

Survey shows business travellers will take to the skies in 2022

In a recent travel trend survey conducted by FCM during the month of October 2021, 175 respondents from 26 countries, including South Africa, provided answers to burning issues such as the impact of vaccines on travel, how to tackle safety, what we can expect from travel costs, and many more. The vast majority (63%) of respondents indicated that new and better things await business travel in the year to come.



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Bonnie Smith, FCM general manager, says: "The years 2020 and 2021 will go down in history as the most disruptive years in business travel to date. But the Covid-19 pandemic has also resulted in innovation, resilience and agility. Instead of letting the pandemic get us down, travel management companies like FCM have taken stock, recalibrated, relooked traveller requirements and come up with innovative solutions that prepare us for a new and better era in travel."

Smith outlines the top takeaways with lessons and trends that will make for a more robust corporate travel sector in 2022 and beyond:

1. The revival of the travel policy

Although the freedom and appeal of 'unmanaged travel' was all the hype in 2019, the pandemic has given the travel policy a well-deserved boost in popularity.

“Prior to the pandemic, we saw a move towards unmanaged travel with travellers wanting to book non-traditional accommodation and low-cost flights on their own terms. Two years later, the uncertainty of the travel landscape has prompted a return to the ‘safety net’ of a corporate travel policy,” says Smith.

In 2022, all companies – no matter how big or small - should have a solid travel policy in place. Not only will a policy help companies keep a handle on costs, but clear guidelines can help travellers feel comfortable and confident to travel again and it will help companies ensure the best duty of care.

The travel policy will also prompt companies to discuss important issues such as definitions of ‘essential’ travel. What warrants a business trip today? And how many employees are allowed to travel together at any one time? This document can also highlight Covid-19 protocols and open the discussion on whether travellers will be required to be vaccinated.

According to the survey, the following elements are rated as very important and should be included in a 2022 travel policy:

- Duty of care: 73%
- Travel tracking: 46%
- Expense reporting: 39%
- Approval processes: 31%
- Trip length: 17%

2. Technology forges the way

Today’s technology is smooth, intuitive and very much in the background. "Customers and consumers don’t necessarily care about the tech, or how it works, just that it does. Seamlessly," says Smith.

Although a knee-jerk reaction has been to abandon online booking in favour of offline booking, in 2022, we can expect to see an adoption of blended technology. The vast majority of business travellers now opt for online booking tools provided by a TMC. In a nutshell, this means that they still enjoy the freedom of online booking while at the same time getting the expertise and peace of mind that comes with booking through a professional.

Smith explains that as business travel recovers, more and more companies are embracing technology to help them get back on the road with confidence. This includes easy access to information; instant alerts and travel updates; always-on communication channels; and AI-enhanced booking platforms.

Technology has the potential to support duty of care in unprecedented ways. Today, there are tools available to keep an eye on risks and developments in the world of travel. They can send alerts, track where travellers are and send relevant live information – straight to your mobile device.

3. The traveller comes first - always

Traveller safety and well-being still trump all other concerns in a post-pandemic world. After months of lockdown and social distancing, travellers need to know their safety comes first before they hit the road.

The main concerns highlighted in the survey showed that:

4. The anticipation of travel costs in 2022

While corporate travel budgets remain under pressure, it's only natural that companies are looking for a crystal ball when it comes planning and travel costs in 2022. Unfortunately, the majority of respondents predict travel costs will increase and therefore put even more pressure on tight budgets.

- 48% of respondents predict travel will be more expensive in 2022.
- 38% say prices will remain the same.
- 14% are hopeful and predict travel costs will be cheaper.

Unsurprisingly, companies are re-evaluating travel based on the impact on their bottom line as well as the environment and the safety of their travellers.

5. Building traveller confidence

Corporates are weighing the pros and cons of each trip carefully. They have started to realise the value of in-person meetings but are careful not to make people travel for things that could – or should – be handled virtually.

This trend becomes abundantly clear in the survey when respondents were asked for which reasons they would take back to the skies:

- 49% said they would travel for essential requirements.
- 14% would travel to visit regional offices.

Essential travel is likely to mean different things to different people, but is likely to include supplier relations, managing customer relationships, new business opportunities, building a company culture and key account management.

6. Hybrid solutions will continue to shape business travel

The jury is still out on whether remote work will be the future – but what is sure is that remote work and hybrid conferences will continue to take over the workplace in 2022.

"It is therefore important that we re-imagine our workspaces ensuring that meetings and events for both virtual and in-person attendees are unforgettable, irresistible and impactful," says Smith.

The key question in 2022, according to Smith, will be to determine who should physically attend meetings and who can connect remotely. "Unfortunately, there is no cookie-cutter answer to this question," says Smith. "When meeting new clients around initial projects, it's important for high-level management to connect face-to-face in order to build trust, pick up on messages and read body language. Once you have laid the initial foundation, it becomes easier to collaborate virtually."

Although virtual meetings are easy and efficient, 2022 will be about finding the right balance in a true hybrid fashion, according to Smith.

"There are many factors at play in the road to business travel recovery. But what is certain is that we can expect a gradual but steady return to healthier and more productive business travel in 2022," concludes Smith.