



Socio-occupational and geographical determinants of the frequency of long-distance business travel in France



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ABSTRACT

Business travel, and long-distance business travel in particular, has received much less attention in research than home-to-work travel. This article explores some determinants of the frequency of long-distance business travel. It focuses on the influence of two parameters that have been little studied: the individual's socio-occupational group and the workplace location. The data used were provided by the 2008 French National Transport and Travel Survey. Following a review of the literature, a Poisson regression is performed on the frequency of long-distance business trips. The most significant determinants are socio-occupational category, income, gender and the urban or rural nature and size in terms of the number of inhabitants of the area of location. In particular long-distance business trip frequency is lower in the Paris urban area than in all the categories of urban areas as well as rural areas because of the highly centralised organisation of economic activity and the transport network in France.

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1. Introduction

It is not easy to arrive at an accurate estimate of the share of business travel in total travel demand. However, data from a number of national travel surveys and the conclusions of a number of studies, amongst them the “World Travel Monitor” report (IPK International, 2014), suggest that the estimated contribution of business travel to total long-distance travel, defined as any journey further than 50 miles (approximately 80 km) from home, is currently close to 15% in both Europe and the USA (Aguiléra, 2014).

However, business travel has received much less attention in research than home to regular workplace travel (Aguiléra, 2014; Faulconbridge et al., 2009; Gustafson, 2012). Yet business travel is highly characteristic of certain modern forms of work which exhibit reduced adherence to predefined locations (Crague, 2003; Vilhelmson and Thulin, 2001). This kind of travel is an essential and probably growing component of work activity for a number of professional categories, including some of the self-employed, executives and salespeople, as well as many company directors (Haynes, 2010).

However, there is still a lack of research that can genuinely explain the connections between, on the one hand, the factors

arising from corporate strategies, the nature and organisation of work and developments in ICT and, on the other hand, the need for business travel (Faulconbridge et al., 2009). Yet this is an important issue since there is a need to reduce the negative environmental consequences of business travel (Aguiléra, 2008).

The purpose of this article is to identify some determinants of the propensity of French workers to travel for business purposes. Only long-distance business travel undertaken on a non-daily basis has been considered. This is defined as business trips involving a distance of over 80 km as the crow flies from home. A consequence of this is that we consider both national and international business trips while many studies define a long-distance business trip simply as an international one. In addition, unlike many studies in this field, we have not only considered trips with at least one overnight stay. Our definition of long-distance business trips is therefore broader than that used in many other studies and may involve more occupational groups. The goal of the paper is to improve our understanding of the need for long-distance trips in the contemporary economy by identifying some of the factors that explain the frequency of long-distance business travel among French workers. We have focused on the influence of two parameters that have been little studied: the individual's socio-occupational group and the characteristics of the workplace location.

The paper is structured into five parts. The second part provides a review of literature on the determinants of business travel. The third part presents the data, which was sourced from the 2008 French National Transport and Travel Survey (ENTD). This part also

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describes the test sample and the variables that will be tested in a Poisson regression. The fourth part of the paper tests the explanatory power of these variables for the frequency of business trips undertaken in the previous 3 months. The fifth part is a conclusion which presents a summary of the main findings and an exploration of a number of areas for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. A wide range of motivations

The reasons behind the demand for business travel are very diverse (Faulconbridge et al., 2009). They include the globalisation of companies and markets, the increasing prevalence of multi-facility companies, the introduction of multi-site team working, the growing reliance on outsourcing and partnerships with other companies and the increasing number of professional events like conferences and trade shows (Aguilera, 2008; Haynes, 2010; Storme et al., 2013). These changes mean that organisations need to communicate more with geographically separate entities: customers, suppliers, partners, etc. Indeed the ability to obtain, share, and transmit information, especially complex information, has become highly strategic in the contemporary economy (Larsen et al., 2008; Wiklund and Shepherd, 2003). And although the transmission of information by ICT is increasing, face-to-face contacts remain essential because they are an efficient means of communication for complex information (Lorentzon, 2003). In particular face-to-face communication is crucial for technology transfer because technology is best explained and demonstrated in person (Hovhannisyan and Keller, 2011). In addition physical encounters can help solve incentive problems, facilitate socialisation and learning and finally contribute to psychological motivation (Bathelt et al., 2004; Jones, 2007; Julsrud et al., 2012; Stoper and Venables, 2004; Torre and Rallet, 2005). However, business travel is not undertaken only for the purposes of face-to-face contacts: in both the industrial and services sectors, some trips are also undertaken for the purposes of diagnosis, maintenance, repair and delivery (Wickham and Vecchi, 2009).

Business trips are therefore made for a wide range of reasons, especially customer visits (including communication activities but also technical aspects), internal meetings – in the case of an organisation with several facilities, training courses, corporate conventions, conferences and trade shows. For instance, for the Norwegian employees who travelled by air interviewed by Lian and Denstadli (2004), 42% of domestic business travel was for conferences, courses and conventions. In Sweden, about one fifth of long-distance business trips (more than 100 km each way) are for conferences and other events, whereas meetings, customer visits, etc. account for about half (Frändberg and Vilhelmson, 2003).

However, few attempts have been made to identify the variables that explain the frequency of long-distance business travel. Existing studies underline the influence of the nature of the activity – both at the company scale (like the business sector or the belonging to the public or private sector) and the worker scale (like the position held) –, the internal organisation of the company (like the number of its sites) and the policy regarding travel expenses. They also suggest that individual characteristics (like gender) make it more or less likely to travel for business. Finally they do not really discuss the influence of the workplace location while we think this is an important parameter.

2.2. Nature of the work

2.2.1. Business sector

Some production and service sectors are more knowledge-intensive and operate on a more global scale than others (Bell

et al., 2004; Tödtling et al., 2006). Examples of knowledge-intensive sectors are finance, electronics, biotechnologies, research and the medical or semiconductor industries. These sectors are in general more internationalized and use more tacit knowledge than more traditional sectors. Hence one would expect them to need more face-to-face contacts with remote interlocutors and therefore generate more business trips.

However, the influence of the sector on the need for business travel is not clear in the empirical literature because only a few studies have analysed this issue. Hugoson (2001) found that the willingness to make a business trip is greater in manufacturing industry than elsewhere. In Norway, Lian and Denstadli (2004) concluded that the oil industry produces more travel than other sectors. Haynes et al. (2005) suggested that the software industry is one of the most travel-intensive sectors in Ireland. The business sector is probably not the most important variable for explaining corporate travel needs, in particular because organisational strategies (sites, functions) and marketplace geography strategies can vary greatly within a single sector. The position held is probably more relevant. Finally, as it has been said before, business travel is not undertaken only for the purpose of complex knowledge exchanges but also for technical reasons (like maintenance or repair). Hence knowledge-intensive sectors are probably not the most concerned by business travel.

2.2.2. Public sector versus private company

Whether a company belongs to the public or private sector seems to be a more important differentiating factor than its business sector, with the private sector logically generating more travel, in particular international travel, than the public sector (Crague, 2003; Lian and Denstadli, 2004). Moreover, the reasons for business travel differ between the public sector, where long-distance business travel is much more likely to relate to conferences and courses, and the private sector, where the main reasons for travel are sales, marketing and consulting (Lian and Denstadli, 2004).

2.2.3. Profession and position held

Certain professions and, more specifically, certain positions within organisations, involve substantial travel, whereas others do not (Wickham and Vecchi, 2009). The available research on the subject identifies two variables: the first is the position held, i.e. the nature of the tasks performed, and the second is the level of responsibility in the exercise of the tasks. These two variables are linked with the need for business travel because they help to distinguish between jobs that do or do not involve interchanges with internal and external interlocutors, as well as the content of those interchanges: simple or knowledge-intensive, i.e. entailing a degree of face-to-face communication. Management functions, sales functions and functions in which there is a strong need for complex information (design, research and development, etc.) seem to be amongst the most mobile (Aguilera, 2008). As regards management functions, travel is associated in particular with the need to monitor multiple sites and negotiate with customers and, more broadly, with the organisation's partners. Sales functions also demand direct relations with customers, which entail travelling. Finally, functions associated with complex information (i.e. information that cannot be exchanged by ICT) need to work in collaboration with various interlocutors in developing knowledge and/or products, because of their complexity and/or the customer's needs for personalisation. The self-employed, who often combine several of these functions, are in general particularly mobile (Arnfolk and Kogg, 2003).

Moreover, the need to travel tends to increase with the level of responsibility. However, this parameter can also bring greater flexibility in controlling, and in particular reducing, the degree of

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