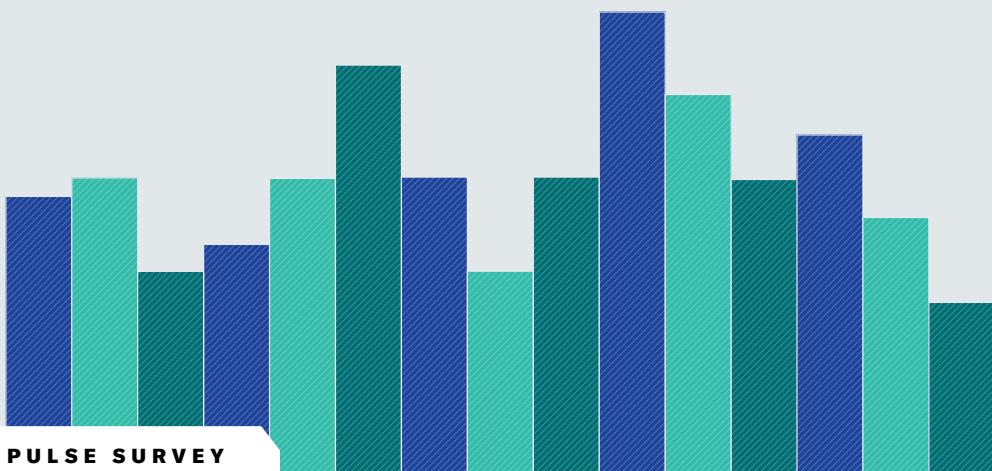




# Harvard Business Review

ANALYTIC SERVICES



# **Investing in Travel to Strengthen Culture and Increase Engagement**

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## **SPONSOR PERSPECTIVE**

The world of work is in flux as companies explore new ways to manage working life. Distributed models can offer improved flexibility and better work-life balance for your people. But hybrid and virtual working also bring challenges; how can organizations perform and flourish when coworkers are no longer colocated?

"Investing in Travel to Strengthen Culture and Increase Engagement" by Harvard Business Review Analytic Services, sponsored by Amex GBT, examines how companies use travel to reunite their people and foster the human connections that underpin resilient organizations.

Four hundred twenty-five business decision makers were surveyed to generate the report. From their answers, we know that they value travel as an effective way to strengthen bonds between coworkers, spur collaboration, and support company culture. They understand that bringing people together can fill an important gap in the employee experience, growing empathy between employees and helping make remote workers feel more included.

In times of change and disruption, it's more important than ever to rally your people around shared goals and get them working together as an effective team. We hope the insights in this report can equip you to do that.

We are grateful to Bristol Myers Squibb Co., GSK plc, and Steris plc for sharing their experiences of using internal travel to engage employees and strengthen corporate culture. These companies offer powerful best practices for any organization that wants to make the most of the new world of work.



**Patti Huska**

**Chief People Officer**

**American Express  
Global Business Travel**

# Investing in Travel to Strengthen Culture and Increase Engagement

When it comes to investing in business travel—particularly during a time of inflated travel prices and frequent disruptions—companies may prioritize trips to meet with customers that have a clear connection to top-line growth. However, travel to meet others in the organization—coworkers, teammates, mentors, new hires, job candidates—also can drive significant value in terms of culture and engagement.

In fact, as the ability to travel has returned, companies may derive even greater benefits from such internal travel investments than they have in the past. With the majority of organizations embracing hybrid and remote work, travel has become necessary to bring people together in person to better collaborate and innovate, build trust and relationships, increase feelings of inclusivity, and create a more cohesive culture.

“Business travel is really important in terms of collaboration and especially professional development—training (particularly on new products), conference attendance, even in-person project work has professional development benefits,” explains Deborah Short, global head of travel at London-based GSK plc, the multinational pharmaceutical company formerly known as GlaxoSmithKline. “We’re developing people all the time, and that’s seen as a big benefit of travel.”

A survey by Harvard Business Review Analytic Services of 425 respondents familiar with their organization’s business travel finds that 88% say that in-person interactions such as meetings, off-sites, and workshops are critical for ensuring positive long-term relationships between employees and coworkers. But while 60% of respondents say their company supports and encourages business travel in general, fewer (36%) rate their organization’s approach to business travel as very effective in supporting how the organization works

## HIGHLIGHTS



88% of survey respondents say **in-person interactions** (meetings, off-sites, workshops) **are critical for ensuring positive long-term relationships** between employees and coworkers.



71% agree that **a primarily remote work model can make employees feel disconnected** from the organization.



52% say their organization experienced **decreased employee engagement as a result of fewer in-person internal meetings** during the pandemic.

Due to rounding, some figures in this report may not add up to 100%.

today. In addition, a lack of support to bring remote workers and teams together is one of the top business travel challenges cited by respondents.

The pandemic lockdowns certainly showed how the lack of in-person interaction negatively impacted organizations' teams. Fifty-three percent of respondents say their organization had collaboration challenges because of fewer in-person internal meetings during the pandemic, 52% experienced decreased employee engagement, and 49% faced communication challenges. Meanwhile, even as travel bans have been lifted, the survey shows that remote working can also take a toll on culture and engagement, with around seven in 10 respondents agreeing that a primarily remote work model can make employees feel disconnected from the organization.

On the flip side, investing in business travel for internal purposes has a positive impact on culture and engagement. "Coming out of the pandemic, we had certainly proven that, for a period of time, we could be very successful as an organization with most employees working remotely," says Adam Goldberg, global head of travel and meetings sourcing at Princeton, N.J.-based Bristol Myers Squibb Co. (BMS). "But our leaders made a very intentional decision to bring people back together coming out of the pandemic in support of our culture because we firmly believe being together creates connections, fosters collaboration, and drives innovation, which delivers for our patients. We believe strongly that bringing employees together in person is an important aspect of that."

While the global biopharma company now has a hybrid workplace model, it also invests in bringing employees together face-to-face. "We really strive for the best of both worlds," Goldberg says.

This report explores the value of business travel investments in creating a cohesive culture and how meeting in person fosters greater connection, engagement, and problem-solving. It also outlines the importance of the executive support of travel programs to their ability to best support the way organizations work today.

## **Rebuilding Social Capital and Strengthening Culture**

The cultural impacts of fewer internal face-to-face interactions emerged during the pandemic. While organizations made heroic efforts to shift their employees to remote working as travel bans took hold—and many were able to maintain or even improve business performance—the lack of in-person gathering had a profound impact on culture and engagement. Respondents report a variety of negative consequences resulting from this extended period of largely virtual interactions and little travel, including collaboration challenges, decreased employee engagement, training and professional development challenges, and difficulty managing



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dispersed teams. **FIGURE 1** In fact, only 6% say their organization experienced no negative business impacts as a result of fewer in-person internal meetings.

Health care and life sciences products and services company Steris limited travel to only essential visits to customers once travel bans were lifted for a certain amount of time. All internal meetings became videoconference calls. "While it was not a one-to-one replacement for meeting in person, it was the right alternative at that time, and we optimized by providing guidance on how to engage optimally," says Karoline Medancic, director of meeting, travel, and customer events at Mentor, Ohio-based Steris. Managers were advised to be more intentional about engagement and inclusivity, offer more breaks, or send remote team members a box of goodies or pay for their lunches. "We made it work," Medancic says, "though the human face-to-face interaction was missed."

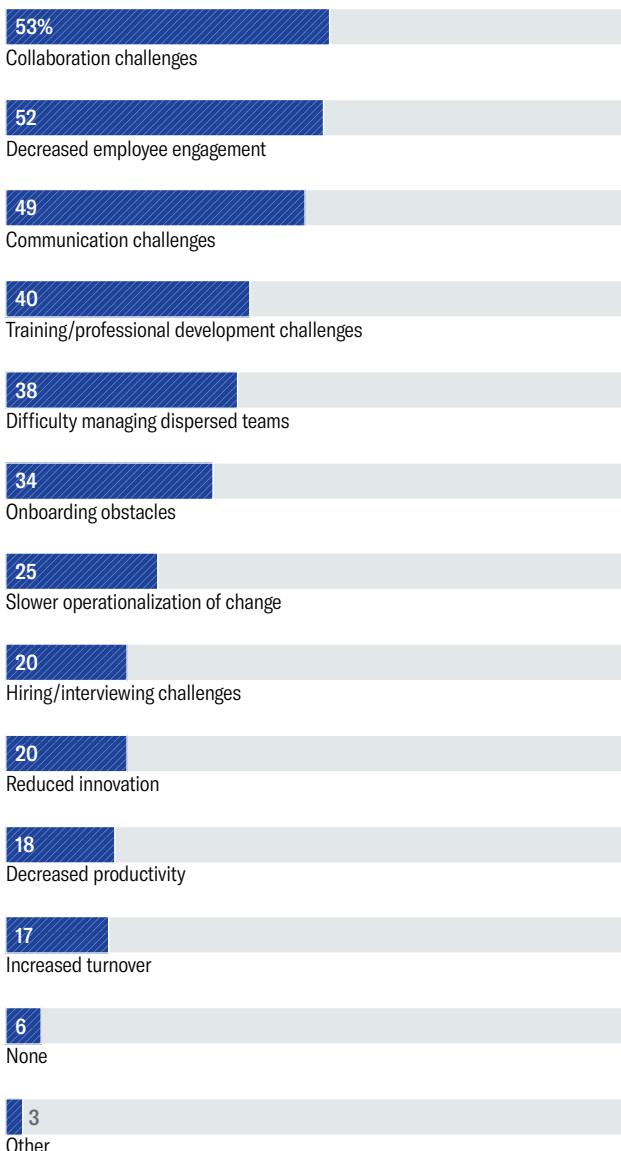
While widespread travel restrictions are over, remote and hybrid working arrangements are now prevalent in many organizations, establishing challenges to meeting in person. Around two-thirds of respondents say much of their organization works remotely today (3% are entirely remote, 15% are primarily remote with some in-office work, and 48% say they have an even mix of being in the office and remote). Just over a quarter (28%) are primarily in the office, with some

FIGURE 1

## Pandemic Travel Restrictions Hurt Organizational Dynamics

Collaboration and employee engagement suffered the most during the Covid-19 lockdowns

What negative business impacts did your organization experience as a result of fewer in-person internal meetings (among employees, teammates, new hires, etc.) during the pandemic? Select all that apply.



Base: 404 respondents; excluded "We did not reduce in-person client meetings during the pandemic," "My organization has never had in-person client meetings," and "Don't know."

Source: Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey, May 2023

remote work. Only 7% those surveyed say their organization's workplace model is completely in the office today.

To better support hybrid/remote workplace models, just over a third say their companies are consolidating their office space, and some are investing in new hybrid working solutions. When asked in what ways, if any, their organization is adapting its physical office footprint to accommodate hybrid/remote work, 36% say their organization is reducing its office footprint. An even greater number, however, say their organization is updating spaces to better support remote/hybrid workers coming into the office—e.g., quiet rooms or hot desking/flexible seating (46%) or updating spaces to better support hybrid meetings (40%), for example. Around one-third (32%) say their organization is updating spaces—with huddle rooms, for example—to better support collaboration/socialization in the office.

Business travel for internal purposes is a complement to these investments in their physical spaces. BMS rolled out its "50/50 flex" work model, which allows the majority of its office-based employees (other than those in lab, manufacturing, or other roles requiring their physical presence) to work remotely half the time. The company has updated its workplace (particularly new additions to the footprint) to support the approach, offering more open spaces and shared desks, and "neighborhoods," which include groups of workstations, collaborative places, and support spaces within an office. Travel is part of the solution. "We're back in an environment where people can travel as they would before Covid," says BMS' Goldberg. "Provided there is a clear business need, employees are able and encouraged to travel, with open spaces and flexible neighborhoods creating space for connections when traveling."

At Steris, where some office-based employees may have the ability to work from home two to three days a week, travel is determined by employee need. "In some cases, there are more frequent in-person meetings than before to drive engagement and focus," says Medancic, the global travel director.

Employees at GSK had long been meeting and collaborating from a distance and across time zones. "We've always worked in global teams," explains Short, the global head of travel. "Most of my team is in other countries, so we're used to interacting remotely."

But the company also has a strong focus on culture. As GSK shifted to hybrid working, with employees going into the office two to three days a week, the company has been even more intentional about supporting engagement and a cohesive culture. The company's new sustainable headquarters in Central London is being designed with this in mind. There are regular events like the procurement group's "culture programs." Remote workers travel to attend these events, "where we can engage and share in person even with teams that we're not a part of," Short says.



**At Steris, where some office-based employees may have the ability to work from home two to three days a week, travel is determined by employee need. “In some cases, there are more frequent in-person meetings than before to drive engagement and focus,” says Karoline Medancic, director of meeting, travel, and customer events.**

But not every organization is making such investments in noncustomer travel. In fact, lack of support for bringing remote workers/teams together was the second-most-cited “biggest business travel challenge” in the survey (23%), which followed the number one challenge, cost (“limited funding/budget for travel,” 52%). And many respondents say travel for internal meetings has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. Sixty-three percent say travel to meet colleagues at an off-site (e.g., corporate retreat) has decreased compared to the pre-pandemic period, 56% say travel to on-site company meetings to bring remote/hybrid workers together in person is lower, and 56% say travel to visit their organization’s other office locations occurs less than it did before the pandemic.

This reduction in internal travel could become worrisome for organizations that value employee engagement and culture. Respondents say dispersed organizations can suffer from a lack of connection. Even among this base of respondents for whom working remotely is now commonplace, 71% of respondents agree a primarily remote work model can make employees feel disconnected from the organization. **FIGURE 2** In addition, 88% say in-person interactions (meetings, off-sites, workshops) are

critical for ensuring positive long-term relationships between employees and coworkers, and 83% agree that they have gained greater awareness of and empathy for coworkers and customers as a result of business travel. The broad adoption of remote work can create hurdles to building an office culture and fostering engagement, suggesting that travel becomes even *more* critical to bringing colleagues together.

## A Demonstrated Return on Noncustomer Travel

During the pandemic, two major shifts occurred relevant to travel. Noncustomer travel wasn’t possible for an extended period, and a vast majority of office employees worked remotely full time for the first time. Those dual circumstances provided greater clarity about the value of face-to-face interaction and travel for internal purposes. A majority of respondents indicate that traveling to meet or spend time with colleagues pays dividends in terms of culture and engagement.

Around seven in 10 respondents (71%) agree their organization realizes tangible business value from trips to

FIGURE 2

### What's Gained by Bringing People Together

Face-to-face meetings and travel build bonds

Rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements

Net agree (selecting “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree”)    Neither agree nor disagree    Net disagree (selecting “somewhat disagree” or “strongly disagree”)



In-person interactions (meetings, off-sites, workshops) are critical for ensuring positive long-term relationships between employees and coworkers.



As a result of business travel, I have gained greater awareness of and empathy for coworkers and customers.



A primarily remote work model can make employees feel disconnected from the organization.

Base: 420 to 424 respondents, which varies by row; excludes “Don’t know.”

Source: Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey, May 2023

meet with coworkers/other employees in person. Respondents indicate that the greatest business benefits of meeting in person for internal meetings (e.g., among employees, teammates, new hires) are stronger relationships between employees/teams (74%), greater collaboration (60%), stronger organizational culture (55%), greater employee engagement (54%), and increased feelings of inclusion for remote workers/dispersed teams (46%). **FIGURE 3**

In addition, travel can play a key role in professional development. Six in 10 respondents agree that most employees in their organization believe business travel is a key component of their professional development, and around half (51%) agree that leaders in their organization also believe that. (Notably, however, more than a quarter—27%—disagreed with the latter statement.)

GSK's workforce was able to pivot to remote working successfully during the pandemic, and GSK exceeded its own growth projections. However, the company has grown even more over the past year, as travel investment has grown to 80% of 2019 spending—a benchmark that the company plans to maintain to meet ambitious sustainability goals for the future.

At BMS, travel to internal leadership summits is an important element of developing the company strategy and culture. "It sets an example from the top down of the importance of getting teams together in person to better focus, collaborate, and set a course for our success as an organization," says Goldberg, the global head of travel and meetings sourcing. "A significant benefit of travel is bringing teams together to set a clear direction."

Survey respondents agree that the most effective approach for many types of internal meetings is to gather in person. When presented with a list of different internal meeting purposes, the majority of respondents believe face-to-face meetings facilitate the best outcome. **FIGURE 4** For meetings meant for team building/bonding for geographically dispersed teams, 79% say in-person meetings facilitate the best outcome. In fact, meeting clients to conduct business was the only other meeting type that had more respondents saying in-person meeting was the best method. Seven in 10 (70%) say meeting in person is the best method for brainstorming/innovation. Sixty-four percent say interviewing candidates for key appointments is best done face-to-face. And more than half (58%) say meeting in person is the best method for onboarding/training.

Goldberg, who is based in New Jersey, manages a team in Florida. They travel to get together in person each year. "We got comfortable [with] remote work during the pandemic, but nothing compares to in-person connection and collaboration," he says. "I'm grateful that my organization values that."

Members of the top management team at Steris agree that strategy sessions, product launches, intensive training, and certain celebrations are worth traveling for, Medancic says. Getting together in real life "energizes and invigorates," she

FIGURE 3

### In-Person Meetings Deliver Teamwork, Culture, and Engagement

Interacting with coworkers face-to-face strengthens relationships and collaboration

What are the greatest business benefits of meeting in person for internal meetings (among employees, teammates, new hires, etc.)? Select up to five.



Base: 425 respondents. Not shown: 0% "Don't know."

Source: Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey, May 2023

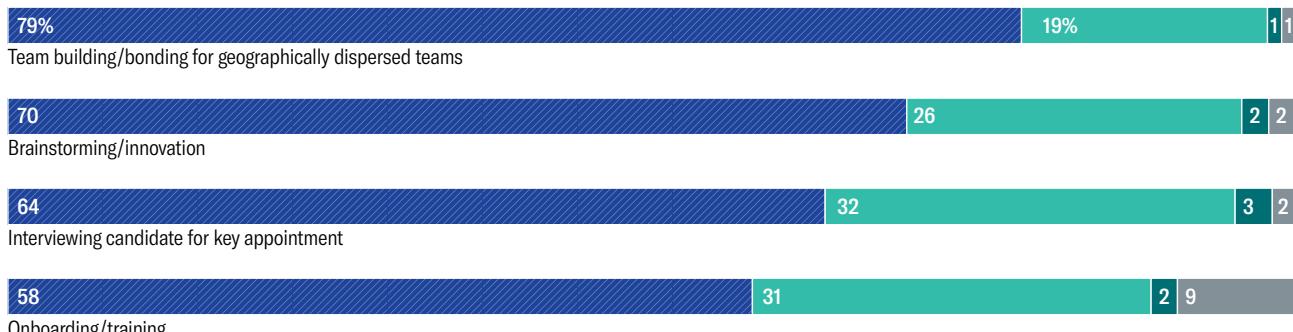
FIGURE 4

## When Being Face-to-Face Is Best

In-person team building, brainstorming, hiring, and onboarding work better than remote alternatives

For each of the following meeting objectives, select the interaction method that best facilitates a successful outcome.

█ In-person meeting   █ Virtual/video meeting   █ Telephone/audio meeting   █ On-demand webinar/recording



Base: 417 to 421 respondents, which varies by row; excludes "Don't know."

Source: Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey, May 2023

says. “While cost for business travel is watched, our leaders do a good job of driving face-to-face meetings where necessary.”

GSK has been reviewing its travel policy and will go live with a new version in January 2024 to ensure that it’s aligned with the way the organization works today. The new policy will formalize a “virtual first” approach to internal meetings. The travel function will also make it easy for employees to understand when it makes sense to get on a plane or train by building those reasons—including internal business development meetings, senior leadership team meetings, supplier meetings, conferences, clinical investigator meetings, and audit meetings—into the policy and online booking tools. “Travel will be just as important as it was before,” says Short. “It allows for collaboration, professional development, and for innovation to drive our product strategies.”

## The State of Business Travel Management

When it comes to business travel policy and management, there are similarities in approaches across organizations. A wide majority (89%) of respondents say their organization has formal, centrally managed travel policies. It follows, then, that few (16%) say their organization doesn’t have a dedicated, central travel function. In addition, around six in 10 respondents (61%) report that their organization uses a single travel management company (TMC) across the enterprise, with fewer (14%) saying their organization uses multiple TMCs.

Enterprise oversight of travel and working with a single TMC can offer significant benefits. Chief among them is providing duty-of-care services for an organization’s traveling employees. “Having one global TMC that feeds into travel security is absolutely paramount,” says Short. “We also have more options to enhance the user experience. We can maximize our opportunity for savings with airlines and hotels. And it gives us simpler reporting.”

GSK also enlisted its TMC’s consulting arm to fine-tune policy and services to meet changing business needs. “They provide us with benchmarking and analysis,” says Short. A new travel policy better aligned with corporate strategy will place more emphasis on sustainability, accessibility, traveler health and well-being, and “bleisure” (a combination of business and leisure) travel.

The changes are in keeping with the company’s priorities. For example, GSK has aims to reach 80% net-zero carbon emissions by 2030, so sustainability is starting to be factored into travel decisions. As a company in the health care space, GSK also places a premium on employee well-being. The new travel policy reflects employee well-being by covering expenses like rental GPS and airplane Wi-Fi and not requiring employees to book the lowest available fares (within certain limits). “We’re not going to let them spend thousands more; it’s a balanced approach,” says Short. “But employee health and well-being [are] important to us, so we adapt and continuously improve the program.”

Another important way in which travel programs can strengthen corporate culture is by aligning with and integrating a company's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategy and goals. GSK, for example, has made significant investments in DEI at the corporate level. So, with the new travel policy, "we want to make sure every group that has accessibility needs is catered to and feels a part of business travel," Short says. The company is looking to implement an accessibility travel desk through its TMC. It also recently surveyed both its DEI function and its LGBTQ employee groups to find out what other changes they'd like to see.

More than half (56%) of respondents agree that organizations *should* integrate DEI goals with their business travel policies and programs, yet fewer (39%) indicate that their own organization does so. This situation is further underscored by respondents' assessments of the importance of inclusion in business travel programs and the extent to which their own organizations' travel programs accommodate all travelers. Forty-five percent of respondents say that it's very important that a travel program is "inclusive and accommodates the unique needs of all travelers" in order to best support the organization. However, fewer (24%) say their organization's current program possesses this attribute to a great extent.

Like GSK, BMS adapts its travel policies to meet the changing needs of the company and its people. The travel function meets with its TMC regularly to assess performance, perform root cause analysis, and improve the travel program over time. These meetings have been crucial as BMS rethinks pre-Covid-19 travel strategies. "The environment has changed so dramatically that we can't assume that the way we set up services before is the right way to be operating now," says Goldberg. For example, for some of its more prominent meetings, BMS is investing in a TMC agent on-site to handle travel disruptions. "Knowing there's enough risk in the system that cancellations and changes are likely to occur, we've found that it's a best practice that we are thoughtful about employing," Goldberg says.

Travel industry disruption is top of mind for corporate travel executives today, and there's a clear cultural benefit to helping employees navigate these continued travel issues. "Our mission is to discover, develop, and deliver innovative medicines to help our patients prevail over serious diseases. But we can only do that if we are taking care of ourselves and our employee population so that we're in the best state of mind to achieve that mission," says Goldberg. "That cascades to our travel program and its mission to keep employees safe and provide a seamless experience for them. In this environment—delays, cancellations, longer wait times for travel agents, inflation—we are focused on providing a seamless level of service to our traveling employees."

BMS has also increased education and awareness efforts to help employees understand the state of the travel industry,



**"Having one global TMC that feeds into travel security is absolutely paramount. We also have more options to enhance the user experience. We can maximize our opportunity for savings with airlines and hotels. And it gives us simpler reporting," says Deborah Short, global head of travel at GSK.**

what tools and mechanisms are available if they run into problems, what to do if they have medical issues while traveling, and so forth. "We share that information with travelers through a variety of communication channels so they are as prepared as possible," Goldberg says.

Goldberg also elicits feedback to improve the travel program. "In programs like ours, a secret sauce is leveraging the power of our administrative community, who are largely responsible for booking and supporting our leaders when they travel," says Goldberg, who runs regular engagement sessions with and surveys of the company's administrative assistants. "They're a very vocal group and not at all shy about suggesting improvements," he says. "The discussions also humanize the travel program and help our people understand that it's not just a black box; there [are] real people working on their behalf to meet their needs and solve their problems."

## Executive Support Elevates Managed Travel's Impact

Other things, of course, can prevent travel programs from more effectively supporting employees and the larger culture. A cost-containment approach, for example, may be limiting the full value of business travel for internal purposes. Limited funding/budget for travel is, by far, the biggest business travel challenge, according to the survey respondents, cited by 52%. It certainly follows that when asked what area of the business their organization's travel function reports to, the greatest share of respondents (30%) says it falls under finance, more so than operations (17%) or HR (15%), and three-quarters of respondents agree their organization considers travel a cost center that must be managed tightly.



**“Business travel is a good tool to drive the culture and engagement. Business travel has always been an integral part of our organization’s culture, and I don’t expect this will change,” says Medancic.**

Of course, travel *is* an expense—and a significant one. But well-managed travel for internal purposes can also be a smart investment, yielding stronger relationships among employees, greater collaboration, increased employee engagement, a more unified culture, and increased feelings of inclusion. Sending that message has to happen at the top of an organization. Indeed, when asked which attributes were most important to having a travel program that best supports the organization, 82% of respondents say that being “supported by executive leadership” is very important—more than any other attribute. Yet only around half (49%) of respondents say their organization’s travel program is supported by executive leaders to a great extent.

BMS, Steris, and GSK offer a glimpse into what this leadership support can look like. Throughout the year, BMS leaders come together to review and refine their operating budgets for each business unit, which empowers employees and their managers to determine how to invest in travel. “We allow a good deal of autonomy in each business unit to determine where travel provides the most value within the broader organizational structure,” says Goldberg. “That sends the message that it’s not just a cost to be reduced.”

At Steris, “executive leadership support is a key component to the success of the program, which includes funding, strategy alignment, and adaptability,” says Medancic. “If the support is not in place, then the program may not be as successful as it should be.”

GSK has a travel steering committee, with all the business units represented on it. “They provide us with important perspectives and make decisions on travel,” says Short. “It’s a very collaborative process in which we provide them with benchmarking data and insights about what other organizations are doing and recommend things, as well.” Short established the committee as soon as she arrived at the company. “It’s absolutely imperative that you engage with the business when developing the travel policy,” Short explains. “Without that, everyone ends up doing their own things, and you lose your synergies and the ability to manage the traveler experience.”

For the most part, the travel programs in many organizations seem adequate. Just under one-half (47%) of respondents say theirs is moderately effective, 13% say it’s a little effective, and 4% say it’s not at all effective. But these programs could be better. Just over a third (36%) of respondents say their

organization’s approach to business travel is very effective in supporting how the organization works today.

At a time when culture and engagement are key drivers of business performance, good enough may not be good enough. Having a business travel program that meets the needs of a modern workforce is essential. To increase that likelihood, organizations need leaders who believe in and support managed travel for internal purposes. Fifty-three percent of respondents who say their travel program is supported by executive leaders to a great extent indicate their travel program is very effective in supporting how the organization works today. Meanwhile, those who say support from executive leaders is moderate are 30 percentage points *less* likely to say their approach to business travel is very effective (23%), and the group that says support from leaders is minimal or nonexistent are 41 percentage points less likely to say their approach to travel is very effective (12%).

## Conclusion

Travel is not just a cost to be contained but also an investment in an organization’s employees and its culture. The survey makes a strong case for such returns on business travel for internal purposes.

Organizations realize tangible business value from trips to meet other employees, new hires, and job candidates in person. These face-to-face gatherings strengthen the organizational culture, increase employee engagement, build more positive long-term relationships, increase awareness and empathy among coworkers, and foster feelings of inclusion. In organizations that have more employees working remotely or in hybrid business environments, achieving these benefits is likely to require *more* business travel, not less.

When a company puts its people and its culture first, success follows, according to Medancic. “Business travel is a good tool to drive the culture and engagement,” she says. “Business travel has always been an integral part of our organization’s culture, and I don’t expect this will change.”

She says there’s been an increase in business travel in her organization to participate in collaborative sessions and team meetings. “Many things can be done remotely,” Medancic notes, “but relationships and collaboration are better built in person.”

## METHODOLOGY AND PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Harvard Business Review Analytic Services surveyed 425 members of the *Harvard Business Review* audience via an online survey fielded in May 2023. Respondents qualified to complete the survey if they were familiar with their organization's business travel.

Size of Organization	Seniority	Industry Sectors	Job Functions	Regions
<b>35%</b> 10,000 or more employees	<b>27%</b> Executive management/ board members	<b>15%</b> Manufacturing	<b>25%</b> General/executive management	<b>54%</b> North America
<b>30%</b> 1,000-9,999 employees	<b>43%</b> Senior management	<b>15%</b> Technology	<b>13%</b> Sales/business development/ customer service	<b>17%</b> Asia Pacific
<b>10%</b> 500-999 employees	<b>22%</b> Middle management	<b>11%</b> Business/ professional services	All other functions less than 10% each.	<b>15%</b> Europe
<b>24%</b> 100-499 employees	<b>8%</b> Other grades	<b>10%</b> Financial services	All other sectors less than 10% each.	<b>7%</b> Latin America
				<b>6%</b> Middle East/Africa
				<b>1%</b> Other

Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

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