

FIVE TRENDS THAT WILL DEFINE THE FUTURE OF BUSINESS TRAVEL

Presented by

Skift.

+

TripActions



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There's no question that 2020 brought a seismic shift to the corporate travel sector. In the face of a global pandemic, nearly every stakeholder—including suppliers, business travelers, business travel platforms, and travel managers—had to reassess old habits, shift business plans, and reimagine what business travel might look like moving forward.


Making that exercise more challenging was the sheer number of significant changes. These included the growing acceptance of remote working arrangements and a new focus on assessing and minimizing risk for traveling employees. Businesses also grappled with the growing importance of managing company spending and gaining access to dynamic, real-time information—all to help assess a highly fluid business environment.

But what comes next? Which of these changes are merely passing fads, and which represent permanent adjustments to how the world plans and travels for work? And most importantly, how can company decision makers design successful business travel strategies for the future?

In this report, Skift and TripActions explore five trends that are likely to shape business travel in 2021 and the years beyond. The report relies on the results of a primary survey conducted by Skift in mid-2020, analysis of recent industry news, and interviews with key business travel experts and travel managers.

The result offers strategic guidance for travel managers, finance teams, and HR departments as they determine how to navigate this unique moment in the industry's history.





Traveler safety

Cost control

Two things on the mind of every travel manager to ensure business continuity and recovery.

In today's environment, getting back to business and ensuring the safety of traveling employees go hand in hand. Success depends first on having the right data and insights to make smart business decisions. Combine that with flexible travel and expense management tools for a winning formula that protects travelers while controlling costs.

See why TripActions is your trusted partner to help you get back to business travel safely and cost-effectively.

"TripActions is the only complete, end-to-end T&E management solution for the enterprise with the best online booking tool, global TMC and payments and expense solution in one platform. TripActions scales with our business to give us the tools and data we need to deliver a robust, global T&E program that protects our traveling employees while saving us money."

GameStop

- Judy Payne, Director of Meetings and Travel

TripActions

Fast becoming the default for corporate travel and expenses, TripActions is the leading, cloud-based T&E platform that combines industry-leading technology with best-in-class travel agency service. TripActions is trusted by 4,000+ companies globally to protect traveling employees while controlling costs and saving money.

See a demo at <https://tripactions.com/skift>

EXECUTIVE LETTER

Dear Corporate Leader,

As the world continues to battle challenging headwinds, we're seeing exciting signs that a turnaround is in progress, bringing hope to people and businesses around the globe.

Of course, plenty of questions remain, and lots of work remains to be done. We all need to keep thinking creatively about what the future could bring—and then innovate and adapt to make it happen.

That's exactly what we've been doing at TripActions since our founding in 2015. We've created a disruptive platform for corporate travel and spend management that more than 4,000 global customers trust to keep their travelers safe, ensure compliance, and save money.

Ultimately, we're about our users—all of them, all the time. It's a philosophy that's helped make our end-to-end travel and spend management platform a go-to solution. We launched our spend management offering, TripActions Liquid™, last year; it lets you do away with expense reports and have complete visibility and control over spend.

When can our teams meet face-to-face again? We're all figuring that out; but planning for the future begins by understanding all the shifts happening now in the travel landscape. It makes this exclusive trends report from Skift and TripActions essential reading, to glean key insights for 2021 and spark new ideas about how we can all move forward together.



Thomas Tuchscherer

Chief Financial Officer
TripActions

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ABOUT SKIFT

Skift is the largest industry intelligence platform providing media, insights, and marketing to key sectors of travel. Skift deciphers and defines trends for global CEOs and CMOs across the travel industry through a combination of news, research, conferences, and marketing services.

ABOUT SKIFTX

SkiftX is Skift's in-house content studio. SkiftX produced this report in partnership with TripActions.

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INTRODUCTION



Let's face it: 2020 cast some doubts over long-held assumptions in the corporate travel sector. After the steep drop-off in road warrior activity that occurred in the spring, nearly every aspect of the business travel experience was suddenly up for debate. But as the year went on and the industry has assessed how best to move forward, executives across the industry were sounding a note of cautious optimism.

"All indications are corporate travel is ready to start coming back and will come back pretty aggressively beginning the second half of this year," said Delta Air Lines CEO Ed Bastian [during an earnings call in January 2021](#). Others echoed this sentiment. "Whenever I talk to corporate customers, there's such a backlog of travel needs," said Carsten Spohr, CEO of Lufthansa, in a [recent analyst call](#).

But even as business travel inevitably returns, it probably won't look like it did before. Nowhere is this more obvious than the changing habits of business travelers, who are rapidly shifting their attitudes about when, where, and why they need to travel. Consider the growing shift toward [more last-minute bookings](#) among business travelers, or the growing interest in promoting cleaning procedures and contactless solutions among various travel suppliers.

Meanwhile, companies' organizational priorities are also evolving. And as they do, new opinions are forming about how to assess the risk of travel, along with predictions for what the world will look like as travel starts to recover. One example of this shift in priorities is the rapid move by companies around the world toward remote and flexible work policies.

While remote work is not feasible for all industries—healthcare and construction being two notable examples—the impact of the new policy is forcing an animated discussion in boardrooms around the world about how it will impact business travel spending.

“This is a fundamental shift in how global companies do business,” said Louise Miller, managing partner for the Americas, at Areka Consulting.

Remote work is just one of 2020’s many changes to business travel and the broader corporate culture moving forward. Change is also coming quickly to the areas of corporate spend management, employee benefits, and meetings and events. But while many adjustments loom large on the horizon, some travel industry experts have been quick to caution that when the pandemic ends, the corporate choice between remote work and back to the office will not be an “all or nothing” decision. The two scenarios are likely to exist side by side, complementing one another in the years ahead.

“[In 2020, companies] used technology to conduct business, but in the process, I think we learned that business travel does matter,” said Henry Harteveltdt, president of travel industry marketing research firm Atmosphere Research Group. “Some may be more important to an organization than other types of business travel, but business travel matters.”

Whether it’s the impact of remote work, changing assessments of risk, or how companies track employee spending, it’s increasingly obvious that the next five years of business travel will look very different than what came before. How can travel managers and company decision makers build smart business travel strategies for this emerging world?

In this report, Skift and TripActions present a mix of executive interviews, data, and industry news to identify five trends that will likely define the new corporate travel paradigms of the near future. ♦



TREND #1: TRAVEL MANAGERS ARE NOW RISK MANAGERS



As the effects of the first major pandemic in more than a century continue to linger over the business travel sector in 2021 and beyond, corporate travel decision makers will have to make a wholesale shift in their company-wide travel policies. Instead of setting universal rules, they'll need to begin developing smarter ways to determine how, when, and why employees can safely return to the road.

There's no question that Covid-19 changed the risk calculation for business travel moving forward. According to the results of a 2020 survey by Skift and TripActions, more than 60 percent of travel managers around the world said their company's willingness to let employees travel for work last year had either "decreased" or "significantly decreased" as a result of Covid-19.

Of course, this data point comes with a big caveat: Their opinions stemmed from the short-term shock of the pandemic. Still, the shift in thinking that occurred during 2020 will have a long-term impact on how travel managers and buyers evaluate business travel risk.

But what changes will result in terms of business travel policy making and program design? While it's still early days, one emerging trend is a growing need for better real-time data on the status of Covid-19 outbreaks in potential travel destinations. Citizens around the world have grown accustomed to tracking the [real-time county- and city-level data](#) on Covid-19 in their own communities; similarly, companies will need to adopt a data-first approach moving forward.

Take the TripActions [Business Travel Continuity](#) suite of tools as one example. This innovative platform that TripActions developed helps travel managers quickly identify travel risks and adapt their policy and business travel planning in response to unexpected events.

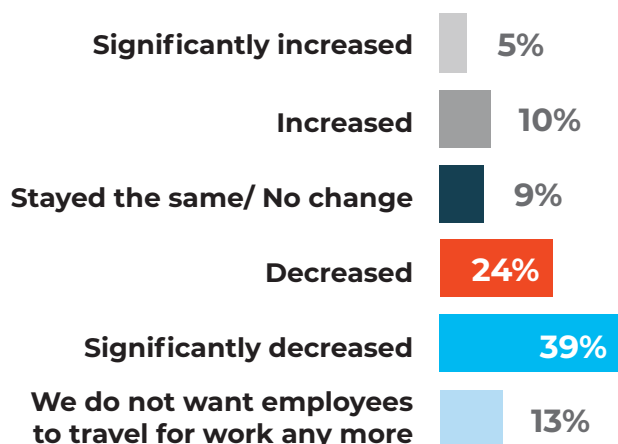
These types of all-in-one risk-assessment tools will be a critical component of travel policy development from now on. Companies also have to be prepared to provide traveling employees with more information about their evolving in-trip experience, so they can be prepared to return to the road.

“It’s [important] to be gathering all of the information on the different touchpoints of a journey,” said Danny Finkel, Chief Travel Officer of TripActions. “What is happening at an airport? What is happening on the plane? What is happening from once you land to getting to the hotel? What is happening at the hotel? And I think a big part of, call it the next phase, is just gathering all this information.”

One more critical best practice related to business travel risk assessment is developing two-way dialogues with employees, in order to better understand their needs. Ultimately, no matter how

Because of Covid-19, our company’s willingness to let employees travel for work has:

Travel Managers



Source: Skift + TripActions 2020 business travel survey

good the design of a travel policy, it’s not going to be successful if the employees don’t feel comfortable.

“Most organizations have a risk team who would be creating that guidance,” said Caroline Strachan, managing partner of travel consultancy Festive Road. “Once it’s in place, it’s really critical that the employee still gets to veto it. They get to say, ‘Even though you’ve done all that risk check, I don’t want to go.’”

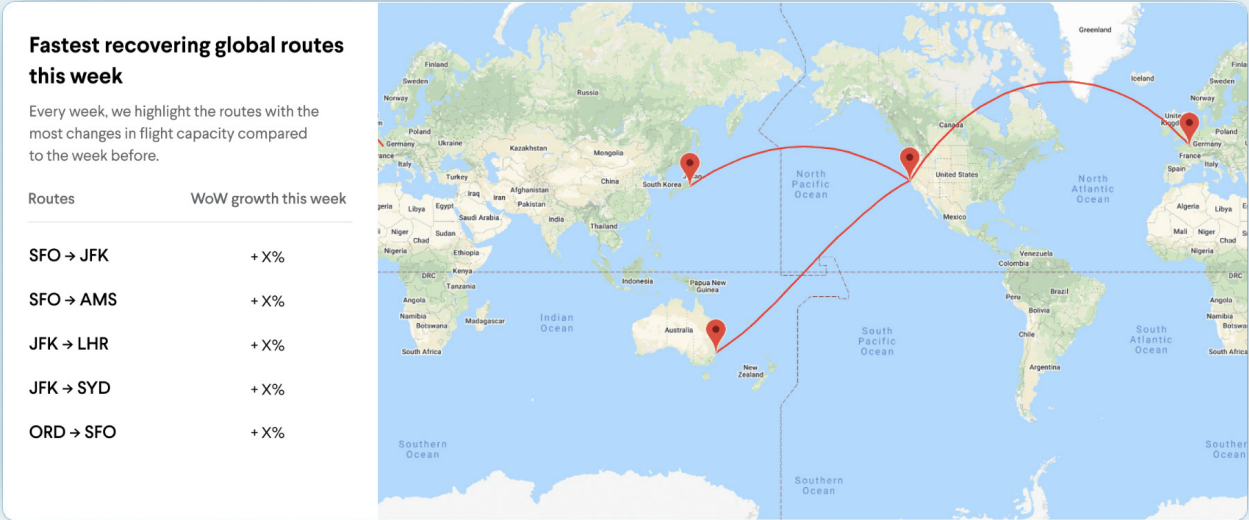
Others agree. “Travel managers across the board are having many more conversations with the travelers,” said Finkel. “Because a travel manager is a perspective of one, that person really needs to understand what employees want and not.”

One solution for creating a new risk assessment policy, detailed in a [recent feature in HR Director magazine](#), focuses on three key actions:

1. Decide what constitutes essential travel.
2. Develop scenarios for different employee groups, such as high-risk individuals or departments that travel frequently (like sales).
3. Rethink policy compliance procedures. Now is not the time to crack down on an employee who makes an out-of-policy purchase to stay safe.

To see how these business travel risk strategies are playing out in the real world, it’s helpful to look at the example set by GameStop. Like many other companies, GameStop had to [quickly evolve its employee travel policy in 2020](#) to adapt to the challenges created by Covid-19. As GameStop travel managers note, they’ve had to take a much more nuanced and human-focused approach to their business travel policy since the start of the pandemic.

This process involved developing a more personalized approach to trip planning with each individual employee. GameStop also created a phased travel chart that provided guidance for different travel activities based on the current level of pandemic outbreak.



A snapshot of TripActions’ business travel dashboard tools, which provide travel managers with a one-stop overview of all employee travel activity.

“It’s different than it was before. There’s a lot more emotion involved when it comes to travel,” said Judy Payne, director of meetings and travel at GameStop. “It’s allowed us to work personally with each and every traveler on their trip: making sure they feel safe where they’re going, making sure they know all the different policies of the airlines and hotels, and keeping apprised of all the [Covid-19] information coming out each week from the location that they’re visiting.”

All of these nuanced policies will, of course, need to be backed up by technology that allows travel

decision makers to enforce them. This means deploying business travel policies and tools that enable dynamic adjustments to business travel rules and risk assessments in response to changes in the broader environment. Even before Covid-19, leading-edge platforms like TripActions empowered business travel decision makers with levers to quickly and automatically make policy adjustments in response to changing circumstances. And when the pandemic hit, TripActions created additional levers, like a coronavirus dashboard and ability for travel managers to block their travelers from visiting areas where they could be at risk.

Phase	International Travel	Approval	Risk Assessment*	Home or Car Sharing	Roommate Required	Self-Quarantine at Home
I	Banned	EVP	Required	Banned	Banned	14 days upon return from all travel
II	C-level Approval Required	VP	Required	Banned	Banned	14 days upon return from all travel
III	VP Approval Required	Supervisor	Required	Banned	Yes, per policy	If you feel unwell or visited a Covid “hot spot”
IV	Supervisor Approval Required	Supervisor	No	No	Yes, per policy	If you feel unwell, notify your supervisor before returning to work

A phased business travel guidance chart developed by GameStop in response to Covid-19. An increasing number of companies are looking to develop more nuanced business travel rules in the face of a rapidly evolving business travel environment.

TREND #2: REINVENTING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BUSINESS TRAVEL AND SPEND MANAGEMENT

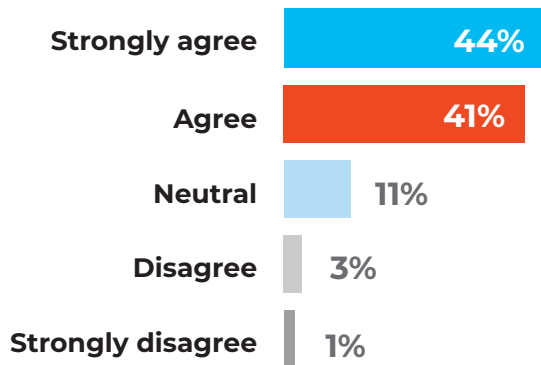


In years past, many company executives saw corporate travel primarily as a cost in their budget plans. But with the dramatic changes in company culture and business travel caused by Covid-19, that perspective has shifted.

Today, there's a growing urge among those in finance, travel management, and human resources (among other departments) to think more strategically about how travel expenses, payments, and reconciliation processes align with company-wide strategy and profitability goals. This shift in perception is pushing many business travel managers to reinvent how they think about the management, approval, and monitoring of spending moving forward.

Even though 2020 forced a temporary halt in business travel spending, the necessity of business travel as a company expenditure remains clear. After all, according to the 2020 Skift and TripActions business travel survey (conducted in the midst of the pandemic), more than 80 percent of program managers agreed or strongly agreed that business travel is important for driving company growth.

But even as company-wide commitment remains strong, attitudes toward travel expenses and corporate spend management are evolving. The economic shock created by Covid-19 forced many organizations to make tough decisions about their cash flow, long-term investment plans, and employee retention as they made every effort to stay solvent.

Agree or disagree: “Business travel is important for driving company growth.”**Travel Managers**

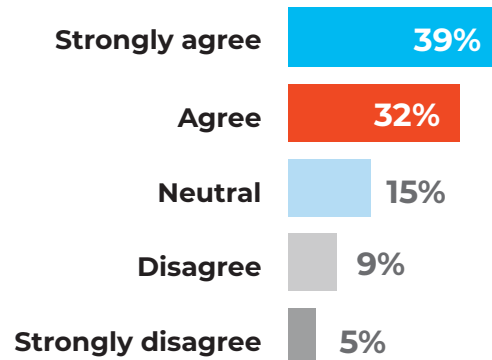
Source: Skift + TripActions 2020 business travel survey (left and right)

As the short-term emergency of Covid-19 recedes, more company decision makers are realizing two things. First, they need better visibility into how—and how much—they’re spending. Second, they need to more carefully consider how the value of these activities contributes to the organization’s broader business goals.

“You can see across the board, travel budgets are changing,” said TripActions’ Finkel. “People are going to have to be a lot more cognizant of what they’re spending, how they’re spending, and why they’re spending it.”

One symbol of the increasing desire for greater visibility and control over corporate travel spending is the growing reliance on company-issued credit cards for employee travel expenses. According to the Skift and TripActions survey, more than 70 percent of program managers agreed or strongly agreed that employees should pay for work travel expenses with a corporate travel card.

Yet at the very moment that travel managers are starting to look more closely at spend management strategy, the existing tracking tools are exposing a significant weakness: Many organizations continue to rely on antiquated manual solutions. Close to 60 percent of program managers surveyed said

Agree or disagree: “We prefer that our employees pay for work travel expenses with a company credit card.”**Travel Managers**

their company tracked employee spending via Excel spreadsheets or a custom form. This finding highlights the need to develop a more integrated, real-time approach to company spend management moving forward.

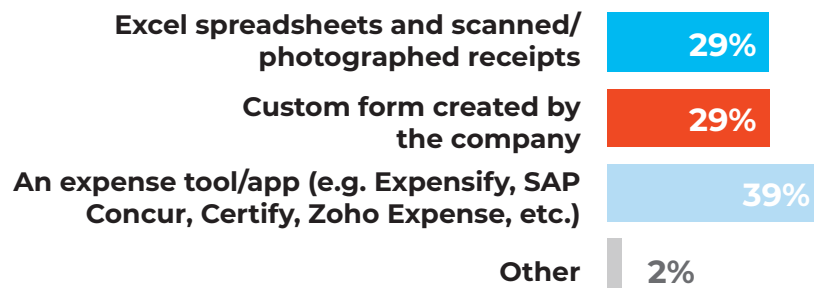
“Having that holistic visibility into your expenses in real time is key,” said Finkel. “As budgets get reduced and there’s more scrutiny and more need to look at costs across the board, I think companies are going to look towards ways they can get that real insight into their expenses and make real-time adjustments to what’s happening across the organization.”

As a growing number of companies think about business travel spending and the broader impact on profitability, they’re turning to more dynamic strategies to track and manage it. This has led to the creation of new, holistic expense management solutions like TripActions Liquid™. This innovative platform, launched in 2020, tracks employee purchases in real time, broadens approved purchase categories beyond travel, and makes it easier for finance teams to reconcile and reimburse outlays.

The goal of Liquid is to help travel managers and buyers gain better control over their company-wide spending priorities. And one of the keys to doing that is artificial intelligence, which can unlock hidden

How are your travel expenses handled by your company?

Travel Managers



Source: Skift + TripActions 2020 business travel survey

patterns in spending and reimbursement to make the process more efficient. Using AI and intelligent policy settings, for example, Liquid monitors and actively approves dynamic spend in the platform directly as it happens. If the spend is within scope, the transaction is automatically recognized, approved, and reimbursed—all without manual intervention.

Products like Liquid also benefit finance teams, who often find it can help them more quickly and easily complete processes like expense reconciliation. In a recent case study of enterprise video communications

company Zoom, company executives report that adopting Liquid has dramatically shortened the time they spend on monthly reconciliation. This has freed them to focus on other, more high-value company projects.

“TripActions Liquid is a major time saver,” said Vik Shah, corporate controller at Zoom, in the case study. “I run a lean team at Zoom, and we have actually been able to reduce reconciliation time from weeks to under an hour each month.” ♦



TREND #3: CLOUD-BASED, INTEGRATED, END-TO-END SOLUTIONS ARE ESSENTIAL



Covid-19 highlighted an important weakness in historic business travel strategies. When companies rely on multiple business travel platforms, it's significantly more difficult to build a complete picture of travel activity. This partial view complicates decisions about changes to policy, spending, and employee well-being. That's why it will be essential for companies to rely on a single, trusted partner for corporate travel and expense—one that combines these disparate data streams into a single source of real-time data and actionable insights.

Combining tools into a single platform also improves an employee's travel experience. Before business travel essentially paused in 2020, employees noted a diverse range of problems affecting their work trips. The most common issues mentioned in the 2020 business travel survey included avoiding Covid-19

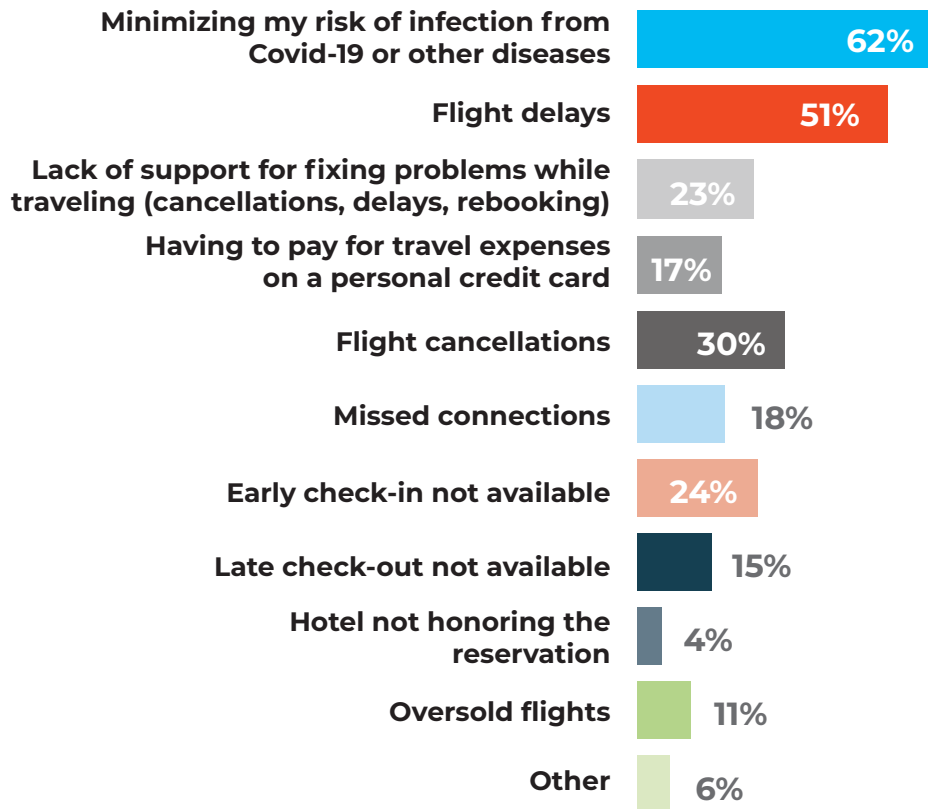
infection, flight delays, and a lack of customer support.

Perhaps the biggest takeaway from these results is that there's no single source of friction when it comes to travel. Instead, employees and their organizations need to be ready to handle problems caused by anything from normal disruptions to natural disasters.

Not every business travel problem is controllable, of course. But in the past, the structure of the corporate travel ecosystem made trip problems worse, not better. Many organizations arranged separate contracts with different vendors for trip booking, designing and managing company trip policies, handling in-trip customer service issues, and tracking spending.

What are the most common problems you face when traveling for work?

Business Travelers



Source: Skift + TripActions 2020 business travel survey

Not every business travel problem is controllable, of course. But in the past, the structure of the corporate travel ecosystem made trip problems worse, not better. Many organizations arranged separate contracts with different vendors for trip booking, designing and managing company trip policies, handling in-trip customer service issues, and tracking spending.

The siloed nature of these solutions leads to all sorts of problems, including imprecise traveler communication, missing trip information, unnecessary internal red tape, and unresponsive support. To make things worse, it often creates software challenges for company information technology departments, forcing them to maintain an increasingly complex collection of different integrations with various software systems.

Covid-19 has further highlighted the weakness of this siloed business travel approach. Having access to bad, or simply out-of-date, information literally had life-or-death consequences for travelers. And without modern tools to track spending, the pandemic also had a significant impact on cash-strapped companies trying to succeed in a tough economic environment.

“Companies’ travel managers and executives are going to need tight controls in their managed travel programs,” said Finkel. “That ensures they have all the different levers and approval processes to provide peace of mind to their employee base while traveling.”

“

Companies' travel managers and executives are going to need tight controls in their managed travel programs.

”

With more complete information, all stakeholders—travelers, managers, and company decision makers—can make smarter and safer decisions for their organization. That's why the future of travel management is likely to combine all of these tools into a single solution, as is the case with TripActions, which includes travel management support, online booking tools, and expense management.

In the future, this new generation of end-to-end business travel tools will also go a step further in simplifying and streamlining the entire business travel process. By utilizing tools like artificial intelligence and employee-level personalization, travel managers can also rest assured that these end-to-end solutions provide the right context to address the specific needs and circumstances of each individual traveler.

Consider the value of tools like [TripActions TravelXen](#)—an intelligent, proprietary tool developed by the company to manage travel agent support. It delivers real-time, contextually relevant trip information to agents to help them solve travel problems faster.

Another important piece of the end-to-end puzzle will be managing spend. As organizations look for ways to better manage travel problems as well as employee spending, solutions like TripActions Liquid will become increasingly essential. As an added bonus, Liquid can natively integrate with the core TripActions platform, allowing corresponding transactions to be automatically associated with an employee's trip, leading to fewer invoices and saving accounting teams from manual reconciliation of expenses.

Covid-19 has exposed the many weaknesses of the business travel industry's historically fragmented approach, whether those weaknesses were related to problems with the trip itself or to controlling costs. But even when Covid-19 fades into the background, new types of disruptions will take its place. The only way to survive in the future is by relying on a new generation of integrated, end-to-end solutions. ♦

TREND #4: CONSUMER TRAVEL WILL KICKSTART A BUSINESS TRAVEL RENAISSANCE



For many organizations that rely on business travel, 2020 proved to be a challenging year. One surprising bright spot, however, was the presence of a small but noticeable uptick in consumer travel. According to data company [Adara](#), the volume of domestic leisure flights in the United States increased at the beginning of summer and fall, as well as at the start of 2021.

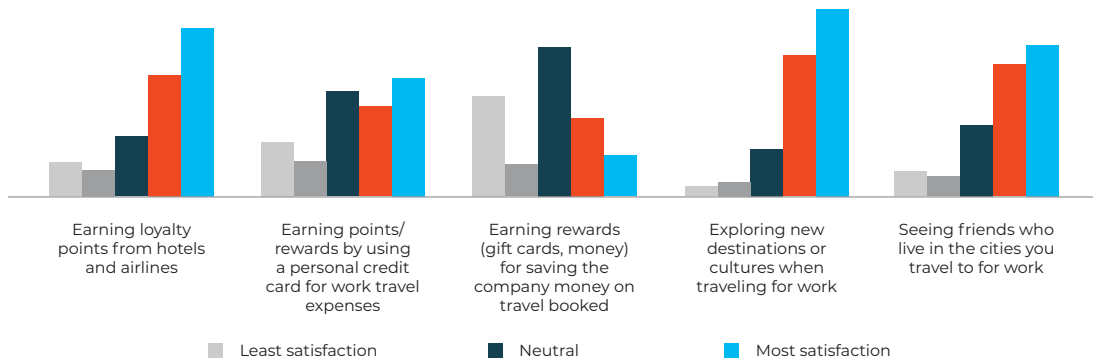
This upswing in leisure travel could play a more important role in business travel recovery than previously expected, helping reset attitudes and habits for the hybrid working environment that's likely to emerge post-pandemic.

While leisure travel and business travel have often been treated as different customer segments, the two activities have never existed in completely separate silos. Even before 2020, trends like remote work and trips combining work and leisure were already helping to reshape corporate policies related to expense approvals, trip-booking rules, and employee benefit packages. Now, as business travel continues to recover, many corporate travel stakeholders on the management and supply side expect that helping to facilitate and integrate leisure travel alongside business travel will help them stimulate demand more quickly.

Which of the following travel “perks” would you say provide you with the greatest satisfaction?

Please rank from 1 (Least Satisfaction) to 5 (Most Satisfaction).

Travelers



Source: Skift + TripActions 2020 business travel survey

But perhaps the most important effect of leisure travel on business travel will be about helping to reduce the anxieties of employees who are unsure or hesitant about starting to travel again.

One telling example of this phenomenon comes from Southwest Airlines' Chief Commercial Officer, Andrew Watterson, who spoke in September 2020 at the Skift Global Forum about the strong correlation between travelers who took their first post-Covid trip and their subsequent intent to travel.

“Once they travel, the intent to travel skyrockets,” said Watterson. “People are fifty-fifty on whether they’re comfortable with travel right now. But once they experience the Southwest Promise, from traveling with us, [their intent to travel] goes up to 86 percent plus.”

Leisure travel not only increases intent to travel. It also helps educate, inform, and reassure other travelers who may still be on the fence. “The examples that we’re seeing of people’s experiences as they travel will definitely inform how companies and how business travelers return to the road,” said Atmosphere’s Harteveltdt.

“It’s a psychological impact,” agreed Randy Luck, senior manager for accounts payable and travel at Ancestry.com. “After people see that it’s safe and it wasn’t as stressful as they thought it was going to be, they feel better doing it in the future.”

As the pandemic threat begins to diminish, business travel decision makers and suppliers will start looking for opportunities to provide employees with new user-friendly features and incentives to help further stimulate travel.

One example of the shift is TripActions’ enhanced personal travel booking experience, which makes it easier for traveling employees to add leisure itinerary details for themselves and their family members to a pre-existing work trip.

Another opportunity to connect leisure travel activity with a return to business travel is through loyalty programs. Earning and redeeming loyalty points was a popular perk well before Covid-19. And loyalty is likely to remain a strong incentive once travel returns. According to Skift and TripActions’ 2020 business travel study, more than 70 percent of travelers said earning loyalty points gave them the highest levels of satisfaction of any business travel perks.

So far, it appears that travel suppliers are taking this insight to heart. Many hotels and airlines are adjusting their loyalty redemption offers during Covid-19 to help encourage more people to use their large reward balances.

“The airlines, hotels, and card companies are doing a great job making it easy for people to redeem points and feel like they’re getting a lot of value,” said Areka Consulting’s Miller. ♦

TREND #5: REMOTE WORK WILL PLACE GREATER IMPORTANCE ON CORPORATE TRAVEL



Of all the habit changes that took place in 2020, one of the biggest shifts was the move by many organizations toward remote working arrangements. Whether it's giant global organizations like [Twitter](#) or two-person small businesses, nearly every company is now learning to adapt to the new reality of remote work. One [2020 investigation from Gartner](#) found that 82 percent of companies plan to allow employees to work remotely at least some of the time. And increasingly, employees also seem to be on board: According to a [2020 FlexJobs survey](#), 65 percent of employees wanted to remain remote after the pandemic is over.

But for all the positive changes associated with remote work, the question over the impact on business travel remains. After all, why would employees need to travel at all if they can meet with co-workers and clients virtually? While this may seem like a reasonable solution, the belief is that remote work may eventually lead to more business travel, not less.

Perhaps the strongest reason business travel looks set to continue in a remote work world concerns the simple need for certain types of essential workers and for certain types of jobs. For example, in sales departments, travel is a competitive need to generate new business and form relationships.

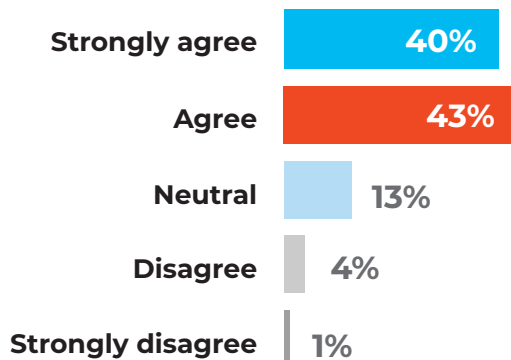
“What you’re going to probably see is a company that starts to travel, and they’re the ones that are actually closing the deals,” said TripActions’ Finkel. “And then you’re going to see another company that says, ‘Oh, wait. We were hesitant to dip our toe into the travel pond, but we’re seeing our competitor actually gain market share because they’re actually visiting our customers, and the customers are actually having that personal connection.’”

But another reason to remain positive about the industry outlook is that employees and managers continue to believe business travel is more effective than meeting virtually. According to the Skift and TripActions survey, more than 80 percent of business travelers and close to 80 percent of managers agreed or strongly agreed that meeting in person was more effective than meeting virtually.

Companies that spoke with Skift agreed that many employees will likely want to travel if and when they are able to do so safely.

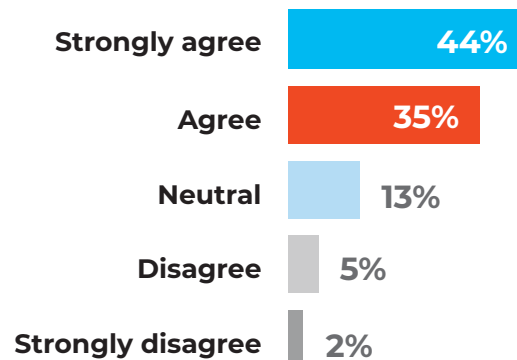
Agree or disagree: “When it comes to getting things done, meeting in person is more effective than meeting virtually.”

Travelers



Agree or disagree: “When it comes to getting things done, meeting in person is more effective than meeting virtually.”

Travel Managers



“Some of the [activity] where our team would go from office to office to meet with people, maybe some of that is impacted by doing it virtually now,” said Ancestry’s Luck. “But I know that some of our people can’t wait to get back in the room with people face-to-face rather than doing everything over Zoom.”

“We probably need face-to-face contact a little more than we think,” wrote Jason Gay in a humorous [Wall Street Journal article](#) that ran in December 2020. “I don’t think work travel will ever vanish. Mostly because our families want us out of the house.”

But beyond the simple need or desire to travel, remote work is likely to also create new incentives for business trips. The biggest changes are likely to involve the purpose and duration of trips. Business travel in the past may have involved lots of repeated short trips, some of which might have involved only a single, hour-long meeting.

Moreover, new patterns are likely to emerge. Organizations with geographically distributed workforces, for example, will need to bring together employees for relationship and team building and training, since they won’t have the benefit of casual and in-person interactions around the office.



“Those who are off site by default are always going to want human connection,” said Darren Murph, head of remote for GitLab, [at the 2020 Skift Global Forum](#). “What ends up happening is travel becomes a core part of culture building. Business travel should get a lot more dynamic.”

You’re going to have teams of 10, 15, or 20 people who suddenly need an offsite every quarter or so, to build strategy, to bond, or build relationships.”

Some travel suppliers are already responding to the growing demand for remote-friendly business travel by testing new products and services. United Airlines, for example, is testing a [new subscription](#) that bundles flights with remote work space. And hospitality company Selina made waves in October 2020 by [acquiring the popular “Remote Year”](#) coworking program.

“HR and workplace organizations [will need to] work out how they create those workplaces of the future,” said Festive Road’s Strachan. “Because ultimately that’s going to be the employee experience and employee engagement, whether they have everything that they need as an individual to really thrive in that organization and deliver what that organization needs them to. There’s a really big task ahead of those people designing that.” ♦

CONCLUSION

The changes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic present the corporate travel sector with new risks, but also new opportunities. It's already clear that 2020 forced business travelers and travel managers alike to alter their habits in significant ways. But whether these changes end up being a net positive or negative for the industry is an outcome that will only be determined by the actions those in the industry take in response.

It's true that a range of business travel strategies—including product innovation, company spending, risk management, and policy—will need to evolve to address the industry's new realities. But if approached with the right attitude, as well as a willingness to innovate and experiment, it's likely that the entire business travel ecosystem will emerge from the current crisis stronger, more resilient, and more creative as a result. ♦



ABOUT SKIFT

Skift is the largest intelligence platform in travel, providing media, insights, and marketing to key sectors of the industry. Through daily news, research, podcasts, and Skift Global Forum conferences, Skift deciphers and defines the trends that matter to the marketers, strategists, and technologists shaping the industry.

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