remote, unprecedented reports of burnout and stress are signaling that businesses must quickly adapt if they are to survive — particularly as 40 percent of workers consider resignation. As the importance of workforce unity and work-life balance ascend, so too has the ability of travel programs to shape employee experiences, connectivity and mobility.

“When Covid first happened, people said internal meetings would be the last to come back, from a cost-savings driver,” said Linda McNairy, vice president Americas, Amex GBT Meetings & Events. “But then what we’ve learned from all this isolation and separation is that meetings drive culture.” Just two months into 2022, Amex GBT Meetings and Events saw a 200 percent increase in the number of meetings booked for the year so far.

¹ **SOURCE:** McKinsey, May 2021, “[What executives are saying about the future of hybrid work](#)”

² **SOURCE:** World Economic Forum, June 2021, [Survey](#)

THE NEW MEANING OF MOBILITY:

With managers questioning how to build culture in a new work world, company-wide mobility poses a potent solution. As travel becomes a more meaningful touchpoint for in-person collaboration and connecting people to company culture, its role is expanding to include:

- How new hires and prospective employees experience company culture.
- How teams or whole companies align, bond and collaborate at retreats, offsites or all-hands meeting.
- How companies exercise thought leadership at events and conferences.
- How employees sustain and build client relationships.
- How companies showcase their priorities and values to all internal- and external-facing audiences.



Strategy:

THINK LIKE A CHIEF JOURNEY OFFICER

Against the backdrop of fluctuating plans, distributed workforces and tight labor markets — thinking like a Chief Journey Officer offers a way in to reimagining employee connectivity and fundamental business goals. By approaching travel as less of a transactional function and more as a dynamic strategy for unlocking company cultures and advancing priorities, executives and managers can collaboratively future-proof a new, culturally-attuned path toward growth and prosperity.

CENTERING TRAVEL WITHIN ORGANIZATIONS



Insights + Actionable Takeaways:

WHERE DO YOU GO FROM HERE?

Adopting a Chief Journey Officer mindset requires travel teams and corporate leadership to view travel as a mode to meet pressing cultural demands. Each of the following five spaces — company culture, worker wellbeing, professional development, employee empowerment, and corporate values — provide ripe grounds for businesses to respond to essential workplace needs and ignite progress.

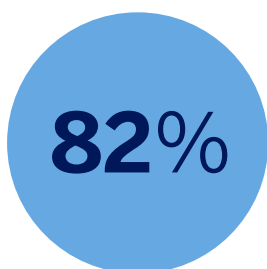


1. Travel fuels your corporate culture

Question: If your company remains remote, how do you create a cohesive culture?

As virtual collaboration tools make companies more discerning about why and where they send colleagues, business travel is taking on new meaning as a progressively valuable and powerful generator of company culture. More than a mode to close deals and sustain external relations, travel programs are becoming the core way through which remote teams gather — as seen via Dropbox’s Virtual First plan, where offices become as-needed team meetings centers, Automattic’s prioritization of annual in-person assemblies to break up their otherwise asynchronous workflow, and Salesforce’s launch of their “Trailblazer Ranch” to reignite company culture.

More than a third of executives voice preserving company culture as their biggest hybrid work concern.



OF BUSINESS TRAVELERS CITE THE IRREPLACEABLE VALUE OF IN-PERSON MEETINGS.

Doubling down on the power of travel to stoke employee potential and build internal bonds, startups and tech giants alike are increasingly pursuing offsites and team retreats as vital moments to spark motivation, engagement, and a sense of unity.

“The number one danger to Salesforce and other companies is that people are going to become disengaged in the culture of the company,” said Brent Hyder, Salesforce’s Chief People Officer and President, in reference to his team’s commitment to meeting face-to-face once a quarter.

³ **SOURCE:** Deloitte, April 2021 [Return to Workplaces survey](#)

⁴ **SOURCE:** American Express & American Express Global Business Travel, 2021 [“Back to Blue Skies” report](#)

Take action

- **Be bullish when it comes to internal business travel**, amplifying team relationship building as a core travel program focus.
- **Curate and package team offsites** featuring inspiring locales, unique stays, team building tools, cultural programming, and motivational speakers.
- **Drive employee interest and engagement** by marketing travel schemes through company communication channels.
- **Align business travel strategy with company retention and recruitment strategies**, elevating it as a cost and human capital saving mechanism.



2 ■ Travel incentivizes your workers' wellbeing

Question: As burnout remains a key concern from both productivity and retention angles, how can you create better work-life balance?

Long-brewing burnout coupled with the challenging circumstances of recent years have spiked stress levels and amplified a need for businesses to address employee wellbeing more directly and aggressively. As experts predict the value of the corporate wellbeing market to quadruple to \$87.4B by 2026, passive and siloed wellness perks are being replaced with more centralized and ingrained strategies. On the rise are companies shutting down for wellness weeks and “synchronous” time off, offering free therapy, paying workers extra to take vacation days, and partnering with corporate wellbeing providers which are proliferating at warp speed. Travel’s intrinsically rejuvenating potential lends itself as an UX-driven aid for boosting employee wellbeing. Going from something that pre-pandemic was associated with the problem — staff traveling too much — business trips in the future can be redesigned to demonstrate personal care and lifestyle consideration.

And that movement is already underway. Oakland-based human resources executive, Meghana Reddy told *The New York Times*⁶ earlier this year: in sharp contrast to off-sites being a “nice to have” pre-pandemic, they are now “a must-have,” qualifying an investment in them as “a better use of money than trying to get people back in the office.”

Wellness⁷ describes a healthy lifestyle beyond acute illness. It refers to a state of physical health in which people have the ability and energy to do what they want to do in life, primarily focused on eating habits, exercise and quality of sleep.



Wellbeing encompasses the broader holistic dimensions of a well-lived life — beyond traditional modes associated with self-care. Research has found five elements of wellbeing that add up to a thriving life across career, social, financial, physical, and community domains.

⁵ **SOURCE:** Market Report, May 2021, “Global Corporate Wellness Industry”

⁶ **SOURCE:** The New York Times, Feb. 25 2022, “For Workers Who Are Never on Site, the ‘Off-Site’ Still Beckons”

⁷ **SOURCE:** GALLUP, March 2021 “Wellness vs. Wellbeing: What’s the Difference?”

Take action

- **For personal wellbeing:** Expand vendor deals beyond basic accommodation and transit toward spa services, meditation app subscriptions, noise-canceling headphones.
- **For career wellbeing:** Aid professional development associated with business travel and remote work, such as written communication skill training to help employees thrive within asynchronous work environments.
- **For social wellbeing:** Offer phone plans to stay in touch with family/friends while on the road.
- **For financial wellbeing:** Be transparent about procurement to explain cost rationale.
- **For physical wellbeing:** Consider spending caps that can include a personal travel allowance.
- **For community wellbeing:** Create the opportunity for fellow business travelers to share tips on a company communication channel.
- **Make these actions count** by creating new KPIs (in conjunction with HR) to leverage travel data as a barometer of employee wellbeing or burnout risk.



3 ■ Travel drives your employees' personal development

Question: With people questioning the merits of a traditional 9-5 work model, what programs and policies can help you stay competitive in the talent pool?

Not only did the pandemic-enforced pause give companies an unexpected opportunity to reassess their business strategies, it also amplified and accelerated a decade-long demand for workplaces to actively support employee happiness and personal growth. As workers continue to recalibrate their priorities and put more stock into personal experiences, retention and acquisition are becoming more about emotional and psychological gains than historic signifiers of success — like political clout, financial compensation, and job promotions alone. Chris Collins, an assistant professor at Cornell who runs a research center for HR studies, told *WIRED*⁸ recently that without personal connections, “it’s just a job, it’s just a list of tasks, there’s no loyalty to the company... It’s not surprising that turnover is so high.”

As companies grapple with a tight labor market, business travel is becoming a key differentiator within the talent equation. In step, transformational perks connected to business travel (digital nomadism, blended trips, four-day work weeks, sabbaticals, and the rise of hotel “workspitality” spaces) are challenging the category’s historically transactional reputation.

Mark Cuschieri, Global Head of Travel at UBS, noted a growth in synergy between travel teams and stakeholders across HR, business continuity management and the workspace teams. “I have no doubt that these relationships will be maintained,” he said. “Our function has had to take on broader responsibilities and, in the future, as travel changes, it will be critical to continue those relationships.”

⁸ **SOURCE:** WIRED, Feb. 23, 2022, [It's Tough to Build a Corporate Culture in a Remote-Work World](#).

Take action

- **Build out a program offering that caters to blended/extended travel** including partnerships for on-the-ground entertainment, recreation opportunities, cinemas, restaurants, live events franchises.
- **Forge partnerships with hotels launching co-working spaces** as accommodating and enjoyable refuges for employees before and after meetings or trip duties.
- **Initiate an employee sabbatical offering, connecting trip duration to years of employment** to fuel retention and giving employees something to look forward to.



4 ■ Travel provides your employees with autonomy

Question: How do you give business travelers more freedoms and options while still making sure compliance and duty of care obligations are being met?

With the advent of remote and hybrid work, autonomous workstyles are no longer exclusively associated with unorthodox career paths such as the gig economy. As a result, mainstream and full-time employees have become increasingly averse to strict travel policies. They want to work for companies that demonstrate an understanding of individual preferences and provide more choice within travel programs. To this end, one Amex GBT client reported new efforts to create more self-service traveler options, including a mobile strategy that keeps the duty of care responsibilities and itinerary changes contained within one, accessible app.

On the customer side, a shift toward more flexible travel has already become cemented. Recognizing people's desire to get out and about again despite potential trip disruptions and unknowns, many travel and hospitality industry players have made shopping, booking, and insuring travel more adjustable and accommodating than ever before.

As employers reconsider their programs, they must put more stock into the end-to-end travel experience — reducing moments of friction during travel while carving out new opportunities for employee autonomy when it comes to trip planning, booking, and amendments.

Take action

- **Rethink compliance by adopting less-stringent vendor relationships** that give people more booking options and choice.
- **Partner with TMCs to design or bundle services** based on specific travel needs and sensibilities.
- **Employ corporate booking systems that enable employees control of travel date/time changes**, leaving the door open for them to add a layover, extend trips over a weekend or tack on PTO.
- **Include employees in the travel program process by holding town halls, deploying surveys, or tapping focus groups and subcommittees** to provide critical perspectives and feedback on policies.



5 ■ Travel showcases your company values

Question: It seems like business travel and sustainability will always be at odds — what can you do to demonstrate leadership and progress in this space?

Against the backdrop of global crises, ascendant cultural values — such as sustainability, diversity, equity, and inclusion — are increasingly defining *how*, *where*, and *why* people and businesses invest their assets and energy. Acknowledging real change can't happen in a vacuum, industry leaders are reassessing their impact and supply chains accordingly: Netflix is backing Black-led banks, United Airlines Ventures is creating a fund to decarbonize air travel, Unilever is shedding sub-brands that lack purpose.

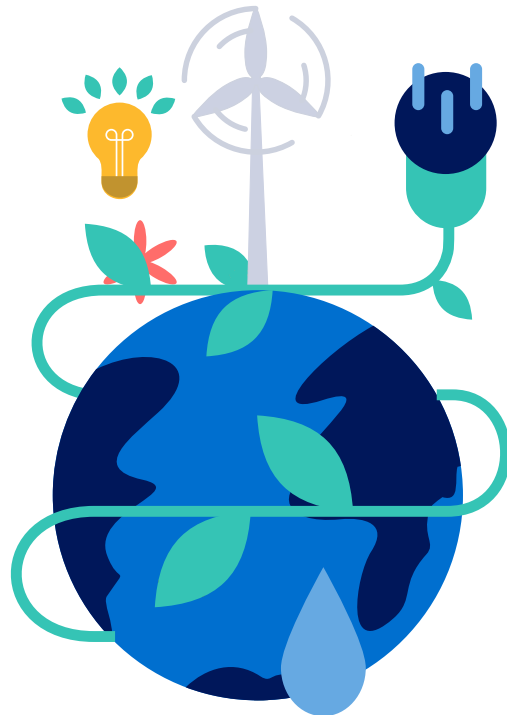
Business travel — via its vendors, partners, locations, food, fuel, and technology — contains a plethora of policies and relationships that exercise and exemplify company priorities.

“It’s our responsibility to provide the right information at the right time in order to make more informed choices — choices that are better in terms of sustainability will be key,” stated UBS’s Cuschieri.

To better relate to new employee desires and societal expectations, companies must shift their business travel mindset from automated to intentional. By adopting policies and programs that reflect slower, more inclusive and regenerative travel, organizations can do more than demonstrate social responsibility; they can create additive benefits felt by those on all sides of the travel experience.

Take action

- **Use travel vendor relationships to express company priorities and CSR/ESG goals**, i.e. work with service providers to build out a more diverse supplier database, increase the percentage of minority owned/operated vendors in your program.
- **Address climate pressures head-on with impactful policy efforts**, such as fewer but longer trips, partnering with TMCs on a sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) strategy, or carbon footprint tracking.
- **Tailor programmatic offerings to incentivize travelers use of low or no emission modes for on-the-ground transport** (bike shares, electric car rentals, public transit).
- **Make business values holistic by applying them to cross-department efforts**. For example, partner with events teams to offer green transportation to and from events, in addition to event-specific offerings like compostable/plastic-free cutlery or plant-based menus.



Conclusion:

TURN TRAVEL INTO A BUSINESS DIFFERENTIATOR

Opening the aperture on business travel will allow leadership to overcome many hurdles of a newly distributed work world — unlocking ways to cultivate company culture and achieve sustained business goals. More than procurement and logistic keepers, travel managers are in a prime position to fuel this transition by becoming stewards for company values and employee experiences — two things now largely driven by travel. During the pandemic, we learned that uncertainty demands holistic and agile solutions. Travel teams, therefore, must take an active, cross-departmental approach, working in conjunction with human resources, data, finance, DE&I, and sustainability. As businesses start embracing an endemic state of mind, there has never been a more pivotal time to make travel a company-wide investment to secure a productive, purposeful, and profitable path forward.



Glossary of Key Terms

Distributed workforce: The mainstreaming of remote and hybrid work structures has diminished in-office interactions which previously dominated corporate culture. This shift toward a distributed workforce underscores the need to reconsider how to connect and move all employees — not just those historically associated with business travel.

Asynchronous work: Stemming from new distributed work patterns that spread employees across borders and time zones, asynchronous workflow policies leave work schedules and hours up to their employees' discretion. Favoring written communication over meetings and real-time discussions to move company goals forward, asynchronous — like all remote schemes — is putting an emphasis on work boundaries and in-person meetups at key intervals.

Blended trips: Departing from the overused and outdated concept of “bleisure,” blended travel speaks to travelers' desire to combine multiple trip functions to encompass work responsibilities, affinities, relationships, cultural explorations, rejuvenation and beyond. Blended trips emphasize both professional and personal value exchanges.

Incentivized wellbeing: Serving as more than an opt-in perk or offering, incentivized wellbeing directly encourages steps and practices employees can take to improve their wellbeing. Expanding the definition of what falls under self-care, wellbeing spans all facets of life, including the health of one's career, social life, finances, physical anatomy and sense of community.

Employee autonomy: As distributed work instills a greater sense of and desire for options and flexibility, expectations surrounding business travel are changing. In sharp contrast to single-choice or fragmented compliance schemes and booking systems that leave travelers out of the process altogether, employee autonomy means giving workers more choice and control over trip decisions and itineraries.

Inclusive travel: In step with cultural conversations surrounding accessibility and diversity, inclusive travel is about designing experiences, accommodation and transport options for people of all backgrounds, demographics and abilities. It means prioritizing safe spaces in order to enable individual growth to take place and trip goals to be met.

Regenerative travel: Taking the concept of low or no impact (associated with sustainable travel and ecotourism) to the next level, regenerative travel aims to create an additive value — leaving a place better than you found it in regard to the local community, economy and physical environment.

Intentional travel: Like inclusive travel, intentional travel is travel driven by a purpose — whether that purpose be oriented toward personal/professional enrichment or to social/ecological good. Within the business world, the proliferation of virtual collaboration tools have made in-person business trips more optional and thus intentional — creating a deeper connection between planning work trips and achieving business priorities.

Report Contacts:

ABOUT AMERICAN EXPRESS GLOBAL BUSINESS TRAVEL

American Express Global Business Travel (GBT) is the world's leading B2B travel platform, providing software and services to manage travel, expenses, and meetings and events for companies of all sizes. We have built the most valuable marketplace in B2B travel to deliver unrivaled choice, value and experiences. With travel professionals in more than 140 countries, our customers and travelers enjoy the powerful backing of Amex GBT.

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For more inquiries, please contact GlobalCommunications@amexgbt.com.

ABOUT CULTIQUE

Linda Ong and **Sarah Unger** are co-founders of CULTIQUE, the cultural insights and strategy venture of CIVIC (a Seacrest Global Group Company). The premium advisory develops bespoke cultural strategies for forward-looking businesses, using culture as a competitive differentiator. This report was written in collaboration with CULTIQUE analyst **Ria Knapp**. For inquiries, please contact sarah@cultique.co.

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