



Business travel – The social practices surrounding meetings



Glenn Lyons*

Centre for Transport & Society, Faculty of Environment and Technology, University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus, Bristol BS16 1QY, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 October 2012

Received in revised form 16 February 2013

Accepted 4 March 2013

Available online 24 March 2013

Keywords:

Business travel

Briefcase travel

Meetings

Excess travel

ABSTRACT

A considerable amount of travel domestically and internationally is undertaken by 'briefcase travellers' in the pursuit of business meetings. Such business travel is deemed costly to the economy. This paper examines the potential factors at work in the social construction of meetings and their associated travel. What are the different motivations and expectations in attending a meeting? What are the actual consequences (positive and negative) in attending? How can the organisation of a meeting impact upon the wider organisation of activity in time and space of the individuals involved? How does the process of meeting attendance, including travel, unfold? How might ICTs impact on the social practices associated with meetings? The paper offers a critical assessment of such issues that may underlie and influence the nature and extent of business travel. It goes on to define the notion of excess briefcase travel as a means to frame the challenge for policymakers, employers and employees in potentially reducing such travel and the associated research challenge to establish empirical understandings. The paper examines literatures from transport studies as well as other territories of social science including mobilities research.

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1. Introduction

As currently judged within transport economics, business travel accounts for a major part of the economic value of time invested in travel overall. It therefore seems remarkable how little attention within transport studies had been paid to developing an understanding of the composition of business travel and what gives rise to such travel. An improved understanding would help inform how this might be changing or could be changed in the future. Both transport policy and business practices face the challenges of addressing a radically changed economic landscape, pressing environmental issues and managing the demand for travel. They also face the opportunity of the information age in terms of new ways of transacting that may (or may not) hold the promise of reducing or reshaping the amount of business travel that takes place. This paper seeks to draw upon what is currently understood both within transport studies and more broadly in other fields such as that of mobilities in the social sciences in order to explore attitudes, behaviours and influencing factors regarding meetings and the associated business travel. The aim is to reveal the extent of current understanding and explore what prospects might exist for changing levels of business travel.

As at 2011, 3% of all domestic trips made in Great Britain were for business¹ (i.e. travel during the course of work) compared to 15% for commuting (DfT, 2012). The figures for the US (for 2001) are remarkably consistent with work related business accounting for 3% of all person trips and trips to/from work accounting for 16% of all person trips (Hu & Reuscher, 2004). Meanwhile, international business travel has grown in tandem with a globally networking society – Haynes (2010) points to there being more international business travel by air today than the total amount of international air travel in 1980.

In terms of the cost to the economy of business trips (as interpreted in the UK), the value of working time per person associated with a journey depends upon the travel mode (based on the average wage rate of individuals using a given mode). Hence the 'cost' of a business trip by car (as the driver) lasting one hour is assumed to be £26 per individual in terms of time lost to economically productive use outside of travel. The corresponding figure for a rail passenger is £37. Meanwhile the value of a one hour commute (based on an equity value of willingness to pay of the individual) in terms of time 'cost' is taken to be £5 (DfT, 2011). Once such values are accounted for it becomes clear that, in spite of their small share of overall (domestic) trips, in terms of assumed economic impacts of travel, business trips account for a substantial proportion of total travel. Mackie et al. (2003) note that "[f]or proposed road schemes ...although business travel by car only accounts

* Tel.: +44 117 32 83219; fax: +44 117 32 83899.
E-mail address: Glenn.Lyons@uwe.ac.uk.

¹ Defined in the National Travel Survey as "personal trips in course of work, including a trip in course of work back to work. This includes all work trips by people with no usual place of work (e.g. site workers) and those who work at or from home".

for around one sixth of all traffic, it accounts for about half of the assumed 'costs' of travel time".

From a transport policy perspective we know remarkably little about business travel in terms of understanding its determinants and potentially influencing its overall impact on levels of mobility. Indeed, literatures beyond those of transport studies attest to a wider paucity of insight (e.g. Beaverstock, Derudder, Faulconbridge, & Witlox, 2010; Faulconbridge & Beaverstock, 2008, chap. 7; Gustafson, 2006; and Haynes, 2010). This said, it is within such literatures that some researchers are seeking to address the issue (variously focusing on international as opposed to domestic travel (e.g. Beaverstock et al., 2010; Faulconbridge & Beaverstock, 2008, chap. 7; Haynes, 2010), overnight business trips as opposed to within-day trips (e.g. Gustafson, 2006) and business travel by air (e.g. Denstadli, Julsrud, & Hjorthol, 2012; Haynes, 2010; McNeil, 2009)).

The paper uses a series of questions to frame an examination of the issues and considerations that are contributing or could contribute to a developing understanding of business travel – or more specifically that travel which derives from the participation in face to face meetings.

2. A developing understanding of business travel

In order to move to a position of considering face to face meetings and their associated travel, it is first necessary to recognise the breadth of coverage of travel purposes that can be reflected in the rather ambiguous term 'business travel'.

2.1. What is the makeup of business travel and its destination activities?

National travel surveys are a key source when painting a picture of the composition of (domestic) travel according to journey purposes. However, in spite of their authoritative nature in relation to substantial sample sizes and thus representativeness, they report in a remarkably superficial manner in terms of disaggregated insight into the nature and heterogeneity of travel and travel purpose. In Great Britain's National Travel Survey, in common with other such surveys, a key element is a self-completion 7-day travel record (Anderson, Christophersen, Pickering, Southwood, & Tipping, 2009). In terms of recording journey purpose, participants are instructed as follows: "What was the purpose of your journey? Please give a simple description such as 'go to work', 'take children to school' or 'go home', If you went shopping please note whether it was 'food shopping' or 'other shopping' ". These data are then processed into 20 different trip categories, one of which is 'in course of work'.

Thus, all we know in relation to business travel from such surveys is what proportion of all trips the rather coarse category 'in the course of work' represents. Similar limitations apply to records of international travel. It can be tempting to characterise all 'business travel' from the perspective of the knowledge worker. However, Mackie et al. (2003) remind us that "[t]here is clearly a category of employers' business travel in which, broadly speaking, the work being done during employers' business time actually consists of travelling: this applies, for example to service engineers, delivery people, public transport drivers, lorry drivers etc." Meanwhile these authors have coined the phrase 'briefcase traveller' to reflect employees travelling in the course of business. This can be taken to refer to that travel associated with face to face meetings.

There are a number of considerations that would shed more light on the makeup of business travel in relation to an interest, eventually, in addressing travel demand and patterns of travel associated with business activities.

2.1.1. The extent to which the activity at the destination is location dependent

Some travel in the course of work has destinations that are spatially fixed: the service engineer's visit to a given premises to carry out work;

the delivery of a parcel to a specified address; a site visit to inspect or discuss specific facilities. Meanwhile briefcase travel may have few or no constraints on destination location in terms of the destination activity itself other than the provision of suitable facilities such as a meeting room. In such cases a choice of destination is likely to exist (especially for domestic business travel). The question then becomes one of what factors determine the choice outcome. Destination may be dictated by habit or tradition (e.g. meeting at company HQ), the location of the activity host or by a 'boundedly rational' (Todd, 2007) optimal location to suit all those involved in (travelling to) the activity. The level of seniority of individuals involved or spatio-temporal constraints faced by specific individuals may weight such location choice (Urry, 2003). Consideration of collective carbon footprint may also now feature.

2.1.2. The nature of the activity at the destination in terms of the importance of co-presence

Allied to the issue of location dependence is the question of whether two or more individuals need to be co-present in order that the purpose(s) of the activity at the travel destination are achieved? This question is particularly pertinent where the activity concerns information exchange and where it may appear that the information could have electronically transcended the distance between the individuals involved rather than the individuals having to travel to be co-present.

Co-presence offers the prospect of a multi-sensory experience of encounter and exchange. While the exchange of facts and figures, diagrams and the like could be done remotely, matters of eye contact, body language and indeed smell can strongly colour the proceedings and outcomes of an activity. Arnfalk and Kogg (2003) and Denstadli et al. (2012) review media richness theory which contends that the medium of communication is determined by the nature of information to be communicated. More complex information requires higher 'bandwidth' media (notably face to face) and straightforward information requires only a low-density medium (e.g. email). An important distinction must be made between the transmission of codifiable information with 'stable meaning' and of 'complex tacit knowledge' (Storper & Venables, 2004). Face to face lends itself strongly to the latter.

There is a danger of 'functional thinking' (Geels & Smit, 2000) in understanding the purpose of face to face communication. It will often reach beyond sharing knowledge and views on explicit topics of business relevance to the formation of trust and building of human relationships. As Storper and Venables (2004) note, "[h]umans are very effective at sensing non-verbal messages from one another particularly about emotions, cooperation, and trustworthiness"; likewise Urry (2003) remarks that "[e]ye contact enables and stabilizes intimacy and trust".

It can also be the case that co-presence provides a contribution to social capital. Jain and Lyons (2008) discuss the notion of the gift of travel time which can in part symbolise the gesture of importance of a social encounter implied by an individual being prepared to give their time in order to travel and achieve co-presence (in contrast to the fast and efficient alternative of electronic communication which "paradoxically, can be so efficient that it destroys the value of the message" (Storper & Venables, 2004)). Urry (2003) more broadly explores what he calls 'meetingness' and, in the context of an increasingly networked society of the information age, the need for periodic face to face meetings (social or business) to address obligations as well as to sustain networks of weak ties. Faulconbridge, Beaverstock, Derudder, and Witlox (2009) in their empirical analysis of professional services firms reveal an intermittence of face to face meetings that are "the opportunity to establish, consolidate and reconfirm relationships which minimise the future need for travel".

2.1.3. The duration of the activity set against the duration of the associated travel

Schwanen and Dijst (2002) have examined the relationship between activity duration and travel time, considering the notion that

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