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How did business travel become a one-way ticket?



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How did business travel become a one-way ticket?

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So today I'm going to talk a little bit about business travel, and how business travel is now an everyday taken-for-granted part of working life for so many people. So whether you work for a major investment bank, in a marketing agency or even if you're an academic like many of the researchers talking on these videos are, business travel has become an embedded part of what we do as part of our work. So we spend time "on the road", "up in the air" flying around the world and don't really question that as a way of completing our everyday work practices.

The consequences of business travel

The problem is, of course, that business travel has a whole range of different consequences. So if you're an employer, you have concerns about the cost but also about the risks that go with travel. So the recent Icelandic volcano demonstrates very clearly how having travellers around the world who become stranded can cause all kinds of problems for businesses in terms of maintaining the continuity of their work. From the travellers point of view, of course, travel isn't without consequences too. So, for example, we can think about the social consequences - the people you leave behind at home, the stress that that might cause, particularly for children. We can also think about the general hassle and difficulties that go with being on the move and trying to work in a mobile fashion. If we then take another perspective we can also think about the carbon impacts of business travel. So for individuals, but also for organisations, the carbon generated - particularly by flying - is increasingly becoming a concern that requires management as part of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) agendas, but also as part of individual commitments to a more environmental, sustainable future. So in that context of business travel being so normal, but also potentially so problematic, it's perhaps not surprising that we often hear employers but also workers talk about aspirations of travelling less. So we hear people talking about the desire to spend less days on the road, for employers to spend less money and less time sending their employees around the world. But what we know through research, but also through common sense, is that travel generally has increased over time and has become more and more important in the past 30 or 40 years. In particular I want to think about how travel has become this embedded and normal practice, and how understanding it as being embedded and normal might help us to also understand not only why travel has grown in importance but also why it's so difficult to challenge, and so difficult to stop travelling, even though we might want to.

Key trends over recent decades

So, first of all, let me say a little more on the rise of business travel. Let's think about the main trends and what the data tells us in terms of business travel. Now at one level it is notoriously hard to access data about travel because much of it is held by corporate travel agents and they treat that as proprietary information. However, what we can do is focus on particular modes of business travel and identify some key trends that give us a bigger picture of what's been happening in the past 30 or 40 years. So let's think about air travel - which is often the form of travel that's most associated with business travel for international work. Research suggests that

somewhere between 20 and 40 percent of all flights are for business purposes. And if we then take that 20 and 40 percent, and calculate using World Bank (2012) data, we can reach the conclusion that somewhere between 3.5 and 7 billion passenger journeys are made every year for business reasons by air. So straight away we start to see the significance of business travel in terms of a mobility practice, but also in terms of those social, environmental, corporate dilemmas that I was talking about earlier.

Shedding light on business travel through surveys

So there's an initial starting point for thinking why business travel may be important. But we can then perhaps dig down a little bit further into the trends relating to travel. So for example, we can look at the Barclaycard Business Travel Survey, looking at a series of executives and surveying them over time to understand better their travel practices. So this survey began in the early 1990s and between 1996 and 2006 charted a significant 32 percent rise in the number of miles travelled by the executives being surveyed. So the executive survey demonstrated significant growth in their time on the road, up in the air, during this period. Interestingly, when this survey was completed in 2008 - at the time of the credit crisis and the beginning of the global recession - those surveys suggested they had no intention of reducing the amount of travel they engaged in, despite the economic effects of the global downturn. This demonstrates perhaps just how important, how central travel is to everyday work practices now and how we can understand it as something that can't be sacrificed or replaced despite economic, social or other pressures. Another line of analysis is to focus again on air but to look at a national context, and think about how important business travel is for national economies. So the UK International Passenger Survey data looks at the arrivals and departures from the UK by air for business reasons. And that survey charted between 1970 and 2010 a growth from 2 million arrivals and 2 million departures a year from the UK and to the UK for business to 9 million. So it's a growth of 7 million additional arrivals and 7 million additional departures for business reasons by air in that period of time between 1970 and 2010.

Business travel and globalisation

Again, when we put all of this together we start to see this significant trend of business travel becoming ever more important, ever more proliferating, yet - as I

hinted at the start of the video – potentially ever more problematic as a result of this growth. Now, what should we make of that? Now in some ways that’s unsurprising, I suppose. If we think about the globalisation of the economy in the past 40 years or so we would logically expect that there would be more travellers and more business travel ongoing. But when we think about that trend and that growth – and the connection of travel to the globalisation of the economy – a new set of questions starts to emerge, particularly in light of the technological revolutions that have been taking place at the same time as the globalisation of industry. So, for example, the rise of video-conferencing raises questions about ‘Why isn’t travel increasingly being substituted by virtual communications?’

Videoconferencing does not reduce travel

So let’s dwell on that issue just a little bit longer because that’s really at the heart of some of the key debates in this area. If we roll back to the beginning of the new millennium, around the year 2000, there was a significant belief that videoconferencing, the rise of Skype and the internet technologies, would lead to a decrease in the need for business travel; a substitution effect whereby people travel less and spend more time interacting virtually. Now, clearly these technologies have grown in importance, yet we haven’t seen the substitution effect that we expected. In fact many researchers now write about the idea that we have videoconferencing acting as a form of mobility ally, by that they mean videoconferencing is used to allow more frequent interactions between business people located around the world, but doesn’t replace the need for face-to-face contact. So the same level of travel occurs, videoconferencing just provides a new way to interact between those moments of face-to-face encounter. Now this was surprising to some extent for the literature; a substitution effect was very much expected but didn’t occur, so it raises questions about why that is and how we explain that. And that’s really the task for the remainder of this video – to think about why we haven’t seen the change in the role of business travel that we might have expected in the past 10 to 15 years, and how that might be connected to this problem of overcoming difficulties associated with social, environmental consequences of travel in a corporate setting. So let’s think about that issue a little bit more.

A lack of richness in communication

So one explanation for videoconferencing and other online technologies not having the impact on travel that we expected would be a technological explanation. So these technologies simply don't provide the kind of richness you get from a face-to-face encounter - seeing the whites of one another's eyes, body language and what that tells us about the relationship. And there's ultimately something increasingly important in such explanations; we all know that meeting face-to-face is very different than having an encounter over the screen. But what I want to suggest is that that can really only form one layer of the explanation as to why this problem of business travel - if we want to see it in that way - continues to persist. So let's think of travel in a different way. Let's think of travel as not only a functional technology, something that allows us to complete business, but let's think of it as something as a cultural phenomena, let's think of travel as taking on particular cultural as taken for granted embedded meanings in the business world. What does that perspective reveal then? How might it get us further towards understanding this continuous growth in travel?

Business travel: a culturally normalized practice towards success

Well, one argument I want to put forward is that over the past 30 years or so, what we've seen is the production of a particular set of cultures and logics and discourses that create travel as normal, necessary and expected. So if you want to be a successful business person, you have to be a traveller. Now these cultures have emerged from all kinds of sources, but perhaps one source we might focus on is the role of the mobility industries themselves. So the airlines, for example, generating logics around the business traveller as being the successful business executive. So one example of this comes from the work of Hudson, who took a historical perspective, looking at the adverts of the British Overseas Airline Corporation and the way that they described the business traveller. So they described in their adverts the logic that the successful business traveller - going by first class or business class - was the individual who would make the corporation successful and therefore any company that wanted to be successful needed to have the effective and successful business traveller. And we saw these adverts emerging in the 1970s and beginning to penetrate popular culture, in terms of the understanding of the business traveller as the successful executive.

Business travel on the big screen

Most recently perhaps we can see this is in the film starring George Clooney “Up in the air”, where the glamour of business travel was in some ways deconstructed. What’s most significant though is that a film was actually made about the whole idea of the glamour of business travel and what it involved. It’s become embedded in a normal understanding of what successful executives do, and it’s very hard to get away from that culture and to substitute that form of glamorous “Up in the air” travel with videoconferencing. Executives assume that to be successful, they must travel. Corporations publicise the mobility of their executives and use it as a tool to highlight their success as businesses. And that kind of cultural logic that has emerged over the past 20 to 30 years is, I would suggest, as important in explaining why travel continues to grow as any functional logic that focuses on what technology can or what technology cannot do. And so what I’m arguing is that we need a more multi-dimensional way of thinking about the role of travel if we’re really to get to grips with some of the challenges that I alluded to at the start. Let me just give a couple more examples of how that cultural logic is powerful. In many ways, the culture of travel being crucial for the success of business is now locked into, for example, workers’ contracts. We see a stipulation that workers must be mobile: ‘if you work for this company, you must agree that you will travel.’ We see promotion procedures that reward mobility.

Business travel’s relationship with career prospects

So, Espino and colleagues (2002), in a survey of World Bank Group employees, found that 69 per cent of employees felt that their career prospects would be jeopardised if they didn’t actively engage in travel. So these kind of structural phenomena that are emerging as a result of the cultures that I’ve described are just as important in explanations as what technology can and can’t do, I would suggest. So to wrap up, what does all that mean? Well, at one level, as I’ve hinted at throughout the video, a cultural explanation of the role of travel in business helps us to explain why we have the corporate, social, environmental concerns that I outlined at the start of the paper. So the idea that we all know travel is carbon-intensive, we all know that potentially we should aim to reduce travel, yet we don’t seem able to do it, can be explained as much by the cultural mechanisms that lock us into wanting to and feeling the need to travel, as any functional explanations about what it allows.

The need for a new cultural perspective on videoconferencing

At another level, taking that one step further, we can think about how this explanation of business travel leads us to different strategies to try and reduce travel when we want to. So it suggests that we don't just need to invest in new technologies but we need to think about:

a) the erosion of these cultures that generate a need for travel and

b) the production of new cultures where the use of videoconferencing, online interaction is seen as a symbol of success, as a legitimate business practice as much as travel is. So, a different way of thinking about doing business. And just to give one example of why that's important.

If you were to suggest that you were going to pitch to a client for a major contract using videoconferencing instead of going to visit them at their offices, you would probably be seen as out of synch with common business culture. You would potentially damage your chance of getting the contract. If a new way of thinking emerges - that the effective business is seen as the business that engages in virtual practice - potentially we'd get to a situation where it does become a real possibility to reduce business mobility. But clearly the erosion of existing cultures and the production of new mobility cultures is far from simple. And in that sense business travel really is an exemplary mobility practice that helps us to understand how mobility has become so embedded in everyday life in the corporate, but also the personal setting.

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