The unnoticed impact of business travel

Introduction

Travelling for business purposes is something millions of people do every week. But how many businesses think smartly to ensure this travel is effective for everyone involved? Travel is a vital part of the wider Smarter working picture and needs careful consideration.

While some people do enjoy travel, there's no doubting that it can be draining, especially when it's a common part of your working week. Whether you're heading off to an early meeting in rush hour or arriving home too late to do the school run, travelling for work can impact on life outside of your job.

The human impact is one thing, but financial cost is also significant. According to Luggage News, the average cost of business travel in the UK is £750 per employee per year. Clearly, some employees' travel costs will be much higher – and the total bill for businesses with large numbers of employees will be significant. Indeed, on that average alone, any business with more than 1,350 employees will have a £1 million-plus annual travel bill.

For a lot of businesses, large scale meetings are always going to be necessary but there are always ways to cut costs and make it fit into the employee's life better.

Cutting costs is essential for any business – and so is employee retention. Workers who are struggling to build a strong work life balance are more likely to leave their job. Spending a lot of time apart from your loved ones and struggling to fit in everyday activities such as going to the gym can – and does – put a strain on workers.

This brings us full circle. Happy workers don't look to leave – and not leaving means no cost to recruit. Smart travel, therefore, is about finding the right balance with wellbeing, safety/security and cost. The end result should be retention and efficiency.

But that's the ideal. Before we can get there, we need to be able to understand where we are right now. In this report, we've set out to discover the current state of play for business travel in the UK and how it can be optimised to work smarter and not harder.

UK Business Travel 2019: Our Survey

We commissioned an exclusive survey of UK professionals who often travel for business to find out their views on the impact this travel has on their lives. The results show a number of key findings that all companies should take on board.

We've noticed the challenges people have faced, including missing important life events and putting their own wellbeing at risk. It's clear from the results that business travel has a lot of scope to improve. Even something simple, like finding a middle meeting place instead of one person travelling miles, would make all the difference to the people involved.

We asked respondents why they travel to meetings for work, and although most meetings remain important for those in attendance, 30% of people told us they went to meetings because they 'feared if they didn't, it would negatively affect their career'. Meanwhile, 36% of people only attend because they're told to. Similarly, 34% of people admitted the meeting they attended could've been held virtually. An additional 27% said they arrived only to find out they didn't need to be at the meeting. All of these are negative incentives that are unlikely to be delivering smart results.

Our survey showed that travelling for business purposes is likely to have a negative effect on the mental health and wellbeing of employees.

15% of workers admitted they've struggled with their mental health when travelling to and from meetings. This increased to almost one in five (19%) for 25-34 year olds. Across the whole workforce – and the whole population – this is a huge number of people whose health is suffering from the lack of smart travel for work.

These findings mirror an assessment from the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, which found that those who travelled 21+ days a month were more likely to report trouble sleeping, mild anxiety and symptoms of depression.

Not only can your mental health be at risk, but your physical health can also be jeopardised. In our survey, 17% of 45-54-year-olds said they struggle with both their mental and physical health when travelling. A shocking 47% of people saying they usually get a takeaway on the way home from a meeting or business trip, which, when done often, is going to negatively affect your physical health.

With meetings eating into personal time, it's not surprising 29% of 25-34s have more rows with their partner as a result of travel.

Eight hours is the usual working day for most people, so elongating this as a result of a work meeting is likely to cause employees distress. With the distance of some meetings, those in attendance may spend hours out of their day travelling. Not only does travel often make people more tired, but there can be additional stress that comes with travelling long distances. With delays, cancellations and congestion, there are endless reasons that an issue could arise. While there are some things that are always going to be out of control, thinking smartly about the time and location of your meeting can minimise the impact of travel.
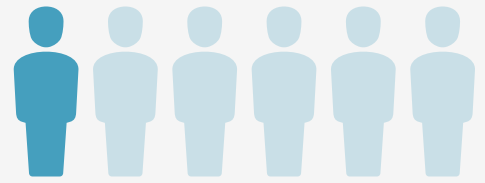
One in six workers struggle with their mental health when travelling to and from meetings
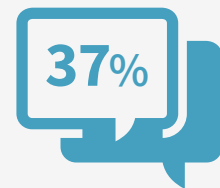
37% of people have travelled to a meeting that 'could have been summarised in an email'
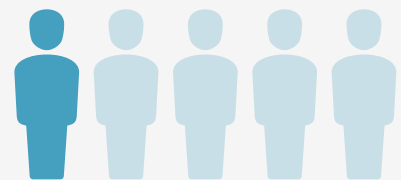
Almost one-in-five people (19%) have missed an event at their child's school while travelling to meetings

Physical and mental health is vital

Returning home late after being asked to travel is common for 40% of employees questioned – with travel regularly spilling outside of core working hours. Travelling by yourself can often be a lonely process, and it can only be made worse by taking up a chunk of your personal time. With a lot of workers travelling for business purposes multiple times in one week, it can result in mental health concerns if it continues for a long period of time. Simple things can make a difference for business travel, including booking a meeting room located in the middle of the two destinations, which results in less travel time for the employee.

It would also be more convenient for most people to have a meeting at about 11am, for example. Not only are you avoiding rush hour, you're also less likely to leave or return in the dark in winter, which increases feelings of safety. 27% of women asked admitted they previously had to walk somewhere they didn't feel safe when travelling to a meeting, while 22% of men also experienced this. Similarly, 23% of business travellers have had to park somewhere they didn't feel safe, in an area they didn't know.

Ensuring your safety and wellbeing is looked after is of utmost importance to employees. Location contributes to this – as well as the overall impression made on the attendees.

When deciding on a place for the meeting, 35% of people believe the office is the ideal place for a meeting. Meanwhile, 14% would rather the meeting was held over lunch – proving that the working lunch is perhaps not as popular as you think.

Only 35% of people always feel safe and secure when travelling for work

One in eight people spend more than 6 hours a week travelling to meetings

19% of people would rather the meeting be virtual summarised in an email'

Case study

Travelling for business can damage health, relationships and personal time

Oliver Davies, 29, a brewery financial executive in Gloucestershire told Capita about his struggles with driving and getting the train for work.

Oliver said: "I travel around three days a week, which mostly consists of me getting myself to different places. Often, I'm travelling between 800 and 1,000 miles. With early meetings, it's difficult to know when to leave, but you adapt and plan your trip. It's harder on the way home, you're likely to get stuck in traffic, if you're leaving a big city at 6pm it could end up taking four or five hours.

"I usually leave the house around 6am, but the time I arrive back home varies, the mixture of tiredness and stress often impacts my judgement. When you've been stuck in traffic or the train line is closed and you're stressed and you're all over the place, when you eventually do get into the meeting you don't really take in what's said."

He added: "My wife works in London a couple of days a week and commutes, but we don't see each other during the week. It's hard to try to do things ourselves; it all gets put on hold, particularly if I'm not home until 10pm. We try our hardest to have date nights. The occasional days we're in the office we'll try to have a date night, but at the drop of a hat it can go out of the window."

It's easy for businesses to lose track of the people behind the travel request. Considering real, human stories of the difficulties of travelling can help to bring people back to the fore.

Driving is one of the many ways people can travel, and the potential difficulties are often only worsened if you get the train or need to fly too. While Oliver faced a mixture of driving and getting the train, he was hit with a lot of negative repercussions as a result of travel and offers a human example of the impact of travel management.

Physical health and eating habits can be put at risk

As stated earlier, 47% of people said they would get a takeaway on the way home from a day of travelling.
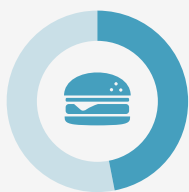
47% of people get takeaways on the way home when travelling for work

Oliver said: "My eating habits are absolutely terrible. On a normal week I'll eat a breakfast of yoghurt, fruit or cereal, my lunch is usually salad and dinner is always fresh food. When I'm on the road, I end up eating on the way. When you're hungry, you've got to stop at services with nothing but a Burger King. After a long day of picking up bits and pieces, I'll come home feeling quite ill."

About a third of people have felt ill or suffered from a lack of sleep as a result of travelling for work

Oliver found he's missed out on a lot of important aspects of socialising, whether that's going to the gym, seeing his friends or visiting family. He added: "I've had to cancel plans quite a few times because of work, even things throughout the week like seeing relatives. If I can't do it in the week it gets pushed back to my weekend, which means I don't have any time for myself. Sometimes I even have to call my parents to get them to pick up my dog because I've been called into work.

"It can be lonely at times. Not only do I not see my friends or my wife, but half of the time I'm driving by myself. It definitely has a negative impact, it caused me to change jobs once before – but it's affected by what you're doing and why you're doing it. The travelling isn't as bad now that I'm with a smaller company. It's nice knowing I'm doing it for a reason, but it definitely plays a factor in my mental health."

24% of people have had a row with their partner about working early or late

Behavioural psychologist's insight into the impact of travelling for work

Capita Travel and Events' Behavioural Psychologist Jonti Dalal-Small said: "Travelling used to be a thrilling aspect of the workplace. Some people used to take jobs just to be able to travel because it was an exciting prospect – but now it's a real chore. It used to be an adventure, now it causes dread and uncertainty, with all sorts of problems.

"Whether you enjoy it or not is linked to whether you think there's a sense of purpose within your job. In our survey it came out that people are travelling to these meetings and it's not always clear why. People expect things to be done face to face, but it wastes a lot of time."

He added: "People try to make it easier on themselves by picking up a takeaway, because when you're tired and hungry after a long day you want it to be easy. If you're eating takeaway for a long while it's going to affect you. Your decision making could be impacted by a lack of good food and sleep, you're more likely to make choices you wouldn't have made otherwise. If you're feeling refreshed and able to think things through, it's going to be better.

"It can vary for different people. Each generation is becoming better at understanding wellbeing – jobs used to be a case of 'like it or lump it', but the younger generation are understanding those factors well. I believe the reason the younger generation are struggling more with their mental health is because they have a better understanding of what it means.

"That being said, I think a more experienced traveller develops coping strategies. For me, I know different ways to make it easier, even if it's just collecting my tickets ahead of time. It reduces my stress and you see quite a difference in behaviour. I think the biggest thing for those who travel for work is finding a way to reduce stress and alleviate pressure."

Make travelling for business less stressful

One of the biggest difficulties in business travel, whether you're driving, flying or getting the train, is the fear of getting lost. Regardless of how good you are at planning your trip, anything can go wrong.

Without forward planning, if something goes wrong it's likely to impact how smoothly the meeting runs. The longer you need to travel, the more likely things are going to go downhill on the trip, so it's ideal to have shorter travel and at a more convenient time of day. With the increased stress of travelling in rush hour, pressure of those around you can force you to take wrong turns or get on the wrong tube.

Less time to stress makes for a better meeting, which is why it's ideal to find a mutually beneficial location at a time that

isn't going to cause you to work outside of your usual hours. Instead of one person going to a meeting which is hours away with an arrival time of 9am, perhaps choose somewhere in the middle for an 11am start. That way, rush hour travel is avoided – as is an unnecessarily long trip.

With a later meeting time set in a closer location, it's more likely those in attendance are going to be less tired and ready to go after having a healthy breakfast. Setting the meeting around lunchtime, it's likely the employee will be home in time for dinner, ensuring their diet stays in line with their regular eating habits.

More than a quarter of people (27%) say poor Wi-Fi on a train has stopped them from working on the go
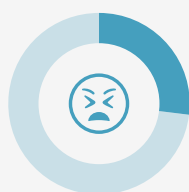
The same percentage (27%) said they had arrived to find out they didn't need to attend a meeting

Only 28% said the way their workplace handles travelling to meetings is 'smooth and effective'

Why keeping your employees happy is important

To maintain retention, employees need to be happy at work, and the way you handle business travel can make all of the difference. Many people have confirmed their mental health problems have been impacted by the increase in the amount of time they spend travelling.

A number of things can result in a happy employee, including good pension schemes, flexible hours and working from home – but travel is definitely part of the mix and needs to be considered.

Research by the University of Warwick shows that happy employees deliver better results. Happy workers improve sales by 37%, productivity by 31%, and accuracy on tasks by 19% – as well as improving health and wellbeing. That ticks the 'duty of care' agenda as well as the business case.

For employees that travel often, it's important to keep an eye on their mental and physical health, and take steps to manage their workload to mitigate any of the potential downsides of travel.

41% of people are forced to work beyond their core hours when travelling for work

More than a third (37%) have skipped a meal because of their travel schedule

Almost one in five (17%) had to travel to a meeting because it was the most convenient option for their boss

A duty of care

Looking after your employees is an essential part of being a manager, and your duty of care includes looking after your employees mental health and wellbeing. A lot of employees' will face stress, and there are plenty of factors that will influence your feelings in the office. Work overload, security, resources and travel.

Not only is business travel stressful, but duration, frequency and inability to refuse all contribute to negative feelings surrounding travel. According to hrmagazine.co.uk, medical claims are higher among travellers, and psychological illness claims are three times more than those who don't travel.

Adjusting the way you look at business travel can increase productivity and decrease absence. Through this adjustment, employers can continue to make improvements which ensure a duty of care is being taken into account.

This insight sheds light on the current state of business travel and, as a result, shows us the need for smarter travel. People can see the value of travelling to meetings but they want travel arrangements that take their mental and physical health – and security – into account. Companies too could benefit from smarter travel that results in more effective working, avoids wasted time and effort or, at worst, leads to retention issues.

Smarter travel is a key part of the picture for Smarter working. Speak to a member of our team to explore what this means and why you need to embrace it within your business.
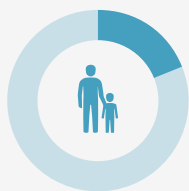
19% of people
are forced to miss the school run to travel for work

Almost a quarter (24%)
had to walk somewhere where they didn't feel safe when travelling for work

14% of people
struggle with their physical AND mental health when travelling to and from meetings

About smarter travel

Capita Travel and Events has created this report because over the years we have built our business, products and services to support these common issues people face with business travel and meetings.

We're helping organisations to travel smarter, avoid unnecessary travel and, when travelling, employees do so safely and securely with health and wellbeing in mind.

Get in touch

Our Smarter working approach, technology and expertise creates better outcomes for our customers every day.

Speak to our team to understand more about overcoming the unnoticed impact of business travel.

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