

# Business travel – the social practices surrounding meetings

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## Abstract

A considerable amount of travel domestically and internationally is undertaken by 'briefcase travellers' in the pursuit of business meetings. Such business travel is deemed costly to the economy albeit that recent work has argued that positive utility of time use is associated with such travel. This paper examines the potential factors at work in the social construction of meetings and their associated travel. What are the different motivations and expectations in attending a meeting? What are the actual consequences (positive and negative) in attending? How can the organisation of a meeting impact upon the wider organisation of activity in time and space of the individuals involved? How does the process of meeting attendance, including travel, unfold? How might ICTs impact on the social practices associated with meetings? The paper seeks to offer a critical assessment of such issues that may underlie and influence the nature and extent of business travel. It goes on to define the notion of excess briefcase travel as a means to frame the challenge for policymakers and employers and employees in potentially reducing such travel and the associated prior challenge for researchers to establish empirical understandings.

## 1 Introduction

As at 2008, 3% of all domestic trips made in Great Britain were for business<sup>1</sup> (i.e. travel during the course of work) representing 9% of total distance travelled (DfT, 2008). Compared to other trip types with the exception of holidays, business trips on average are by far the longest journeys in distance (21 miles) and duration (41 minutes). By comparison, commute trips account for 16% of all trips representing 19% of total distance travelled and have an average length of 8.6 miles and duration of 28 minutes (DfT, 2008). In terms of proportions of all trips, the figures for the US (for 2001) are remarkably consistent with work related business accounting for 3% of all person trips and trips to/from work accounting for 16% of all person trips (Hu and Reuscher, 2001).

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<sup>1</sup> Defined in the National Travel Survey as “personal trips in course of work, including a trip in course of work back to work. This includes all work trips by people with no usual place of work (e.g. site workers) and those who work at or from home”.

In terms of the cost to the economy of business trips (as interpreted in the UK), the value of working time per person associated with a journey depends upon the mode (based on the average wage rate of individuals using a given mode). Hence the 'cost' of a business trip by car (as the driver) lasting one hour is assumed to be £26 per individual in terms of time lost to economically productive use outside of travel. The corresponding figure for a rail passenger is £37. Meanwhile the value of a one hour commute (based on an equity value of willingness to pay of the individual) in terms of time 'cost' is taken to be £5. Once such values are accounted for it becomes clear that in terms of assumed economic impacts of travel, business trips account for a substantial proportion of total travel. Mackie et al (2003) note that “[f]or proposed road schemes ... although business travel by car only accounts for around one sixth of all traffic, it accounts for about half of the assumed 'costs' of travel time”.

Accordingly this paper seeks to question what we know of business trips and in particular of 'briefcase' travel with a view to being able to assess how and to what extent the demand for business trips may be changing or could be changed in future in the context of social change, technological opportunities and environmental imperatives to reduce our carbon footprint.

The author's suspicion is that we know remarkably little about business travel in terms of understanding its determinants and potentially influencing its overall impact on levels of mobility. The paper therefore aims to highlight and discuss a series of questions, the answers to which may be instructive both in terms of understanding travel behaviour and in terms of policy formulation to influence or support travel for the purposes of business. It may well be the case that further important questions should also be included or indeed that some evidence does already exist to begin answering them that the author has overlooked. As such, the first version of this paper can be seen as a working document to provoke discussion and feedback at the *Fourth Specialist Meeting of the Network 'ICT: mobilising persons, places and spaces'*, 7-10 October 2009, Île d'Orléans, Québec, Canada.

## **2 Attempting to develop a deeper understanding of business travel**

The following questions are discussed in this main part of the paper:

1. What is the makeup of business travel and the destination activities from which 'briefcase travel' is derived?
2. To what extent are business meetings 'necessary' as events and from the perspective of each individual attending?
3. What are the consequences of meeting attendance for the individual in terms of their use of time?
4. In what ways and to what extent can ICTs play a part in reshaping business activity and travel?

### ***2.1 What is the makeup of business travel and the destination activities from which 'briefcase travel' is derived?***

National travel surveys are a key source in terms of painting a picture of the composition of travel according to journey purposes. However, in spite of their authoritative nature in terms of substantial sample sizes and thus representativeness, they report in a remarkably superficial manner in terms of disaggregated insight into the nature and heterogeneity of travel and travel purpose. In Great Britain's National Travel Survey, in common with other

such surveys, a key element is a self-completion 7-day travel record (Anderson et al, 2009). In terms of recording journey purpose, participants are instructed as follows: “*What was the purpose of your journey? Please give a simple description such as ‘go to work’, ‘take children to school’ or ‘go home’, If you went shopping please note whether it was ‘food shopping’ or ‘other shopping’*”. These data are then processed into 20 different trip categories one of which is ‘in course of work’.

Thus, all we know in relation to business travel from such surveys is what proportion of all trips the rather coarse category ‘in the course of work’ represents. It can be tempting to characterise all ‘business travel’ from the perspective of the knowledge worker. However, Mackie et al (2003) remind us that “[t]here is clearly a category of employers’ business travel in which, broadly speaking, the work being done during employers’ business time actually consists of travelling: this applies, for example to service engineers, delivery people, public transport drivers, lorry drivers etc.” Meanwhile these authors have coined the phrase ‘briefcase traveller’ to reflect employees travelling in the course of business.

There are a number of considerations that would shed more light on the makeup of business travel in relation to an interest, eventually, in addressing travel demand and patterns of travel associated with business activities.

#### *The extent to which the activity at the destination is location dependent*

Some travel in the course of work has destinations that are spatially fixed: the service engineer’s visit to a given premises to carry out work; the deliver of a parcel to a specified address; a site visit to inspect or discuss specific facilities. Meanwhile other travel in the course of work may have few or no constraints on destination location in terms of the activity itself other than the provision of suitable facilities such as a meeting room. In such cases a choice of destination is likely to exist. The question then becomes one of what factors determine the choice outcome. Destination may be dictated by habit or tradition (e.g. meeting at company HQ), the location of the activity host or by a ‘boundedly rational’ optimal location to suit all those involved in (travelling to) the activity. The level of seniority of individuals involved or spatio-temporal constraints faced by specific individuals may also weight such location choice. Consideration of collective carbon footprint may also now feature.

#### *The nature of the activity at the destination in terms of the importance of co-presence*

Allied to the issue of location dependence is the question of whether two or more individuals need to be co-present in order that the purpose(s) of the activity are achieved. In considering this there is a danger of ‘functional thinking’ (Geels and Smid, 2000). We might consider the activity in terms of its purpose being about information exchange and then ask the question of whether a face-to-face encounter of two or more individuals was necessary or whether the information itself could have been exchanged electronically between two individuals at different locations. This is returned to later in the paper. However, narrowly interpreting the activity in this way through functional thinking may overlook more subtle aspects of information exchange and indeed other reasons for co-presence. Co-presence offers the prospect of a multi-sensory experience of encounter and exchange – while the exchange of facts and figures, diagrams and the like could be done remotely, matters of eye contact, body language and indeed smell can strongly colour the proceedings and outcomes of an activity. It can also be the case that co-presence provides a contribution to social capital. Jain and Lyons

(2008) discuss the notion of the gift of travel time which can in part symbolise the gesture of importance of a social encounter implied by an individual being prepared to give their time in order to travel and achieve co-presence. For example information exchange with a (prospective) client may be 'functionally' possible via a telephone conference call but the establishment of a co-present meeting symbolises a greater degree of significance and commitment that may ultimately achieve a greater purpose of the encounter.

#### *The duration of the activity set against the duration of the associated travel*

Schwanen and Dijst (2002) have examined the relationship between activity duration and travel time considering the notion that individuals balance the two. Based on empirical evidence from the Dutch national travel survey for commuting it was found that there was considerable variation around an average travel-time ratio value. Travel-time ratio is defined as "*the ratio between travel time and the sum of travel time and activity duration*". The average value of the ratio they calculated for a car driver was 0.111 and for a train passenger was 0.222. It would be instructive to have similar values available for business trips. On the one hand one can envisage the ratios being (a lot) higher for single day business trips. Meanwhile for business activities lasting more than a day (e.g. a 2-3 day workshop or conference) the ratio could be (a lot) lower. It may be assumed that individuals would have a notional 'ratio threshold' above which they could not justify engagement in the business activity. On the other hand, achieving a positive utility from the travel time itself in terms of travel time use (Mokhtarian and Salomon, 2001; Lyons and Urry, 2005) could push any such threshold higher. It is not clear to what extent those organising meetings or indeed individuals attending meetings consciously consider the travel 'cost' versus the benefits of activity attendance or whether other factors dictate attendance – in some cases it may be a foregone conclusion that attendance is mandatory irrespective of the cost in terms of travel.

#### *The potential clustering of business activities*

Another means of offsetting the travel 'cost' of a business activity and improving the travel-time ratio is to cluster more than one business activity in close proximity and at or close to the same time. One business activity acts as a spatial and/or temporal 'anchor' around which other activities can be arranged. Two considerations arise. Firstly there is the ability of an individual to dictate the timing and/or location of a further activity to correspond to the anchor – this will depend upon their level of influence/importance associated with the further activity's scheduling and their preparedness to optimise their scheduling. Secondly, a lower level of 'necessity for attendance' threshold for any given activity in the prospective cluster may arise by virtue of the shared travel time cost between the activities.

In relation to ways in which it might be possible to better profile business travel (briefcase travel in particular) through collection of diary data, the question becomes whether or not it is better to categorise in terms of specific business activity types or according to characteristics of the activities such as discussed above. Indeed perhaps the ideal from the point of view of improving understanding is to do both. This said, it becomes apparent that a wide array of potential descriptors exist, for instance specific business activity types could be categorised in a number of ways:

- number of participants;
- inter- versus intra-organisational;
- conference, round-table, exhibition, site visit etc.;

- client, contractor, supplier, collaborator etc;
- domestic or international;
- single or multi-day; and
- business only or business and social.

In seeking to better understand the makeup of business activities and the associated travel during the course of work that is derived, a subsequent issue becomes that of the degree of compulsion for an individual to attend the activity.

## ***2.2 To what extent are business meetings ‘necessary’ as events and from the perspective of each individual attending?***

A central issue determining both whether a business activity takes place and who is in attendance (both of which fundamentally affect the amount of associated travel) is the extent to which conscious consideration is given to whether or not the need for the activity going ahead or any one individual’s participation can be justified. It would seem more than a coincidence that meetings are the source of popular derision in terms of their effectiveness (see Box 1) which does indeed bring into question the motives for them being convened and for their being attended!

### *Box 1. Satirical quotes referring to the necessity or not of meetings*

<p><i>“Meetings are indispensable when you don’t want to do anything”</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">John Kenneth Galbraith</p> <p><i>“The least productive people are usually the ones who are most in favor of holding meetings”</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Thomas Sowell</p> <p><i>“A committee is a group of the unwilling chosen from the unfit, to do the unnecessary”</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Unknown author</p>
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While a degree of consideration is typically given to convening a meeting and its attendance, it can also be the case that such consideration falls ‘victim’ to choice mechanisms that are also being recognised in relation to travel (Chorus et al, 2006; Lyons et al, 2008a) – in particular habitual behaviour and satisficing behaviour. In terms of habit, some meetings are ‘routine’ and are convened and put into people’s diaries almost without question regarding the appropriateness of their frequency, location or indeed need. Consideration of whether or not a meeting should be arranged and whether an individual should attend may be partial in terms of weighing up the pros and cons such that when the case for proceeding is ‘satisfactory’ the affirmative decision is made.

One can conceive of a number of considerations that are in the mind of the individual when making the decision on whether or not to attend a meeting. An illustrative set of such considerations is shown in Table 1. The inclusion of ticks in the Table is in some cases speculative but reflects an important observation that some considerations may be judged in opposite ways by different individuals or by the same individual in relation to different situations.

Table 1. *Individuals' possible considerations on the merits of meeting attendance*

Consideration	Potential motivation / benefit	Potential disincentive / disbenefit
Business norm	✓	✓
Time away from 'the office'	✓	✓
Time away from home	✓	✓
Information sharing – knowledge exchange	✓	
Influencing decisions	✓	
Status and recognition	✓	
Networking	✓	✓
Sociability	✓	✓
Experiencing new places	✓	✓
Monetary cost		✓

An individual may consciously or perhaps unconsciously sense an expectation that they attend a meeting because it is a *business norm* to do so – this may be something that is taken as an overriding justification for attendance; on the other hand it may in some cases be recognised as an equally overriding justification for not attending if the individual senses this is an underlying motivation for the meeting as a whole with prospects for inefficient use of time by attending. *Time away from the office* in order to travel to/from and attend a meeting may be seen as an opportunity cost<sup>2</sup>. Certainly in terms of economic appraisal of business travel in the UK it is judged as such. However, for some individuals there may be no opportunity cost at all but instead an opportunity benefit in that travelling to/from the meeting offers the best alternative in terms of their productive time use – time, for example, to concentrate that is not afforded in the office. Boundaries between work time and non-work time for some in the knowledge economy / information age can become increasingly blurred. Meeting attendance can result in early starts or late arrivals home on a given day or indeed in days and nights away from home. This *time away from home* may for some be an attraction of meeting attendance although it would be presumed that for a greater proportion of individuals time away from home is seen as a personal opportunity cost associated with meeting attendance that would weigh in favour of not attending the meeting. In terms of the meeting itself then perhaps two of the most tangible reasons for attendance concern *information sharing* and the *influencing decisions*. While the individual (or their employer) may not consider a (co-present) meeting was necessary in order that information be shared and decisions reached, given that the meeting is to proceed it becomes necessary to participate. Allied to business norms and with the earlier reference to the gift of travel time, *status and recognition* can be a significant consideration. This may be equated to presenteeism in that whether or not the individual makes a worthy contribution to the meeting they share in its value and significance by association. Three further considerations relate to indirect aspects of a convened meeting. Co-presence affords the opportunity for *networking* with others (both already known and new acquaintances) in relation to matters not necessarily directly concerned with the purposes of the meeting itself. Conceivably some individuals see this as a disincentive because of their own confidence in engaging though in the main this would be judged as a motivation for attendance and in some cases even a principal motivation for doing so. Closely related to networking is *sociability* in that individuals may thrive (or not) on the overspilling of business into pleasure in relation to shared time with colleagues and acquaintances that may be before, during or after the formal business of the

<sup>2</sup> Defined by the Collins English Dictionary as “cost in terms of the best alternatives foregone”.

meeting itself. The geographic location may form part of the associated sociability allied to the opportunity to *experience new places*. Indeed, in some cases (partly because of opportunities to tag non-work social activities to a meeting) the location of the meeting can become the dominant factor in an individual being motivated to attend (or discouraged from attending) a meeting with the goals of the meeting itself and associated opportunity costs deemed to be secondary. Lastly there is typically a *monetary cost*, albeit borne by the employer, of meeting attendance that may bring into sharper relief overall the conscious consideration of the pros and cons of meeting attendance.

If we are to better understand how social and technological change may or could (with appropriate supporting policy interventions) affect the propensity for meetings to take place and be attended in the future then empirical insights are needed into the considerations above (and others that may also come to light). There is a need not only to understand the relative influence that such considerations have in the decisions to attend (and indeed convene) meetings but also to assess the degree to which such considerations can be influenced in the interests of reducing the overall need for motorised mobility associated with business meetings.

In terms of empirical evidence gathering it would be insightful not only to attempt to gather from individuals, in relation to specific meetings, their decisions on whether or not to attend and the considerations weighed up in doing so, but also to retrospectively assess the outcome of their decisions. In other words, having attended a meeting, to what extent did different considerations play their part (as expected or not) in determining the overall degree to which attendance at the meeting was beneficial? Follow-on questions would then be: to what extent do individuals ordinarily reflect upon the efficacy of meeting attendance?; and to what extent is there a learning process at work such that past behaviour is influencing subsequent decisions regarding meeting attendance?

### **2.3 *What are the consequences of meeting attendance for the individual in terms of their use of time?***

Assuming an individual has committed to attendance at a business meeting then this will clearly impact upon their work schedule for the given day or indeed week. The time devoted to the meeting itself might be assumed is time lost from the available time that day or week for other tasks and hence the prospect of opportunity cost exists. This said, for longer business meetings – especially conferences over several days – it is not a foregone conclusion that the individual will be fully engaged throughout in the proceedings of the meeting. Such engagement may be punctuated by periods of ‘time out’ that are used for other purposes (e.g. working in one’s hotel room).

If it is taken as given that the individual has suitably judged the matter of opportunity cost in terms of the time devoted to participating in the business activity itself then attention turns to the potential opportunity cost associated with the travel time devoted to travelling to/from the meeting location. Current UK transport economic appraisal reasons that there is indeed an opportunity cost associated with the travel in that an individual would prefer to use the travel time in some other more productive way if that time could be saved. However, such reasoning may be questioned in terms of how time and indeed working environment relate to productivity in the knowledge economy.

It may be assumed that many individuals involved in attending meetings are knowledge workers in some capacity. Holley et al (2008) discuss how the makeup of economic activity is changing with a move towards a greater proportion of knowledge work and suggest that “[a]s part of this change in the organization of work, there is now a reduced (and reducing) dominance of the clock-controlled industrialized time and a resurgence of the pre-industrial task-oriented concept of time.” In other words it becomes difficult to judge objectively what opportunity costs are associated with the clock time set aside for travelling to/from and participating in a business meeting. An individual’s productivity in the knowledge economy is more likely to be related to the outputs and outcomes of a task being completed than the Fordist metric of hours worked.

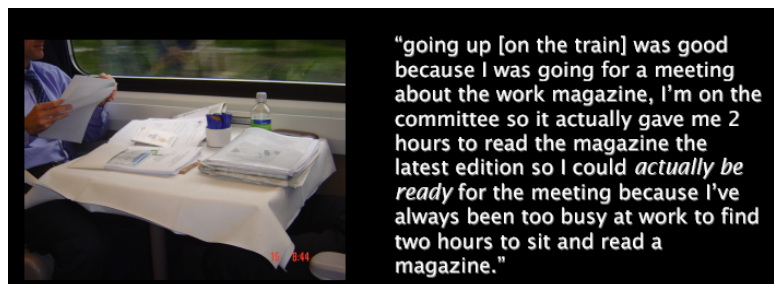
Recent research is revealing how travel time can be fruitfully used both for work and non-work activities. Table 2 shows how individuals travelling for business in a large scale survey of rail passengers in Great Britain (Lyons et al, 2007) have used their travel time and how this has been judged in relation to a loose notion of productivity.

Table 2. Specific activities upon which business travellers spent most or some of their journey time (percentage of business travellers) and the corresponding assessment (percentage of relevant respondents) of the journey time use by those spending most time on a given activity (reproduced from Lyons et al, 2008b)

Activity	Spent most time (%)	Spent some time (%)	I made very worthwhile use of my time (%)	I made some use of my time (%)	My time was wasted (%)
Working/studying	31	51	42	54	2
Reading for leisure	25	47	23	63	12
Window gazing/people watching	13	53	12	58	28
Talking to other passengers	5	13	24	56	19
Sleeping/snoozing	3	13	15	57	27
Text messages/phone calls - work	2	22	39	58	2
Text messages/phone calls - personal	1	15	26	50	12
Eating/drinking	1	21	19	80	1

Note: not all activities offered in the survey question are included in the Table – only those that were selected by at least 10% of respondents for either most time or some time

It is notable that 13% of passengers indicate that they spent most of their time on the train working/studying and that they made very worthwhile use of their time. This suggests that for a substantial minority of individuals travelling to/from their business engagements the travel time may be a gift rather than a burden in terms of work activity. The following extract from previous qualitative research led by the author illustrates this:



What Table 2 also highlights is the challenge of determining ‘ownership’ of time in the knowledge economy. Economic appraisal assumes that travel during the course of work is



time 'owned' by the employer. However, in a task-oriented approach to time then ownership of time is defined by what an individual is doing not by when or where they do it. Thus a quarter of rail business travellers use their travel time mainly for reading for leisure and indeed nearly 1 in 4 of these consider they make very worthwhile use of their time (see Table 2). Considered narrowly it may be assumed that this is an opportunity cost in economic terms but such individuals may just as likely be working at other times which would traditionally be deemed outside of the working day.

What is not yet sufficiently understood from empirical evidence is the extent to which individuals perceive they gain or lose from the choice to attend a meeting in terms of the travel time required. It can be argued that a long journey secures some 'protected space' in the diary – time out in an environment where concentration may be possible that cannot be achieved in the same way when in the office. This might in turn imply that time is being inefficiently managed in the office if such 'protected space' cannot be secured. However, it is more likely that different tasks that form part of knowledge work lend themselves to different working environments. Accordingly individuals are in some control of being able to flexibly assign tasks to environments and thus turn travel time use into a positive rather than a negative.

Consequences of meeting attendance in terms of travelling are also influenced by the choice of travel mode and the level of service offered by that mode (or combination of modes). A greater array of activity types can be engaged in as a rail passenger than as a car driver though assignment of tasks may mean an individual is able to gain as much benefit from a car journey as from a train journey. Stradling (2004) refers to three types of effort expended when making a journey: *physical effort* ("walking, waiting, carrying, escorting and maintaining body posture"); *cognitive effort* ("information gathering and processing for route planning, navigation, progress monitoring and error correction"); and *affective effort* ("the emotional energy expended on a journey in dealing with uncertainty about safe and comfortable travel and timely arrival at intermediate and final destinations"). Such effort is likely to detract to varying degrees from an individual's ability to fully engage in worthwhile time use.

In summary, it remains unclear to what extent the travel component of attending a meeting detracts from (or indeed contributes to) an individual's overall productivity and wellbeing. It seems reasonable, however, to suggest that many individuals have, in principle, some control over this. It appears in the case of rail travel for example that the vast majority of business travellers are provided with an office on the move - 86% of respondents in the National Rail Passengers Survey in Great Britain answered 'yes' to the question 'in terms of your paid employment is there some work that could easily be undertaken on the train?' (Lyons et al, 2008b). Opportunities for greater flexibility of and control over time use are potentially offered through the growing prevalence of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in our working and personal lives.

#### **2.4 *In what ways and to what extent can ICTs play a part in reshaping business activity and travel?***

ICTs have become an increasingly pervasive feature of many people's working lives, especially for those in the knowledge economy: communicating by email and (mobile) phone; and sharing, exchanging and jointly working on documents. Inevitably therefore ICTs

are likely to have potential roles in relation to business activities and related travel. Two roles in particular stand out: *substitution*; and *multitasking*.

### *Substitution*

It has long been assumed that it should be possible, in the case of a meeting largely or entirely concerned with information exchange, to let the information do the travelling rather than require travel by the individuals in order that they be co-present for the exchange. Teleconferencing technologies have been under development for many years. However, it is notable that in research terms teleconferencing appears to be the poor relation to teleworking. In a recent UK review of the potential of various 'soft measures' to impact upon travel demand the authors commented as follows in relation to teleconferencing (Cairns et al, 2004) "*the amount of empirical work remains remarkably sparse, particularly in contrast to the large literature on teleworking. ... the majority of papers ... highlight the technical and cost issues associated with teleconferencing*". Technological issues and associated costs were seen to be the principal barriers in the early period of attention given to teleworking as a working practice. Over time such technological barriers have substantially diminished in many cases and realisation has grown that other factors such as the norms, attitudes and perceptions of employers and employees play a significant part in determining the degree of uptake. It seems perhaps that similar issues prevail for teleconferencing.

Videoconferencing has stood out as the apparent idealised form of substitution for face to face meetings since it seeks to offer audio-visual communication in a synchronous format. Early developments in video conferencing have been characterised by poor quality visual feeds either in terms of resolution or frame refresh rates. Associated criticism has been that the eye contact and body language that can be so important in a face-to-face meeting cannot be adequately recreated through ICTs. However, this is beginning to change. Web cams and products and services such as Skype (<http://www.skype.com>) are making reasonable quality videoconferencing possible depending upon available bandwidth to users. At the high end of the market for videoconferencing issues of eye contact and body language have been all but resolved. For example Hewlett Packard has developed a product called Halo Collaboration Studio (see Figure 1). This has its own dedicated fibre-optic network and 50" plasma screens with video transmission quality that has delays below the level of human perception. Anecdotal insight from the author's communication with colleagues in HP is that this facility where available is heavily used (for intra-organisational meetings) resulting in people meeting more and travelling less.



Figure 1. HP Halo Collaboration Studio (see <http://h20338.www2.hp.com/enterprise/us/en/halo/index.html>)

Alongside the prospect of videoconferencing is the now mainstream availability and affordability of audioconferencing. While this is not audio-visual it can prove more than adequate for certain types of meetings – especially where those participating have already become acquainted previously face-to-face. Email can also be considered a potential substitute for a face-to-face meeting. This points to the observation that substitution for a face-to-face meeting does not necessarily have to attempt to replicate the experience of a face-to-face meeting (as might be assumed in the case of videoconferencing). Substitution really concerns the (primary) purpose of a meeting rather than the means to that end. Email offers an asynchronous form of communication that for many is appealing in part because it can be accommodated around other tasks and/or because it allows more thoughtful and measured exchanges of information and opinion.

The discussion above of substitution relates (implicitly) to substitution for a physical meeting taking place. However, substitution can also apply at the level of an individual. So, for instance, meetings can predominantly concern a group of individuals coming together but with provision for others to join through teleconference for all or part of the meeting. Indeed such substitution in some cases is symbolic of the times we live in, in the face of climate change: examples are now increasingly commonplace of leading figures choosing to deliver keynote addresses to conferences through a video link for reasons of time pressures in being unable to attend the event in person and/or of limiting the carbon footprint of their participation.

It seems reasonable to suggest that in principle a (possibly substantial) proportion of face-to-face business meetings could be substituted for by ICT-based alternatives. Potential barriers to substitution concern the considerations for meeting attendance as set out in Table 1 and which of these can be overcome. Many if not all of them are surmountable and relate to the norms and expectations of the individuals involved. In terms of the travel benefits of substitution then the challenge is also to ‘lock in’ the benefits by ensuring that substitution for one meeting does not lead elsewhere to more travel or other meetings requiring travel being generated. In terms of business practice and policy it would seem entirely possible to substantially influence the norms of business encounters to reduce a reliance on co-located meetings. Intriguingly the reverse approach to influencing the norms of business encounters was attempted by the airline industry following the atrocities of 9/11 in the US: to counter the substantial drop off in flying and the apparent surge in demand for teleconferencing, an advertising campaign centred upon the ‘importance of the handshake in closing the deal’ was launched.

### *Multitasking*

Multitasking can be defined as the simultaneous conduct of two or more activities during a given time period (Kenyon and Lyons, 2007). For business meetings then multitasking can occur in relation to travel to/from the meeting and within the time period associated with the meeting itself. On the basis that travel itself can be assumed to be a time use then any other activities engaged in during travel (as discussed earlier) can be considered multitasking and the availability of mobile technologies potentially supports and enriches this. Meanwhile ICTs are also beginning to ‘invade’ meetings themselves. With the increasing availability of wireless or mobile Internet individuals can make use of laptops and PDAs<sup>3</sup> to not only work on documents during a meeting but also to communicate with remote colleagues. Perhaps

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<sup>3</sup> Personal Digital Assistants

ironically individuals can appear to have travelled to a face-to-face encounter only then to use ICTs to participate in non face-to-face encounters with others within the same time frame. What individuals are able to do however in this way is to identify parts of a meeting when the value in their being co-present and participating is diminished or marginal and avoid the opportunity cost to some extent by temporarily switching to other activities. This is an evolving phenomenon and not always well received since as the proportion of individuals engaged in this form of multitasking increases within a meeting the more the meeting itself may lose its sense of purpose. Perhaps the phenomenon will evolve to the point where it becomes more evident that some meetings were, therefore, marginal all along in their value and should not take place while other meetings will enforce an etiquette of such multitasking not being engaged in.

### 3 An autobiographical insight

As the reader will be aware, much of the content of this paper is speculative and points towards the need for empirical insights and indeed the merits of a grounded theory approach through qualitative research to develop a richer understanding of the influences and social practices surrounding meetings. What the paper does highlight is the challenge of how one would capture and code appropriately the behaviour of meeting attendance in such a way as to elicit helpful insights.

In an effort to at least move from the conceptual to the actual, a small selection of four ‘case study’ episodes involving business meetings, participated in by the author during the month of drafting this paper, is offered in this section of the paper.

#### *Case study 1 – Meeting cluster*

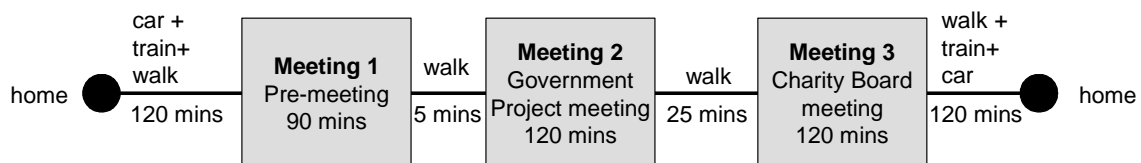


Figure 2. Timeline of Case Study 1

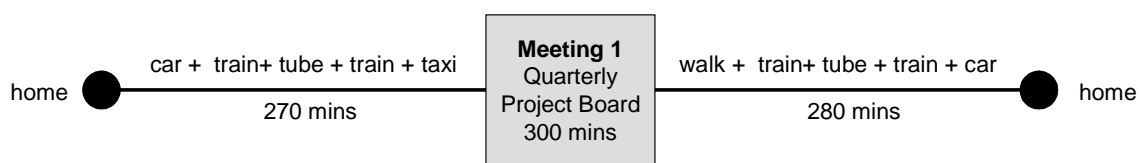
In this first case study based in London the original anchor meeting (3) was a quarterly Board meeting at 5pm whose location was dictated by the Charity HQ – Board members are still getting to know one another. By itself this would have involved a travel-time ratio of 0.67. The Government was requiring a project meeting at its premises sometime in the same month and the author was afforded the flexibility to indicate the best date and time and hence used the anchor meeting as a reference point. This Government meeting (2) gave rise to the need for a pre-meeting over lunch (1). Both meetings involved people who were known to each other. As a result of the additional meetings the travel-time ratio was reduced to 0.45. The anchor meeting was less essential to attend than meeting 2. Meetings 2 and 3 were confined to only covering the formal business concerned and could have been substituted for by teleconferencing (2 more so than 3) but in both cases the gesture of co-presence was significant if not essential.

In summary the meeting cluster rendered the participation in all meetings more ‘cost’ effective but a cultural shift in norms could have afforded the opportunity for all these

meetings to have avoided being conducted in a co-present format. The author's ex-post assessment was as follows:

- meetings 1 and 2 were both productive and a face-to-face format was worthwhile given the significance of the brainstorming and decision making involved;
- meeting 3 involved only a marginal contribution from the author and while it achieved a goal of information exchange (which could have been done by other means) benefits of attendance were status and recognition alongside a business norm expecting attendance;
- to only have attended meeting 3 would have constituted an opportunity cost but the meeting cluster overall was a worthwhile time investment; and
- travel time to the meeting was fully used for preparation while the travel time on the return journey was considered non-work time by the author.

### *Case study 2 – Solitary meeting*



*Figure 3. Timeline of Case Study 2*

This business engagement involved a formal Project Board meeting with two people based locally, three people from another location and two further people from other separate locations. The location dependence of the meeting was minimal and was principally dictated by a 'boundedly rational' effort to minimise individual travel burden - an agreement to alternate meeting venues between two locations associated with the majority of attendees. It was an early meeting within the new project but nearly all Board members already knew each other well. The formal meeting and its business was the only destination activity associated with the accompanying travel with a travel-time ratio of 0.65. The author attended through contractual as well as moral obligation but also for the purposes of information exchange and to influence decisions.

The author's ex-post assessment was as follows:

- the proceedings of the meeting itself were rendered somewhat inefficient by insufficient preparatory work by those attending – the decision making elements of the meeting rather than information exchange were what rendered it marginally justifiable as a face-to-face meeting but certainly some subsequent meetings could be convened through teleconference;
- time away from home (departed home at 5am, returned home at 9pm) was a disbenefit on a personal level; and
- time away from the office was a modest but not insignificant opportunity cost related to the physical, cognitive and affective effort of travel impinging upon travel time use and having a knock-on effect on the following day's productivity through tiredness.

### Case study 3 – Travel-less meeting

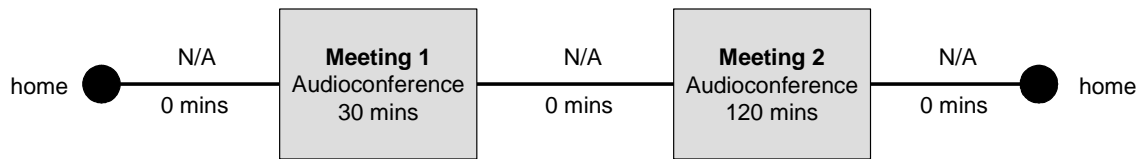


Figure 4. Timeline of Case Study 3

The author had decided to work at home for the day to secure time to focus on reading and writing – teleworking could be seen as the anchor activity. A requirement arose at short notice for involvement in a European project ‘light touch’ decision making meeting. Given that two of the participants were in the UK and two in Belgium an audioconference was set up following email exchanges about the issues requiring resolution. Not all individuals in the conference call had met previously. The second meeting was a monthly management audioconference lasting two hours between four individuals in separate locations, all well-known to each other, working on a major research project. The travel-time ratio was zero. The author’s ex-post assessment was as follows:

- both meetings comfortably achieved their goals without any need for co-presence; and
- the format of the meetings resulted in a highly efficient use of time both for the meetings themselves but also in terms of no travel time requirement allowing a full day of productivity working at home.

### Case study 4 – Social meeting

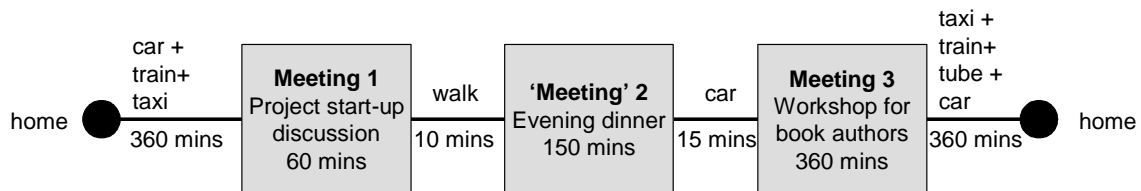


Figure 5. Timeline of Case Study 4

The anchor meeting (3) concerned a full day workshop to bring together chapter authors for a new book project to allow them to meet and discuss their envisaged contributions to the book. Many but not all of the authors already knew each other. Given the timing of the workshop and the distances some people were required to travel (including one from mainland Europe) an evening dinner was arranged for the night before. The author took advantage of the anchor meeting to cluster another meeting (1) that concerned a short one-to-one start-up discussion for another separate project involving the workshop host. Including the evening dinner (‘meeting’ 2) and including local travel time at the destination city between the three meetings, the travel-time ratio was 0.57. The author’s ex-post assessment was as follows:

- attendance at the anchor meeting would not have been essential for the purposes of contributing a chapter to the book but building up social capital was important both in terms of making the effort to be co-present and in terms of the contribution to the event as well as being able to renew acquaintances the evening before;
- meeting 1 was only loosely structured and was advantageous in being face-to-face in terms of body language and eye contact and in renewing acquaintance;

- travel time to the destination was productive for work, meanwhile the return journey was in the company of a colleague from the workshop which provided a mix of social opportunity coupled with some opportunity cost in terms of working time;
- time away from home was a disbenefit on a personal level including the physical tiredness from the travel and intellectual intensity of the workshop impacting upon home time on return; and
- overall, co-presence was justified for the cluster of meetings.

Taken together, these four brief insights begin to highlight the diversity of factors and elements that can comprise an attempt to document the planning for, occurrence of and benefits from meeting attendance. The act of attempting to self-report these four examples has also made evident for the author the difficulty in being able to judge the extent to which participation in the co-present meetings or the meetings themselves was truly worthwhile and the role that substitution through teleconferencing could have played. It seems that ex-ante judgement of whether and why to attend can also differ from ex-post assessment of whether attendance was worthwhile and in what ways. To some extent this highlights the unpredictability of face-to-face encounters.

#### 4 Conclusions

This paper has sought to begin to ‘unpack’ the richness of factors and aspects that lie underneath the rather superficial capture of business travel in national surveys. By highlighting the economic significance afforded to business travel it is argued that the paucity of deeper empirical insight into the nature of business travel and indeed how it is changing over time is rather remarkable. The principal interest of central government, at least in the UK, appears to have been in reducing the burden of business travel on the economy by speeding up journeys through investment in infrastructure and services. Less attention has been given to how the burden might either be lightened through greater attention to improving the productivity of the travel time involved or reduced through a reduction in the proportion of business meetings that are required to take place face-to-face. Given the added impetus to economic considerations that the challenges of carbon reduction have introduced it would seem of added importance to now call for greater attention to be given to understanding the social practices that comprise the construction of business encounters and their associated travel. This would allow an assessment to be made of the extent to which face-to-face meetings are necessary or ‘travel dependent’.

Goodwin (1995) highlighted that in terms of car dependence, a distribution of car trips existed according to their level of necessity for car use – he posited that notionally 20% of all trips by car unavoidable needed to be made by car in terms of the absence of viable alternatives; meanwhile at the other end of the distribution another 20% of all trips by car arguable had entirely credible alternatives available such that use of car could have been avoided. His assertion was that in terms of transport policy it was likely to be more effective, rather than to have blanket policies targeting all car use, to have policies that aimed to ‘nibble away’ at the 20% of trips that were not as firmly rooted in a dependence on the car. In later work, Handy et al (2005) have put forward the notion of excess driving and set out a conceptual framework that may in fact lend itself to addressing the question of excess business travel or more specifically *excess briefcase travel*. Handy et al define excess driving as “*driving beyond that required for household maintenance given choices about residential*

*location, job location, and activity participation*". They go on to note that "[t]he required level of driving can be defined more specifically as the minimum number of trips using the shortest routes to the closest destinations possible and using modes other than the car as often as possible. Excess driving is then defined as driving above and beyond the required level and can be generated by the choice of longer routes, farther destinations, greater use of the car, and more frequent trips than the minimum required." They acknowledge that such minimum requirements can be difficult to define. Handy et al point to a number of reasons for excess driving: value of driving itself; value of activities while driving; variety seeking; habit; poor planning; misperceptions; and lack of information.

The author would tentatively suggest that *excess briefcase travel* could be defined as follows: *travel derived from engagement in business encounters involving co-presence where physical presence could have been reasonably substituted for by other means of engagement in the encounter*. Reasons for excess briefcase travel would include those already set out in Table 1. In such a definition the challenge becomes one of how to unpack and interpret what constitutes reasonable substitution – indeed, a further challenge is that this is likely to be changing over time with social and technological change unfolding. In turn the policy challenge and indeed the challenge for employers and employees in relation to business encounters becomes one of how to bring about more judicious decision making about whether, when and how meetings are organised and conducted such that excess briefcase travel is avoided or reduced. The author would venture to assert that perhaps the notional figure of 20% referred to by Goodwin might also apply in this case. One of the difficulties is that briefcase travel is a derived demand and as such impacting upon it comes from tackling business practices as much as or rather than the travel itself – in most national governments this falls outside the purview of the Department for Transport or equivalent government ministries.

It is hoped that this paper will be a starting point for a new stream of empirical research that can shed more light on the social practices surrounding meetings, allow some assessment of the nature and scale of occurrence of different forms of meetings and lead to some firmer evidence-based insights into the prospects for influencing the nature and extent of briefcase travel.

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