



# Managing obligations and opportunities: Long distance travels and personal network strategies in global organizations

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 7 September 2012  
Received in revised form 12 April 2013  
Accepted 8 May 2013  
Available online 2 June 2013

### Keywords:

Business travels  
Social networks  
Intercontinental travels  
Global organizations

## ABSTRACT

Development of personal networks seems to be of growing importance in global organizations. This paper proposes see business travels more directly related to a need for development, maintenance and exploitation of interpersonal business relationships. Based on an empirical study of managers in 10 international companies, relational aspects of managers intercontinental travels is analyzed, and a theoretical framework to describe interpersonal business relationships and face-to-face interaction is proposed. The framework describes the personal business relationships as motivated by both a need to meet obligations and to build new business opportunities in personal networks of both stronger and weaker ties. Four “personal network strategies”, motivating long distance travels are described. Theoretically, the work draws on research in the field of mobility-studies, as well as recent work in the field of social capital and organizational social networks. The suggested framework is useful not only for a discussion about the role of interpersonal relationships for business travels and contributes to the ongoing academic discussion about the possibilities for development of more sustainable patterns of business travels. Three particular areas for the development of more sustainable network related travels is discussed; raising awareness, reorganization of schedules and responsibilities, and enhanced use of communication technology.

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## 1. Introduction

There is mounting evidence that international business travels are growing in volume and intensity. For instance, the number of United Kingdom (U.K.) residents leaving the country for business purpose visits reached 8.56 million in 2005, a 40% increase from ten years earlier, with Europe (EU15) accounting for an average of 72% of overseas business visits by UK citizens between 1993 and 2005 (ONS, 2006). In Norway, the growth rates for work-related travel to foreign destinations have doubled since the early 1990s (Lian et al., 2007). International business travels appear to be crucial for corporations that are operating within a global economy, in particular in issues of knowledge and innovation (Lassen, 2006). These travels are predominantly by air, and low-cost carriers seem to be stimulating this development. Given the impact of long distant aviation traffic on global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, such business travels also represent an environmental risk that cannot be neglected (Chapman, 2007).

On a first glance, communication technologies and applications such as telephone meetings, videoconferencing, Internet chat-rooms and e-mails appear to have functionality that could make many of these business travels redundant. Forecasters of new technologies have also persistently suggested that these technologies will reduce significant shares of the business traffic related to international meetings

(Cairncross, 1997; Lipnack & Stamps, 2000; Toffler, 1980). It has been predicted that videoconferencing, for instance, could substitute for as much as 50–60% of all business travels (Petersen, 1977).

The empirical evidence analyzing the impact of videoconferences and other information- and communication technologies (ICT) on travel activities is, however, sobering. Recent studies have found that at best only minor parts of these travels are replaced by videoconferences or other communication technologies (Choo & Mokhtarian, 2005; deGraaff & Rietveld, 2007; Denstadli, Julsrud, & Hjorthol, 2012; Haynes, 2010). Some studies have also found that implementation of ICT, at a macro-level, may generate more travel than it substitutes for (Plaut, 1997). Despite hopes and needs for travel reductions, we face a development where the amount of business travel grows steadily, with subsequent increase in emissions from aviation based transport across the globe. How can we explain this unfortunate development? And can we hope to counteract this (from an environmental point of view) unfortunate trend?

The standard answer is that face-to-face communication somehow appears to be crucial for how global business professionals operate in a knowledge based economy (Gaspar & Glaeser, 1988; Lassen, Laugen, & Næss, 2006; Nohria & Eccles, 1991; Salt, 2010). More explicitly, recent studies have hinted that one important reason for travelling is the need for nurturing more or less distant personal business relationships (Axhausen, 2005; Chen & Wellman, 2010; Jones, 2007; Julsrud, Denstadli, & Hjorthol, 2012; Larsen, Urry, & Axhausen, 2006). In a recent study of 1400 Norwegian business travelers evidence

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was found that attitudes related to the need for developing personal relationships were decisive for a significant increase in business travels and a reduction in the use of videoconferences (Julsrud et al., in press).

There is a significant literature describing the necessity for face-to-face interaction in modern organizations (Asheim, Coenen, & Vang, 2007; Faulconbridge, Beaverstock, Derudder, & Wiltox, 2009; Jones, 2007; Kiesler & Cummings, 2002; Larsen, Urry, & Axhausen, 2008; Nardi & Whittaker, 2002; Nohria & Eccles, 1991; Storper & Venables, 2004). Yet, we know little about how managers view the difference between proximate and distant relationships, whether they think strategic about travels as a way to enhance their personal relationship, or whether the personal relationships just spin off as a side-effect from other travel related activities. One reason for this is probably that decisions to travel are largely made on an individual basis. While traveling in traditional “bureaucratic” organization used to be embedded in formal work instructions, traveling in knowledge organizations is to a much larger extent based on individual choices (Kesselring & Vogl, 2010; Lassen, 2006). To unpack the question of why the amount of business travels keeps growing in modern organizations, we argue that it is necessary to look closer at how professionals handle their social relationships, and in particular on the role of face-to-face interaction as a way to initiate, strengthen or exploit these relationships. Inspired by an emergent number of studies that emphasize the role of social networks in today’s (post-modern) work life, this paper sets forth to explore to what extent, and in what way, business managers view traveling as part of their *personal network strategies*. In the context of the environmental challenges related to the long distance flights, we are here mainly concerned with the long distant business trips, i.e. international trips or trips longer than 100 km.

The paper starts with (1) a theoretical overview of literature on business travels and the changing nature of work relations and personal networks. Based on this, we will (2) outline a conceptual framework for analyzing face-to-face interactions and travels in global organizations drawing on network oriented literature on business related communication and travels. The framework is used to guide a set of interviews with Nordic business managers operating across various business sectors (3). Implications of the results are discussed with particular reference to the possibilities of developing more sustainable ways of conducting “network travels” in the future (4). Based on insights from our own qualitative study, as well as from other studies, we argue that measures can be taken to reduce the amount of business travel, thus making the development of long-distance social networks more efficient and sustainable.

## 2. Personal network strategies, proximity and distance

### 2.1. Personal relationships in a networked society

A key idea within much social network analysis is that relationships represent a certain value for the individual who engages in them, his/her organization or the professional community that he/she belongs to. Usually the terms “social capital” (Bourdieu, 1983; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 1999) or “network capital” (Larsen et al., 2006; Wellman & Frank, 2001) are used to describe these resources and the social processes related to the development and exploitation of them. As such, knowledge on the content, constellation and quality of the network surrounding a given person or a group is believed to be crucial in an analysis of the possibilities and opportunities these networks possess.

The rapid diffusion of computers and mobile phones, along with increased access to GSM/GPRS/3G mobile networks, internet connections and various wireless networks have in radical ways altered the way people communicate, socialize and work (Castells, Fernández-Ardévol, Qiu, & Sey, 2007; Ling, 2004; Tuomi, 2002). Given the recognized value of social relationships, it’s not surprising that potential changes in these networks, due to transformations in global communication technologies, have received much attention lately

(Adler & Kwon, 2002; Hansen, Podolny, & Pfeffer, 2001; Huysman & Wulf, 2004). On an individual level it has been argued that personal networks are undergoing radical transformations from small-scale to large-scale, local to global, proximate to mediated and community oriented to individualized (Castells, 2001). One element in this is the “stretching” of the personal relational networks of individuals, making the networks larger.<sup>1</sup> A key insight from the so-called small world literature is that as individuals become more interconnected through personal media, the number of “links” separating any two individuals is reduced. In the network society, interconnected with e-mail, mobile phones and social media, the degree of separation (i.e. number of links between two individuals) is probably much lower than the six degrees found by Stanley Milgram more than 50 years ago.<sup>2</sup>

In a certain sense the stretching of relationship is making the world more like the global village forecasted by Marshall McLuhan half a century ago (1964). A question is whether the media is not only providing more virtual friends, but also removing local connections. It has been argued that personal relationships, in particular among younger people, are dominated by weaker ties, thus shrinking the group of personal friends (Putnam, 2000). For some, this indicates not only a change from stronger to weaker ties, but also a transformation of social life in general (Turkle, 2012).

In general, empirical studies have tended to support the argument that electronic media stimulates a wider network of weaker relationships than before. The idea that Internet and other electronic media erode stronger connections and face-to-face contact has however not gained much support. A series of individual studies of Internet user relations in the UK, the US and Canada conclude that the use of ICT strengthens the ties to friends and families living in the same area, as well as more distant ties (Anderson & Tracey, 2001; Boase, 2008; Wellman et al., 2003).

The question of a general transformation of personal ties due to the adoption of new media relates to the question of individual versus shared relationships. It has been speculated whether community and group-oriented networks are now being replaced by more individualized networks. The term “networked individualism” has been coined to describe a development towards more specialized relationships (Boase, 2008; Wellman, 2002). Wellman (2001, p. 227) has argued that the use of personal media – such as mobile phone and the Internet – paves the way for a more individualized type of communities than ever seen before: “Communities are far-flung, loosely-bonded, sparsely-knit and fragmentary.(...) Rather than fitting into the same group as those around them, each person has his/hers own “personal community””

Following this hypothesis, personal networks tend to become thinner and more individualized, consisting of weaker ties, thus having fewer of the benefits associated with denser communities. In a business setting this suggests that networks are becoming more a resource of the individual than of the organization as such. Ethnographic oriented studies of personal relationships at modern workplaces have to some degree supported transformations towards more individualized networks. Based on a qualitative study of 30 workers in technology organizations, Nardi, Whittaker, and

<sup>1</sup> Following anthropologist Robin Dunbar (1992), humans normally cannot cope with groups much larger than 150 persons, as there is limited time available for “grooming” activities necessary to keep a social group together. This is still much more than our closest ancestors among the primates, chimpanzees, who on average live in groups of maximum 50 individuals. According to Dunbar’s theories development of human language should be seen as a consequence of a group-based need to handle larger networks of social relationships.

<sup>2</sup> Using data on the links among 721 million Facebook users, Markoff and Sengupta (2011) found that the average number of acquaintances separating any two people in the United States was 4.37, and that the number separating any two people in the world was 4.74. A Microsoft study in 2008 found an average chain of 6.6 people in a group of 240 million who exchanged chat messages. Recent studies suggest that a given Facebook on the globe is less than 5° (links) apart from any other user.

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