Revolutionising eco-friendly business travel in the age of Covid-19

Sustainable business travel programmes are set to boom post-Covid-19 as travel managers rally behind new opportunities to fast-track their climate compliance. Bonnie Smith, general manager at FCM Travel Solutions, says: "While traveller safety will, of course, be a key component of any of the changes to travel policies going forward, this could also be an opportunity for travel managers to hit the reset button on their programme's sustainability efforts."

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In a survey of its own members, the Climate Action for Corporate Travel Urgent Sustainability Summit (Cactus) found that 93% 'strongly agree' or 'agree' that Covid-19 has given travel managers an opportunity to fast track the creation of "a more sustainable and viable future for the planet".

Further to this, a 2020 survey of ITM's buyer members found that 56% believed the focus on sustainable business travel would remain the same when things pick up after Covid, while a further 40% believed it would become of even higher importance.

Smith adds: "We have a unique opportunity to make climate action the focus of our post-Covid-19 recovery efforts. It is important that we act now."

Making sustainable travel integration easy

Smith said that for many South African businesses, the challenge of implementing a sustainable travel programme used to loom large, but with the lessons learnt during the Covid-19 pandemic it no longer has to.

"Businesses now have a practical understanding of where and how they can cut down on unrequired travel, this frees them up to ensure that their essential travel is environmentally conscious without concerns about breaking the bank. The whole system will be better streamlined," says Smith.

Pierre-Emanuel Tetaz, EMEA SVP and general manager at SAP Concur, said during a recent webinar on the company's 2020 Corporate Travel Sustainability Index: "We have to acknowledge the fact that the economic situation is not necessarily great, and many organisations are suffering, so overall travel spend will be under pressure. This could mean that people will travel less but might be willing to spend a bit more per trip – unit cost may change slightly and part of that will be because people are going to want to make more sustainable choices."

Research data backs this claim as almost all the companies surveyed by SAP Concur (98%) are prepared to allocate additional spend toward sustainability programmes over and above the current travel management budget.

The importance of acting now

However, market predictions indicate that without focussed intervention business travel emissions will return to previous levels. Hospitality giant Accor for example recently published a study showing that business travel would return to pre-COVID levels within six months, led by domestic travel.

Jonathan Pettifer, director of corporate sales and TMC partners at Accor UK and Ireland, says: "The hotel industry will be gratified to hear that corporates believe their business travel programmes will recover within 12 months, with many anticipating it will happen much quicker. Face-to-face interactions with clients and business partners are vital in many industries and we know there is significant pent-up demand from corporates wanting to get their executives back engaging directly with key contacts."

Smith urges buyers not to let the unique sustainability opportunity offered by Covid-19 slip through their fingers: "Integrating sustainable business practices into your travel programme can be seamless if you have the right information. Multiple airlines, hotels, and car hire companies have made huge changes to their business models to ensure that travel is more sustainable, and there is no reason why you shouldn't take advantage of this. FCM has the knowledge of how best to incorporate these businesses in your programme and can help."

Sustainable travel tips

Corporate travel policies can be oriented to favour: direct flights over indirect routes, as well as the use of closer-in regional airports and rail over car where it's logical on domestic routes, or at the very least those car hire companies with an electric fleet. Those hotels which pay attention to food miles and other sustainable practices can also become preferred suppliers.

Additional ways to travel sustainably include:

• Choosing an airline that offers a carbon offset option.

• Packing as light as possible.

• Traveling without paper by using more digital tools and technology for tickets, hotel confirmations and itineraries.

• **Choosing a hotel near your business meeting or event, so you catch public transport, use a share bike/electric scooter program, or walk.**

• **Being an environmentally responsible guest; reuse towels, turn lights/air-con off when you're out, take short showers and avoid dry cleaning clothes.**

• **Packing your own toiletries in reusable containers, BYO toothbrush and a reusable razor.**

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