

IS THERE A BETTER OPTION TO CORPORATE TRAVEL MANAGEMENT?

or

THE LAOS – NAIROBI INCIDENT

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ABSTRACT

Corporate travel continues its explosive growth. It is driven by internationalization of travel, development of transportation and ICT, and deregulation of air carriers.

Growth of the corporate travel brings concerns into areas constituting three domains of sustainability – environmental, social and economic. Not only is corporate travel considered to be the third largest controllable cost in the corporations, it is also identified as one of the largest producers of greenhouse emissions. At the same time corporate travel directly affects quality of working and private life of the employees.

Building on the studies of several Swedish and Finnish companies, the article examines the motivation of the corporate employees to travel or not to travel. Excitement and status associated with travel, as well as structural and managerial arrangements within and outside corporations, make corporate travel attractive and easy. On the downside of the travel activities are travel costs, environmental impacts, unproductive working time, fatigue, and suffering family life.

Is it possible to cut travel, and at the same time improve corporate competitiveness, level of international communication, and quality of working life? We distinguish and discuss several methods employed by corporations for the travel reduction purposes – ICT-related methods and Corporate Travel Management Systems.

Key words: corporate travel management, business travel, travel motivation, travel reduction, ICT, teleconference, videoconference, corporate travel management system

1 INTRODUCTION

“Stig is the head of environmental department of a large consultancy firm. His department works in a joint research project with two universities from the neighbouring countries. Stig is in charge of the project finances. After the project has been up and running for half of the whole project length, the other university discovers that the consultancy partner has not paid any of the project money to the university. When being asked, Stig’s subordinate informs that he cannot do anything because Stig is in Laos for the next three weeks. After he is back, Stig has a lot of things to do. The worried university partner calls to Stig’s subordinate who tells that nothing can be done now since Stig is leaving for Nairobi the following day. He will be there for ten days. The researcher contacts Stig personally and gets a promise that immediately after the Nairobi trip, he will transfer the money. In the last project month, half of the agreed amount of money arrives on the account of the university. The finance officer of the university sends an e-mail to Stig and the subordinate, asking for the rest of the payment. She has to send three e-mails during the following weeks. Unsuccessfully, because the subordinate can never take the any decisions as Stig is away. The last time we heard of Stig, he was attending the ISO14001 meeting of TC 207 in Stockholm. As to the other university, they never got any money at all. Stig travels in the business class.”

In essence, the story not only reveals that consultants earn more than researchers, but it also implies that travelling to distant places or for important purposes is a symbol indicating importance of the respective traveller. This incident made the researchers of the story interested in corporate travel as a phenomenon. That, however, was only an entrance to a number of other more important questions relating to increasing corporate travel.

Travelling causes one of the most serious set of impacts of corporate activities. It results in significant emissions of CO₂, and also NO_x, VOC, CO and particle matter (EEA 2000). Despite this, travel is seldom recognised in corporate sector as an environmental problem. On the contrary, corporate business trip keep growing at a high speed. Globalisation, a growing fleet of faster, more convenient, and relatively cheaper modes of travel, the development of information and communication technology, as well as deregulation of air traffic, all contribute to the trend of increased corporate travel. The purpose of this paper is to outline the current travel management practices and travel motivations in corporate sector together with reasons to decrease the impact of corporate travel. We will also suggest ways to reduce corporate travel.

In the broadest sense corporate travel can be understood as any work-related travel conducted by corporate members. Usually, however, corporate travel refers to business trips of company people outside of their organisation’s location. The latter is the scope of this paper. The paper is based on a number of empirical studies in Swedish and Finnish companies as well as secondary data from international corporate travel surveys. The Swedish case studies involve in-depth study of two companies and series of interviews in a number of companies and associations whereas in the Finnish companies only the travel managers have been interviewed. Swedish case companies represent ICT- and energy

sector. Majority of the studied Finnish companies are from ICT-industry and others are from paper, and consulting sectors.

2 CURRENT TRAVEL MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

Globalisation has brought about mergers of companies into multinational conglomerates that have factories and offices around the world. It has also brought about an international market place; spread of customers into distant parts of the globe. It has led into specialisation within the multinationals – typically not all but only a certain country office of a multinational company has expertise on a particular matter. Historically, the present magnitude of globalisation has been made possible partly due to the fast-growing personal transport sector, above all the air traffic. This development generates faster, more convenient, more affordable ways of travelling to an increasing number of destinations. In addition, the opportunities provided by Information and Communication Technology (ICT), including use of mobile phones, portable computers and mobile access to Internet, have ‘freed’ the executives and managers from their offices as well as made it possible to keep in contact with distant collaborators. Furthermore, the deregulation of air carriers puts them into more competitive position and consequently provides travelling business people with more attractive options – better prices, services (through e.g. formation of alliances), and special contracts. The above factors are perhaps the most obvious causes at the background of increased corporate business travel.

The transportation sector of Europe contributes one third of all CO₂ emissions of the continent. According to World Travel Organisation (WTO, 2000), the number of international arrivals¹ has grown from 25 to 664 million between 1950 and 1999. That constituted an average annual growth rate of 7%. Not only has travel grown in terms of numbers, it has also expanded geographically. Business travel constitutes up to 18 % of the total number of trips. Air transport remains a dominating mean of travelling – 43%, followed by road transport – 42%, rail transport – 7%, and sea transport 8% (WTO, August 2000). To give another indicative figure of the share of business travel in some of the national contexts, for instance in Sweden 13% of all transportation of people consists of business travel.

Yet travelling is frequently – consciously or unconsciously - excluded from environmental management systems or otherwise treated in a way that clearly indicates an attitude “there is no hope” and “may be sometime later”. Even those corporations that do understand the need to work with effects of the transportation through their EMS, appear to address everything from investing into more environmentally friendly city buses to the purchasing of the more environmentally benign company cars but not with the reduction of the business travel. It seems to be the untouchable holy cow of the corporate sector.

¹ International arrivals refer to travel by all modes of transportation – air, train, car, boat.

2.1 Who is in charge of the travel management?

Although travel costs form the third or fourth largest controllable cost in many international companies, our empirical studies indicate that corporate travel management is still an operative level task with almost no strategic recognition from the corporate level. Travel management was organised in somewhat different manner in the studied companies – the basic distinction would be whether it is an internal function (an employee is a travel manager) or the function has been externalised to a travel agency located in the company premises. At any event, travel management was considered an operative level purchasing function. A number of the Finnish travel managers mentioned the lack of top-management recognition that travel management is an issue demanding systematic and strategic treatment. Another department that travel touched was accounting.

If companies are to address the quality of life and environmental impacts of travelling, they obviously should involve human resource management (HRM) and environmental experts into developing travel policy and strategy. Furthermore, if a company chooses the strategy of replacing part of travels with ICT-assisted solutions like audio- and videoconferences, or Internet applications, the need also arises to include ICT-specialists into the travel management development. Indeed, the best practices on CTM within the corporations are observed when there is a centralised travel management based on the HRM, purchasing and financial departments complemented by clear travel policy, top-management support followed by an example.

2.2 Motivation to travel

Looking at individual business enterprises, there are a variety of occasions for travel: customer visits, conferences, merger negotiations, and professional education seminars among others. Aside of these reasons are motivational factors like economic incentives, routine, status of travelling and the fuzzy motivation of “exciting job content”. The most obvious economic incentive are per diem or travel allowances. For some, these constitute a considerable addition to their salary. Routine as a motivation manifests itself through the fact that many companies never question the need of their personnel to travel: “it has always been done”; “our business requires it” are the responses that researchers receive when asking about reasons for flourishing business travel.

In some companies travelling is a status question, in others it is hard work that the managers and employees would happily reduce. Status motive is present in companies where only a part of the personnel travels. The further you get to travel, the more prestigious your job (the initial example with Stig indicates it clearly). However, in companies where most of the staff travels, the status motivation is not present. Due to a somewhat similar motive, travelling opportunity in a job description often makes the job appealing for young newly graduated recruits: “join the navy and see the world”.

It is nice to travel, so thinks most of us, and business people are not an exception. A survey among top executives in Sweden, revealed that ‘meeting new people’, ‘leisure’ and ‘business travel’ were the respondents’ three top interests (Boson, 1999). Actually, most employees (more than three quarters) look forward to, or consider it nice to get out of the office every now and then (MCI, 1999). There are some factors that cannot be considered primary causes to travel but definitely add to the attractiveness of travelling. ‘Frequent flyer miles’ programmes and non-taxed goods at the airports (Kogg, 2000, App. 2, p 3, 4)

illustrate this category of factors. Given a choice between immediate departure with an airline that did not provide any bonus points and an extra hour of waiting for the airline that gives this bonus, eighteen out of twenty employees of the major Swedish telecom company Telia flying from Oslo to Stockholm, choose the later (Kogg, 2000, p. 40). Non-taxed goods at the airports as well as simplicity with which many of the trips are being arranged with the assistance of travel agents (Kogg, 2000, p. 41, App. 2, p 3, 4) fell into the same category of factors increasing travelling appeal.

Naturally, motivation to travel is associated with the need to get the job done. Paradoxically however, due the simplicity of travel arrangement corporate staff may experience it easier to travel than to go through the trouble of learning how to use substituting methods. Our empirical findings indicate that sometimes travelling occurs because the employees of companies are not quite familiar with the possibilities for the (ICT-assisted) travel substitution or do not feel comfortable about using them, or do feel encouraged to choose “non-travel” option. In some of the studied companies (Sydkraft, Telia) technical knowledge for using virtual meetings appears to be scarce.

In addition to the missing management elements and skills of the employees, discouraging effects on the travel reductions might come through the structural characteristics of organisations. We came across a story of the large Swedish corporation where previously enthusiastic corporate travel manager put a project for travel substitution on ice. The manager came into conflict with the interests of the in-house travel agency with big scale of internal operations and large turnover.

Macro-level effects encouraging air travel

The Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reported that the aircraft emissions were responsible for 3,5% of the Global Warming in 1992 with the potential to increase up to 15% in the year 2050 (ENDS, 1999b). Currently, the aviation fuel is the only fuel that exempted from taxation that gives air carriers the unfair advantage over more environmentally friendly modes of transportation. The airline travel remains attractive due to the related hidden subsidies – untaxed fuel and duty free status of the airport goods. Aviation fuel is the only fuel that is exempted from taxation. According to the EU officials (ENDS,1999) fuel taxation is politically impossible because of the long-standing international agreements on keeping fuel for the commercial aviation tax-free.

2.3 Motivation to avoid travelling

There are also reasons to avoid travelling. In the reality of corporations these relate primarily to costs and travel time. The travel cost is often on the third place of operational costs in corporations. The cost of business travel in Sweden 1998 was estimated to 45 billion SEK (\$US 4-5 billion), including costs for travelling, transfer, hotels, ordering tickets and managing travel expenses. If the costs for loss of working time, these costs exceeds 100 billion SEK (\$US 10 billion). (Arnfolk, 1999) Secondly, travelling has serious environmental impacts, although these were seldom spontaneously considered by corporate decision-makers. The extract from one of our interviews shows the current position of corporate travel management (CTM).

From an interview with VP responsible for HRM in a large Swedish energy company:

.....

- *Is there involvement of personnel managers in the issue of corporate travel in your company? (researcher)*
- *I don't understand your question.... (VP)*
- *I meant whether personnel managers work with corporate travel at all? (researcher)*
- *Oh you mean the kind of expenses when you're travelling or what?(VP)*
- *No, not necessarily because travelling has other implications to... (researcher until the VP cuts in)*
- *Now I see what you mean, you mean an environmental issue, whether we are using cars that are of a certain kind or whether we fly versus use the train?(VP)*
- *Well, not only, actually I was after implications that corporate travel has on the quality of life of the employees, it involves different work-time patterns of the staff. For us, the question is whether it is considered as a matter of a quality of life in your company? (researcher)*

In addition, travelling involves social aspects – although these not always recognised in the companies. Particularly for employees with an extensive travelling schedule, fatigue and jet-lag is a common problem with reduced professional performance as a result. When key personnel such as top managers and specialists within an organisation hardly ever are available due to frequent and long-lasting travelling, the communication with the rest of the staff naturally suffers and a feeling of frustration and loss of direction may occur within the organisation. Regarding quality of private life, heavy travellers experience frequent absentness from home, which may also lead to private, social consequences (MCI, 1999) like loss of contact with family and friends, divorces, and problems of finding a partner. In a survey at Telia, it was found that as employees for whom travelling originally was a positive factor in the job, set up a family, frequent travelling became a negative aspect of the job (Arnfolk, 1999).

3 HOW TO TACKLE THE PROBLEM?

Looking from an environmental perspective, the key problem with travelling is undoubtedly the vehicle emissions. A number of different strategies are currently used on a national and international level to reduce these emissions; different policies and taxation are employed to restrict the possibilities and willingness to travel. How can we reduce these emissions, without severely damaging the business? Is it possible to cut travel, and at the same time maintain or even improve corporate competitiveness, level of international communication and cooperation? Let's have a look at some of the options available. We can distinguish different levels at which the options to corporate travel can be approached.

These are:

- Substitutes in form of ICT-assisted measures like video- or audioconferences
- Planning logistics in the form of route planning or combining trips for different causes together
- Choosing the mode of transport e.g. taking train in trips shorter than one-hour flight.

The most drastic of these measure, and perhaps the most effective way of reducing the environmental impact from corporate travel, is simply to avoid travelling at all. We will first of all look into the option of replacing the trip with a non-travel alternative, i.e. to use some electronic form of communication.

3.1 ICT-assisted methods

What can substitute a business trip? Nothing, is a very common reply. “We have to meet each other” This is very likely true in many cases, but far from all. A number of communication tools are available today, which provide us with a palette of alternatives that partly or fully can substitute the communication at a business trip.

Ever since Bell constructed the first telephone 1876, we have been able to talk to each other without meeting face-to-face. The telephone system has been described as the “Worlds Largest Machine” with more than one billion stationary telephones (POTS – Plain Old Telephone System), mobile phones, faxes, modems and other communication tools connected in a literal world wide web. The cost for telecommunications is constantly plunging, while at the same time, availability and reliability is getting higher.

Most telephone conversation takes place between two persons. If a meeting with more than persons is to take place, a *multi user audio conference call* can be used, connecting three or more telephones connected at the same time. Another option is to connect a *conference telephone*, a type of telephone with speaker function that allows a group of persons in one place to communicate via the phone. These two options are called *audioconferencing*.

The big drawback of audioconferencing is that you cannot see whom you are talking to. This problem is taken care of by *videoconferencing*, in which two or more places are connected via special equipment that allows the participants to both listen and to see each other. Within the concept of videoconferencing, we find Desktop systems and Group systems.

A Group System is basically a big television and a camera. In addition, electronic whiteboards, document cameras, and computers can be connected to the equipment to complement and enhance the communication. Using this system, several persons can participate at each end. Also here, multi-user conferences can be held.

Desk-top or Personal Videoconferencing, consist usually of a computer, equipped with a small camera, microphone, a video- and audio circuit board and a special software. With this equipment, 1-2 persons can communicate at each computer. Multi-user conferences are possible, as several computers can be connected simultaneously.

Furthermore, computers offer a wide range of other means of communication. The most commonly used is e-mail. The founder of the Nobel prize, Alfred Nobel, steered and managed his large, multinational company at the end of the 19th century at large by writing, himself by hand, on the average 40 letters a day. This impressive achievement is today becoming more and more realistic for the rest of us, as *e-mail* is becoming the standard way of written communication. The speed of delivery, relaxed formalities, and the multitude of add-on possibilities has within a decade revolutionised the written communication. Currently more than 10 billion e-mails are sent every day, a number that is expected to increase to more than 35 billion in the year 2005 (IDC, 2000).

But computers offer more than the e-mails' asynchronous communication. On-line collaboration makes it possible for a group of persons to simultaneously, remotely edit the same document, draw pictures, give oral and visual presentations etc. Communication via Internet offers a nearly unlimited range of options, and this technology develops very quickly.

These are some important ICT-based communication tools available as of fall year 2000. The scene will change dramatically in 5-10 years time, providing us with smaller, faster, cheaper, and more versatile communication tools. This will in turn supply us with even better options.

Are the ICT-options viable?

So we've got some great alternatives. But are they good enough? Do they satisfy the requirements that we have on a meeting? In what situation can they be used? In what situations should they be avoided?

The answers to these questions are very strongly dependant on the circumstances: what kind people are to meet, how many, for how long, how well do they know each other, what is the purpose of the meeting etc. Some general findings, primarily regarding videoconferencing, are presented below:

- Most professionals prefer to have meetings with external business contacts in the traditional way, as they are afraid to jeopardise the relationship, trust and feeling of commitment. However, if these meetings are repeatedly occurring many times, the acceptance of using virtual alternatives gets higher.
- Meetings internally within an organisation are also seen as more suitable for virtual meetings.
- It is crucial how well established the relationship is with the person you are communicating with. Virtual meetings are directly unsuitable for making new contacts and acquaintances, but could be fully satisfactory for persons who know each other well.
- Virtual meetings tend to be tiresome and are best suited for shorter meetings.

So, how good are these alternative meeting forms? How much of a "real" meeting can these virtual meetings actually replace? In a survey about group videoconferencing, respondents in different organisations were asked to estimate how much of a 'real' meeting

their videoconference meetings had been able to replace. The figures varied largely within each organisation, from 0 to 100%, but the average ‘degree of substitution’ was roughly 60%. (Arnfolk, 2000).

Another fully relevant question is: just how *fun* is it? How can I get to know the person I’m dealing with? When do I get to go to the opera in Verona, stay at the fancy hotel in Bangkok, get treated with great dinners and sightseeing in Tokyo? Why should I sit at home and stare at a computer or television screen instead of getting out and see some old friends or meet new, interesting people? This ‘fun-factor’ definitely plays a role in the success of introducing the new alternatives. Unless the meeting-goer has another reason for wanting to stay at home (e.g. small children), he or she loses out on something that is regarded as a fringe benefit. This often results in that the potentially time-efficient, money-saving, efficiency-boosting equipment turns out to be investment that is mostly used as a costly dust collector.

If the ICT supported travel alternatives are actually used, it will gain the organisation economically. However, in most cases, the employees using the equipment do not get rewarded for this gain, at least not in a more direct way. One way of overcoming this ‘blocker’, is to provide the user with some kind of incentive for using e.g. videoconferencing or audioconferencing. Possible incentives could be ‘meeting allowances’, time-off, ‘in-frequent flyer points’, paid dinner with a family, tickets for a theatre performance or simply to show some appreciation and to let the employee know how much money and emissions that has been saved in using the travel alternative. Other blockers occurring are lack of training in how to use the equipment, poor support and booking, and the lack of someone responsible for the system. In the case when these latter blockers, at least partially, have been removed, as in the case of Tetra Pac head-office in Lund, Sweden, the technology actually has been used successfully and has gradually increased to cut almost 5% of their air travel.

3.2 Corporate Travel Management Systems

Corporate travel management system (CTMS) is a vehicle with which to reduce travelling by means of making personnel to consider the options discussed above: replacing the trip with a virtual meeting, planning logistics or choosing the least costly or environmentally harmful means of transport.

The major current concern and the target of CTM is the travel cost. Travel management systems, however could be used for other purposes as well. CTMS could involve steps that make travelling more accountable (e.g. by suggesting an individual or departmental “environmental travel account” consisting of number of trips, their length, cost, used modes of transportation, etc.), more reflective (“have you considered a better option?”), more controllable (control system by e.g. assigning responsibility for giving authorisation for a trip to someone else than yourself).

If a trip is considered to be necessary, the next step is to “green” the way this trip is made. Important steps here are:

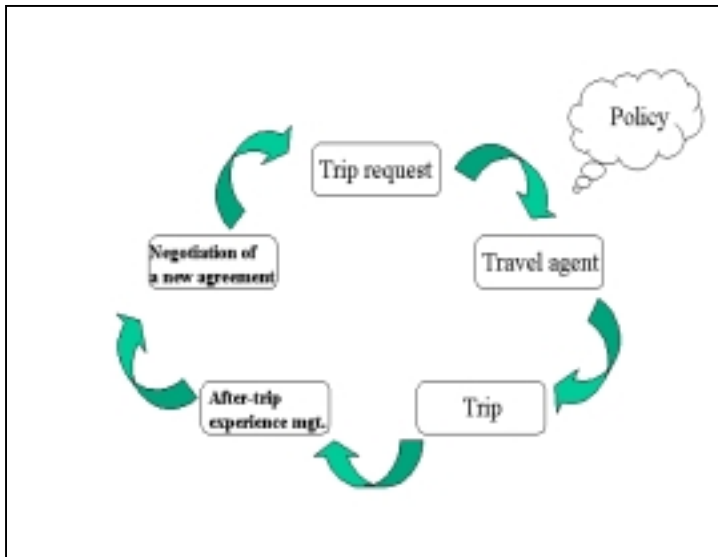
- Scrutinize how many persons that really need go – do five persons from the same company really have to go to that meeting or can one or two do the job?
- Plan the trip well. Avoid unnecessary long routes (zick-zacking), and try to fit in a number of other errands during the same trip.
- Choose a mode of transport with as low environmental impact as possible. This generally means selecting train over plain, public transport over taxi, and of course walk or bicycle when feasible.
- Choose a travel service provider that can offer the selected mode of transport in an as environmentally preferable way as possible. This can include providing a fuel efficient, lean fleet of vehicles, using fuels with lesser environmental impact (natural or bio gas, methanol/ethanol, RME etc)

While the components of the CTMS may vary from corporation to corporation, the total set of logical steps within the system remain the same. Figure 1 presents the travel management cycle of a corporation. *Corporate travel policy* is an essential component of CTMS that influences various elements of travel management cycle. The CTM cycle starts with a *trip request*. First of all CTMS, should make the employee to ask the question: should a trip be made at all? Can the purpose of the trip (meeting, sales, service, presentation, conference, display, etc) be fulfilled satisfactory in another way that by you travel or that someone else is travelling to you?

After validation of reasons for the trip, a permission can be granted. In some instances the corporate travel policy suggests conditions for the face-to-face meetings, and consequently travelling, on the bases of technical possibilities for the travelling substitute, for example with video-conferencing, as well as other conditions, e.g. requirements for face-to-face meetings for some categories of tasks.

After approval of the trip, the trip is being organised by the *travel agents*. In the ideal case the agents create the trip profile on the bases of the travel policy. Up to now, *after-trip experience management* is probably the most rare element of CTMS. It does, however create a feedback necessary for the effectiveness of the corporate travel activity. Finally, after certain experience from the travel is accumulated the corporation may *re-negotiate* the travel contracts with the agents and other service providers.

One of the necessary components of an environmentally adapted CTMS, is a system to measure and compare the environmental impact of different travel services. If we should set up objectives and target, and strive towards meeting those targets, we need to know where we stand today and if we’re making progress or not. The lack of such systems is one of the major Achilles’ heels of introducing the environmental parameter in CTMS. In addition, the travel sector does currently not provide any information that can be directly utilised by the companies for environmental purposes. In an effort to tackle these shortcomings, a conceptual model of a system (Travel Emission Tracking System; TETS) has been developed for the Swedish energy company Sydkraft, to collect environmental data from travel providers, and to manage the data within the organisation (Shalan, 2000).



Picture 1. Elements of the travel management cycle

The description of the above system is largely based on the system designed and operated by Phillips. It is obvious that in this case organisation chose to define travel management as a business tool, which assumes assignment of organisational responsibilities and devise of internal procedures

for handling of the related tasks. The internal CTMS still does not stand for a common phenomenon in organisations, at least not to the extent it is developed in Phillips. More frequently, organisations restrict the business-related management to the work with the agents and handling financial data associated with the trips. In these cases, the decisions about the trips, or trip substitution as well as management of the trips consequences are left to the employees' own devices. The elements of the system are with increasing frequency brought forward by the providers of Internet- (or rather intranet-) based solutions for management of the data linked to the travel management. In these cases, the travel management system becomes linked together by an electronic data-base filled with a travel-related costs. This situation is symptomatic of many trends. It indicated the major concern of corporations with the travel costs as well as the ample possibilities for the reduction of these costs². Generally, the attempts to capture and consequently decrease the cost associated with trips, contract negotiations, experience management, etc. spearheaded the notion of travel management and CTMSs.

4 CHALLENGES FOR CORPORATE TRAVEL MANAGEMENT

Corporate travel decisions belong to the category of decisions that are difficult to affect by mere supply of options for choice. Decisions to travel are defined by the multiplicity of motives, symbols and actions and therefore are very difficult to control. Dependent on her travel preferences, a traveller is able to suggest any of the convincing reasons for travelling or not travelling. Availability of the decision options (see section 3) does not guarantee the best possible choice from an environmental point of view. If changes that result in the effective reduction of the corporate travel is to occur, we should aim for the change in the individual (and corporate) values, not only with respect to the corporate travel, but to the values related to the entire quality of working life. Such changes never occur overnight by themselves but require changes in the institutional setting of corporate travel (mainly in the form of regulation) as well as identification of travelling as an issue needing top-

² The possibilities for the costs reduction have increased after the deregulation of the travel industry.

management recognition. Only then, non-travelling options like ICT-assisted business communication will become more accepted and have a chance to impact the hyper-travelling trend.

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