Understanding the development of business travel policies: Reducing business travel, motivations and barriers

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ABSTRACT

Business travel accounted in the UK in 2010 for 3% of trips and 10% of the UK's domestic distance travelled (Department for Transport, 2011, p. 4). However, it is an under researched area, even though in major cities, where transport networks are most congested, it forms a higher proportion of trips. The paper presents the findings of a study of changing business travel practices and policies affecting the briefcase traveller. The findings are drawn from semi-structured interviews with key actors in stakeholder and private sector organisations based predominately in London and a survey of 150 business travellers. The study was designed to understand the motivations and attitudes towards reducing business travel and the compromises that needed to be made to balance reducing carbon emissions and cost, whilst maintaining or improving productivity and meeting the requirements of the business.

The main findings show the approaches and implications of these approaches to reduce carbon emissions and costs, improve productivity and the impact of ICT. The findings show the importance of external reporting through the Carbon Reduction Commitment, the Carbon Disclosure Project and corporate responsibility reports as a motivator to develop new policies. The paper goes on to outline how some factors can be both barriers and motivations for change, such as customers insisting on meeting their suppliers face-to-face, but also requiring information on carbon emissions as part of the Carbon Disclosure Project. Individuals can also be both a barrier and a motivator to change. The role of existing travel and meeting habits and the view of some that travelling is a perk linked to status symbols have proved to be a hard barriers to overcome. However, a technically literate younger generation used to communicating virtually have challenged these practices.

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1. Introduction

Business travel is fundamental in supporting business, as these journeys are generated by the need to meet or to visit a specific site. It is defined as 'travel in the course of work' (Holley et al., 2008; Lyons, 2013). This is a very broad definition that could include travel to a meeting either internally to the organisation or externally to a customer, visiting sites or, as Mackie et al. describe, it could apply 'to service engineers, delivery people, public transport drivers, lorry drivers etc.' (Mackie et al., 2003). This paper refers to business travel associated with face to face meetings, which Mackie et al. describe as 'briefcase business travellers'. Although fundamental in supporting business, business travel is an under researched area either from a

transport economics perspective (Lyons, 2013) or the relationship between mobility, Information Communication Technologies (ICT) and changing working patterns (Haynes, 2010). The concentration of research for business transportation has been on the commute and freight flows. This could be largely because the business journey only affects a small proportion of workers compared to other forms of business related travel (Aguilera, 2008). Nevertheless, the business trip can have important social implications. It can be time consuming and tiring for the business traveller, affecting their work-life balance and costly for business and the economy (Aguilera, 2008).

The objective of the paper is to add to the research by exploring how businesses have tried to resolve the tensions created by developing business travel policies that both reduce costs and cut carbon emissions, whilst also trying to improve productivity and meet the challenges of new working practices derived from the use of ICT and increased dispersion of office locations or home working and the impact of these on work-life balance (WLB).

The findings of this paper are drawn from the results of a project commissioned by Transport for London (TfL) in conjunction with TRL, formerly known as the Transport Research Laboratories. The work explored the motivations and barriers that private sector organisations based in London, or with large offices in London, encountered in attempting to reduce the amount of business travel and the carbon emissions that this generated.

The research was carried out in two phases; the first was an online survey of 150 business travellers travelling into and within London and the second, semi-structured interviews with stakeholders and business travel managers in private sector organisations. The paper largely presents the findings of the qualitative data and considers primarily the environmental aspects of sustainability through a reduction in carbon emissions.

1.1. The business meeting

People undertake business travel to be co-present with people or objects. Business meetings are held in order to inform, discuss, present, collaborate, sell, strategize etc., but overall the purpose of a meeting is to communicate (Arnfalk and Kogg, 2003; Lyons et al., 2008). Face-to-face meetings have long been supposed to be the most effective way of doing business, seeking out new markets, exchanging ideas and communicating with colleagues and customers alike. They are perceived to have the capacity to transmit equivocal information, to produce immediate feedback, and to build a personal atmosphere when meeting someone face-to-face (Arnfalk and Kogg, 2003).

Face-to-face meetings are perceived to be important for a number of reasons. They are good at building social capital through socialising and networking and removing the anonymity of participants in a group which can help to build trust (Storper and Venables, 2004; Denstadli et al., 2012). Attendance at a meeting can be important to share information and influence decisions. By being present it is possible to share in the value and significance of the meeting (Urry, 2003; Lyons, 2013). Saffo suggests that even when people develop a relationship in a virtual environment they inevitably want to meet in person (Saffo, 1993), so there is a perception that virtual meetings can develop a relationship to a point and that face-to-face is important in developing the social contact. However, work by Romano and Nunamaker shows that the view in corporate America is that meetings are thought to be unproductive (Romano and Nunamaker, 2001).

1.2. Changing nature of organisations

This idea that meetings are unproductive is something that will become increasingly important as the nature and structure of organisations change leading to a greater demand for meetings, which has implications for the transport network. There has also been a shift away from manufacturing with the Taylorism and Fordism approach of breaking work into component parts, to knowledge-based products and services (Holley et al., 2008), affording greater autonomy to individuals about how, when and where they work. More organisations work from a number of sites, in which the hierarchy is flattening and employee independence is increasing. All of these changes are likely to increase the need for communication both internally within the organisation and externally with business partners (Aguilera, 2008; Denstadli et al., 2012). This change in organisational structure is accompanied by a change in the way organisations work, so that there is a greater use of project or innovation teams. These teams can be geographically dispersed generating an increased need for communication, which could be either achieved through physical or virtual means (Hildrum, 2007).

1.3. Technology and its use

ICT has been seen as a way to reduce the impact of the changing nature of organisations on the transport network. The concept that ICT would lead to reductions in business travel has been around since the 1960s, with the expectation that a combination of telephone and television could act as an alternative to business travel (Geels and Smit, 2000). ICT has developed significantly since the development of the telephone, with the Internet as a major step change in the possibilities to communicate virtually. The Internet, invented in 1993 (Lyons, 2002), provides the infrastructure to facilitate the movement of information through mediums such as the web, email, Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) and video. Video communication technology has developed to include '...flexible videoconferencing communication services for conference rooms, desktops and mobile terminals...', which now offer a '...collaboration application with video functionality...' (Denstadli et al., 2013). This not only allows for video communication, but also the ability to show and share documents so that it is possible