

5 ways data can shape your corporate travel programme in 2021

The uncertainty faced by the entire sector in Covid's wake has given rise to many 'new questions', particularly around the nature and length of the industry's recovery, but also around consumer behaviour, booking trends and necessary changes to travel policies.



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Bonnie Smith, general manager of FCM, Flight Centre's global travel management company, believes that data has been at the heart of advancements in the travel industry over the last few years – and that data will continue to guide travel management companies (TMCs) and travel managers as they navigate a post-Covid landscape.

"TMCs use data to get a really good overview of a company's travel needs, preferences, expenses, spend and return on investment. But equally important, data helps us analyse risk – and track behaviour and trends."

For Smith, data is a powerful tool which can:

1. Inform future-focused travel management solutions

Through the use of automation, blended technology, and advanced data analytics, TMCs are going to play a critical role in a company's future travel decisions.

"There's no doubt," says Smith, "that concerns around Covid health and safety are going to put corporate travel under a critical lens for the foreseeable future, especially when it comes to the necessity of travel and the need for safe, considered travel solutions."

A TMC can look at your company's travel history, the current environment and data-backed predictions in order to design highly-personalised solutions for your team.

2. Modernise your T&E management

If your company is still managing its travel and expenses (T&E) manually with intricate spreadsheets or a paper-based system – it's time for an intervention. Manual T&E processes are labour- and time-intensive, meaning your company and your employees are losing hours that could otherwise be spent more productively.

Outsourcing your travel to a professional TMC and replacing inefficient manual T&E processes with an automated approach is the answer for any company seeking streamlined systems, optimal productivity, and greater transparency.

"A TMC will help you implement an automated system to handle even the most complicated requests, payments, and expense reports," says Smith, "Giving you greater control over your corporate travel budget."

3. Assess risk – and improve duty of care

Duty of care has never been more important. "What happens when borders close, or terror attacks and weather events shut down international travel?" asks Smith. "We use flight data and traveller records to locate our travellers quickly and easily – so we can bring them home."

An automated and centralised travel management system is one of the best tools for ensuring traveller safety. Travellers benefit from access to real-time, pertinent travel-safety information on the ground, while managers receive comprehensive traveller tracking capabilities – allowing them to immediately see who is travelling, when and where. Rest assured that should an emergency or threat arise, your TMC partner is ready to deliver a swift and adequate response.

And in a Covid era, data will be used to track Covid restrictions, protocols and requirements around the globe, the results of mandatory health screenings for Covid-19 – even a passenger's immunology status.

"Data," says Smith, "will bring back confidence in terms of hard facts vs. speculation, allowing international travel and trade to resume, while protecting travellers' health."

4. Deliver savings

Savings will be more important than ever in a post-Covid world. FCM, for example, has a track-record of delivering savings for South African companies. A South African-based mining company with international operations was spending over R40m a year flying its executives and technology specialists to all four corners of the globe. After six months of working with FCM Travel Solutions, the company saw its travel liability reduced by a fifth.

"We didn't achieve these savings by forcing employees to use discount airlines or cheap hotels. Instead, FCM looks beyond the transaction, at the bigger picture. For instance, if our data reveals that a client is using 500 different hotels in 50 cities, we would advise reducing this number to say 100, and negotiate a discount with the remaining hotels. It is about

creating efficiencies."

5. Boost policy compliance with behavioural economics

For companies still debating whether or not to engage the services of a TMC, it is often the promise of increased duty of care, significant savings – and stricter compliance with a company's travel policy which is the most appealing.

According to Angelique Montalto, Head of SAP Concur Africa, organisations are having to quickly adapt to improve their travel and expense policies to keep employees safe, while also maintaining adequate liquidity:

"We are seeing across our platform how organisations are taking a far more active role in terms of their travel policies, with a specific focus on meeting their duty of care obligations for travelling employees. In addition, the economic impact of this past year has brought the office of the CFO into a more active role in guiding travel and expense policy as organisations try to maintain healthy cash flow."

Part of this, says Smith is an understanding of behavioural economics.

"A TMC can help identify the reasons behind certain behaviours related to non-compliance – how your employees decide what to buy and how much to spend – and then craft a travel policy that fosters a culture of support, encouraging greater compliance.

"Apply behavioural economics and you may discover, for example, that offering travellers a heap of different options can actually result in decision paralysis – or that by providing only three options at three different price points, the majority of travellers will book the middle-priced option. Information like this can be used to 'nudge' your employees towards the most cost-effective or time-effective choice."

As the role of the TMC evolves from travel agent to "enterprise solution providers", data is needed every step of the way.

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