

The new normal of business travel: What to expect and how to prepare

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For the past few months, most companies have focused their energy on how to adapt to a remote work environment and keep the business moving forward. But, what happens when shelter-in-place restrictions are eased and people head back to the office which, for road warriors, means taking to the sky? How will business travel change? How will airlines adjust? And how can travel managers prepare for what's to come?



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Although no one has a crystal ball, or all the answers, here's what to expect in the future:

1. Higher prices and fewer options

In the short term, you're going to see leaner staffing from airlines and hotels as they try to conserve cash and identify exactly when their travellers are coming back. They've already cut capacity—parking planes and accelerating the retirement of aircraft.

So, even when travel opens up, you'll see a lot of the non-stop flights going away, which means business travellers will spend more time at the airport, waiting for connecting flights—particularly if they're going to smaller markets.

To adhere to social distancing guidelines, these flights will likely have fewer passengers, leaving the middle seat open. This not only means that seat availability will be limited but is likely to increase the price of airfare.

2. Decreased international travel

Even when domestic air travel begins to rise, Montalto expects international travel for business to become more of a rarity. Not only is it expensive, but now companies must consider the medical capacities of the country, the incidence of today's

unprecedented health pandemic, as well as the fact that the traveller could be quarantined after returning home. Organisations must weigh whether the trip is worth the risk of potentially side-lining a key employee for 14 days.

3. Increased car travel and car rentals

While air travel decreases, at least for the short term, car travel and car rentals are likely to increase. If the destination is drivable, I think people will start doing that, both because flight capacity is down and they don't want to be in crowded environments.

Montalto also expects a large swath of business travellers who were using ridesharing services before the pandemic will go back to renting a car. If I rent my own car, I have control over its cleanliness, and I also know that I'm the only one who's been in that car for those 24 or 48 hours, as opposed to getting into a lot of different vehicles through the course of a trip.

4. Increased focus on duty of care

For every travel manager and every company, the pandemic has underscored the need for traveller visibility and Duty of Care. As things open up, I believe companies will be hyper-focused on the safety of their travellers, and making sure they have a means of knowing exactly where their employees are, whether they booked through an agency, a tool or decided to book on their own.

Organisations will seek out a solution to give them this world view of traveller location, and a way to communicate with them, if they don't have a mechanism in place already. What should travel managers be doing right now? While we're in this "wait and see" period, travel managers should take steps to prepare for the inevitable changes ahead.

In times where budgets and staff are lean, finding a way to streamline your operation is more critical than ever.

Assess your entire end-to-end process to look for areas for improvement. Then, start looking at solutions that can streamline those trouble spots. Assess the ROI and, if possible, start making incremental changes before travel volume picks-up again.

Although no one knows exactly what will happen next, by using this time to reassess your policies, procedures, agreements, and most importantly, your plan for keeping your travellers safe, your organization will be ready for whatever the new normal of travel looks like.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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