

8 ways business travel will change after the pandemic

Almost all aspects of daily life have undergone a transformation to a certain extent, and how and why we travel is certainly no exception. It is evident how business travel, in particular, has altered over the past few months, but what remains to be seen is what it will look like in the years to come.

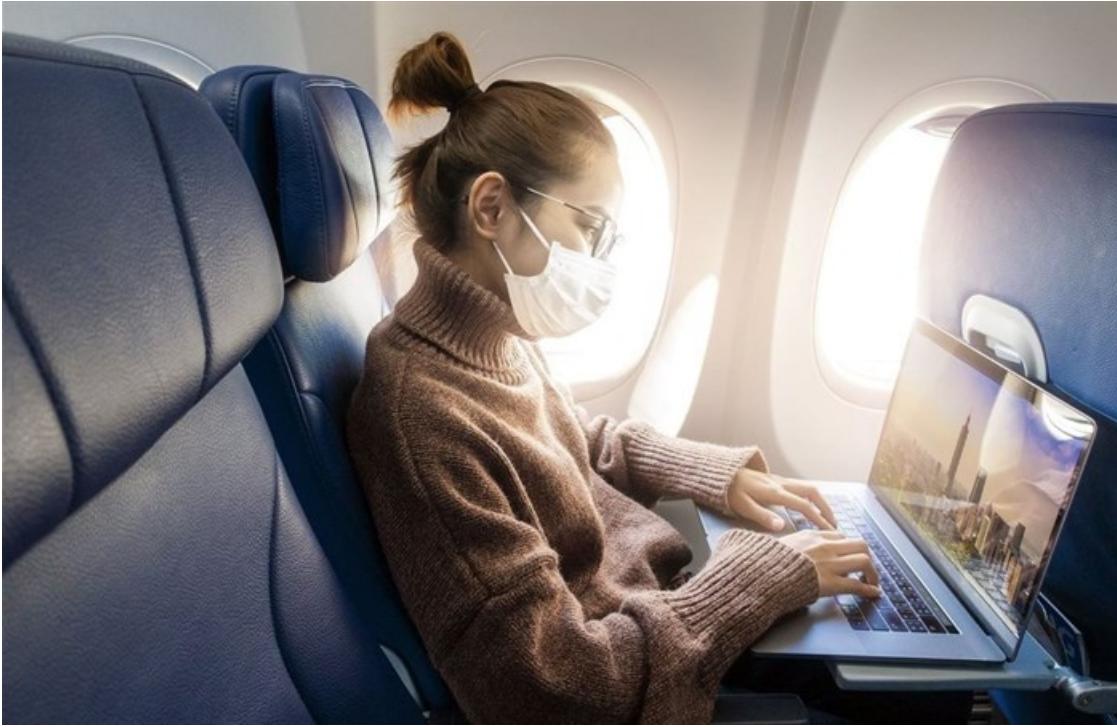


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So, what are the changes that corporate travellers can expect to see in a post-Covid world? Oz Desai, GM Corporate Traveller, weighs in...

1. Slow and steady revival

Currently, most business owners are taking a wait-and-see approach to organising corporate travel for their employees. The State of the Market research recently conducted by the Flight Centre Travel Group indicates that 26% of businesses are planning to return to the same pre-Covid-19 levels for domestic travel during 2021. The remaining 74% of businesses predict reduced domestic travel for the immediate year ahead.

Having said that, there is no escaping the fact that professionals are feeling an immense sense of fatigue when it comes to hosting and attending meetings online. It is true that there is no replacement for a face-to-face conversation when it comes to sealing a deal or discussing a partnership or merger, so there is definitely a sense of urgency to resume 'normal' domestic and international dealings with long-distance potential and existing clients.

However, the uncertainty revolving around Covid still hangs in the air, causing many business decision-makers to hesitate to proceed. It is expected that some industries will resume regular corporate travel faster and with less reservation than others, including management consulting companies and venture capitalist organisations, for obvious reasons.

2. Longer waiting times

The health screenings that have become part of daily life are not going to disappear any time soon, which means that corporate travellers will have to endure significantly extended waiting times when travelling, particularly upon arrival at the

airport, when catching a connecting flight, and when checking into their accommodation.

For instance, before Covid hit, the minimum connection times for domestic-international connections averaged at 45 minutes. Going forward, the OAG, a trusted global data supplier, estimates that the minimum connection times will average at around two hours.

3. Health will remain a priority

Pre-Covid, airports and airlines were primarily concerned with safeguarding passengers and staff from terrorism. While this will still be a priority, biosafety - maximising passenger and staff safety in terms of health - will become just as important. Regular disinfection of frequently touched areas of the aircraft, such as armrests and bathroom door handles, will continue to take place and passengers will be encouraged to complete surveys relating to how safe they felt during their flight.

4. Benefit programmes will improve

In an effort to convince more professionals to take to the skies once again, airlines, guesthouses, and hotels will turn to their loyalty programmes and ramp up incentives. They are certain to offer more attractive deals and benefits to make it more appealing for business travellers to resume their trips sooner rather than later.

Further to this, there will likely be a greater focus on service quality, providing travellers and guests with memorable experiences to optimise the chances of them returning soon in the future.

5. Bleisure travel to soar

After months spent in lockdown, professionals who travel for business-related reasons will be looking to make the most of their time away. Never mind the fact that there will be pressure to travel less frequently, making it strategic to combine work travel with leisure travel.

That means that more and more business travellers will attend that conference or face-to-face meeting with the necessary focus and determination, but also jet off on the trip with the intention of exploring the destination and taking part in a variety of activities and experiences once the work responsibilities have been ticked off the list.

Therefore, it is highly probable that travel suppliers will jump on the bandwagon when it comes to offering 'bleisure' packages that prioritise safety, but that also seek to make all types of business travel well worth the cost, risk, and effort.

6. Increased collaboration expected

Covid-19 demonstrated that collaboration –between countries, government bodies, companies, customers and suppliers –is vital in steering a path through the current uncertainty.

There is a call to all travel suppliers to put competition on the backburner and to come together to collaborate instead. In doing so, the revival of the travel industry as a whole is certain to unfold a lot faster. In an effort to overcome challenges and capitalise on opportunities brought about by the pandemic, it is expected that airports, airlines, and border agencies will investigate new ways of collaborating, particularly in relation to data sharing to meet and exceed traveller demands.

Flight Centre's state of demand, for examples, shows that from a business travel point of view, collaboration has meant adopting a travel program which embraces up-to-the-minute communication, transparency, traveller visibility and the ability to draw on TMC, industry and supplier connections to manage business travel priorities –and traveller concerns. Online resources, such as FCTG's Return to Travel Framework, for example, are important tools to support travel managers, stakeholders and taskforce committees to plan new ways forward.

7. Evolution of contactless traveller experiences

Considering how easily the virus is spread through person-to-person contact, it is crucial for travel suppliers to adopt contactless technology wherever possible. Many traveller suppliers have already embraced contactless technology to help flatten the curve, but the advancement of this technology is not going to stop here.

Numerous travel suppliers will opt to partner with tech companies to create bespoke solutions for their establishments to provide their customers with maximum peace of mind. This will see the implementation of touch-free experiences, gadgets, and devices across the corporate travel experience. If experts are to be believed, soon enough, it won't even be necessary to touch a door handle to use the bathroom on a plane or flip a light switch inside your hotel room. The vast majority of these daily 'touch tasks' will evolve into effortless, sensor-controlled actions.

8 Travel insurance will become essential

Travel insurance was a must-have even in pre-Covid times, but in a time when life can change at a moment's notice, it is and will remain completely non-negotiable. Business owners need to ensure that they are covered financially should their employee fall ill prior to their flight and be unable to board, or in the event that there is a rise in cases and lockdown restrictions need to be enforced once again. In a world where uncertainty prevails, it pays to be prepared!

Covid-19 has impacted each of us in a personal, corporate, societal and economic way. Most businesses have re-written the rule books to cater to the rapid changes we have undergone.

Desai concludes: "Without a crystal ball, no person, business or government can be certain of what the next 12 months hold. However, we can make some informed predictions based on the lessons we have learned in the past months. The travel landscape will look different, but we are positive that business travel will recover."

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