Briefcase travelling – time use and value

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Introduction

Travel time has been a fundamental factor in the shaping of transport and society. Empirically-based assumptions about travel time importance (relative to other travel 'costs') are used in the modelling of individuals' travel decisions. Such modelling is used to estimate the level of use of the transport network by mode, route and time of day. In turn, modelling is used to determine the total saving in travel time, across all travellers, attributable to a proposed transport scheme. The economic benefit of the scheme is then largely determined by assumptions about how much the saved time is worth. Politicians make transport investment decisions guided by cost-benefit analyses. Investment decisions shape the nature and use of our transport system and the nature and use of our transport system shapes the society in which we live.

What is apparent from this introductory overview is that how we choose to judge the cost of travel time and in turn the benefit of saving travel time is a crucial consideration. Indeed, as the SACTRA report of 1999 noted, "[t]ravel time savings are the single most important component in the measured transport benefits/disbenefits of most schemes and policies. Hence the methods of valuing them critically affect the measurement of the economic impacts of schemes"[i]. This article examines this issue. It begins with a brief overview of the orthodoxy of travel time valuation in economic appraisal of transport schemes. A challenge to the orthodoxy is then posed within which it becomes apparent that 'briefcase travelling' is a form of travel for which the orthodox approach may be least robust[ii]. Empirical evidence is then provided in relation to the time use and 'value' of briefcase travelling. A number of implications arise and the article concludes with a series of recommendations.

The orthodoxy of travel time valuation

For the purposes of appraisal, travel during the course of the working day is treated separately to other travel. For the former, the following assumption applies. "Time spent travelling during the working day is a cost to the employer's business. It is assumed that savings in travel time convert non-productive time to productive use and that, in a free labour market, the value of an individual's working time to the economy is reflected in the wage rate paid"[iii]. Values of time are then based on average wage rates that apply to travellers on different modes, thus an hour of time for a rail passenger is valued at about £31 while that of a car driver is £22 and that of a bus passenger is £17. For travel outside the course of the working day, the time is not owned by the employer and is valued according to individuals' willingness to pay. For equity reasons a national average value is calculated which is around £4 per hour (and includes commuting). This treatment of travel time in appraisal has, generally speaking, remained unchanged for the last 40 years.

In spite of representing a smaller proportion of total travel, because of its much higher value, travel time during the course of work (business travel) accounts for a substantial proportion of the assumed costs of total travel time or savings[iv].

While one could readily challenge a presumption that (all) business travel time is wasted, strictly speaking appraisal concerns itself with the value of travel time saved as opposed to the value of travel time itself. This distinction is important in moving to challenge the orthodoxy.

Challenging the orthodoxy

It has long been recognised that travel is more than a means to an end (though this has often been the assumption in transport planning). It is suggested that positive utility is in fact gained from one or more of three elements of a journey to a given destination: "activities conducted at the destination; … activities that can be conducted while travelling; … and the activity of travelling itself"[v]. So, can the assumptions of appraisal account for this broader interpretation?

It can be argued that willingness to pay should account for any positive utility of travel itself; but what of the wage rate approach for travel during the course of work? Well, this may be appropriate for certain types of business travel. Travel during the course of work includes people whose job itself is principally travel (e.g. goods delivery drivers, bus drivers) or who more evidently can only be productive once at their destination (e.g. service engineers). However, it also includes what researchers at the Institute for Transport Studies at the University of Leeds have referred to as 'briefcase travellers' – individuals with a form of work activity that lends itself to being done potentially while travelling. This article's attention turns to focus on this, with specific consideration of business travel by rail.

In support of the orthodoxy it is argued that some productive time use does not invalidate the assumption that any saved time would otherwise have been unproductive as Figure 1 illustrates. If an individual productively uses 40 minutes of a 60 minute journey and a proposed transport scheme would reduce the journey time by 20 minutes then it will be the unproductive 20 minutes that will be saved.

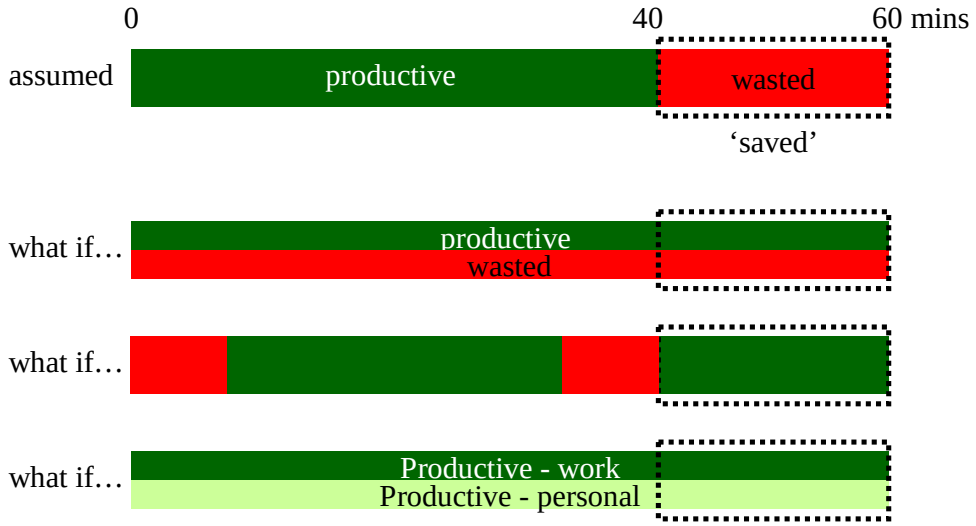

Figure 1. Different possibilities of saved travel time

Yet this argument seems no more valid than other ways of conceiving of travel time use in practice (also shown in Figure 1). An individual could be partially using time productively throughout the journey. Or unpacking and packing up at the start and end of the journey could be classed as unproductive blocks of time with all other time in between used productively – any journey time reduction would then eat into this productive time. Or an individual may use all the journey time productively throughout the journey but be using some of the time for work-related purposes and some for personal purposes: how should this time be valued in the knowledge economy?

It should be noted that it is sufficient in terms of appraisal that its assumptions hold true at the average. In other words, being able to point to examples of productive time use may not alter the prevailing aggregate picture. However, it seems questionable whether, at the average, all saved business travel time converts unproductive into productive time use. If this is not the case then the current wage rate approach would appear to over-value the travel time saved which in turn could be producing inappropriately high benefit to cost ratios in appraisal. Consider Figure 2 which depicts conceptually how all travel may be distributed in terms of the productivity of travel time. In the Figure, counterproductive refers to the prospect that a journey experience is so unsavoury that it adversely affects productivity of time use at the destination. Meanwhile 'ultra' productive is to suggest that the travel environment is such that it lends itself to activity and achievement that are in excess of what would be achieved were the time to have been used outside of the journey.

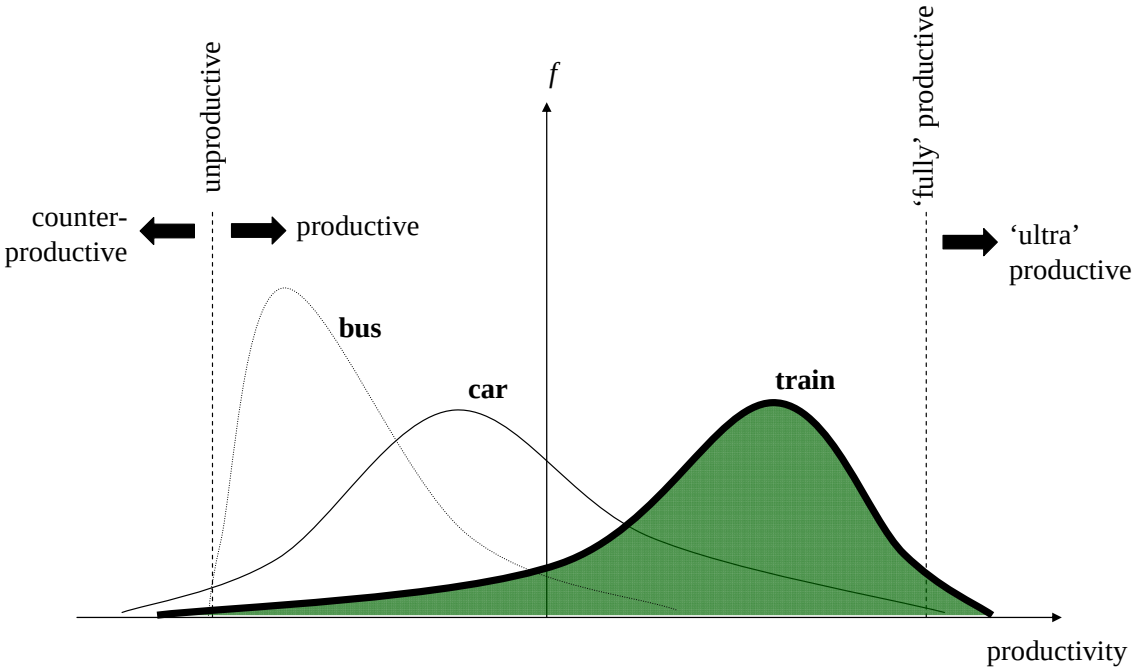

Figure 2. Conceptual frequency distributions of journeys by given modes according to productivity of travel time[vi]

Some empirical evidence

Questions asked in the National Rail Passengers Survey in November 2004 have yielded insights concerning passengers' time use and 'value'[vii]. Table 1 shows the main time uses for individuals travelling on business.

% of 'most time' respondents

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 time (%)
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

Employer's time or my time?

Don't judge a book by its cover

Time well spent – hardly wasted

Activity mixtures

Horses for courses

Table 1. Time use and 'value' for business rail travellers

A number of observations from the Table can be drawn:

- Nearly a third of business travellers spent most time working or studying and yet a quarter spent most of their time reading for leisure – time not generally seen to be wasted and yet not apparently productive in terms of their employer.
- Substantial majorities of passengers, regardless of their main time uses, considered their time use during the journey not to have been wasted. Substantial minorities considered they had made very worthwhile use of their time.
- There is a range of time uses and it can be suggested that while only 3% of individuals spent most of their time sleeping or snoozing, that different individuals may be doing so on different journeys on different days.
- Simply to observe what people are doing could be misleading – window gazing or people watching may appear as unproductive and yet less than a third of people who spent most time doing so considered their journey time to have been wasted.
- Individuals tend to do more than one activity during a train journey – hence over half of business travellers spent some of their time working or studying (86% of business travellers indicated that in terms of their paid employment there was some work that they could easily undertake on the train).

A further observation from the survey (considering passengers regardless of journey purpose) is as follows. Those passengers who consider their travel time to have been wasted are more than twice as likely to have done no advance planning of their time use than those who consider their time use to have been very worthwhile. It was also noted that the distribution of passengers' views about how worthwhile their time use had been was reasonably consistent across different journey durations – in other words, shorter journeys are no more or less likely to be considered worthwhile (or wasted) than longer journeys.

Qualitative research into travel time use has highlighted different notions of travel time from the travellers' perspectives[viii,ix]. Travel time can constitute transition time – time to adjust between different life roles: a need for experiencing distance and the opportunity for gearing up to the destination's demands. It can also constitute time out – time to escape from the obligations in different life roles: an opportunity for 'back-stage' time to be oneself and to use that time selfishly or indulgently. With the advent of mobile phones and mobile internet comes the notion of connected time – formerly unable to interact with others that are not co-present while travelling, individuals can now remain 'connected' while travelling. However, this apparent opportunity may also be experienced as a burden with the notion of infected time – the isolation and time out that travel can provide can now be invaded by communications from others or obligations to communicate with others through technology.

Travel, notably by rail, appears to be governed by clock time – a transport system driven by timetables. Yet research reveals that experienced time can be stretched or compressed – the journey can seem to pass by in an instant or to drag on interminably, influenced by how time is used and experienced. It also becomes clear that time use can be influenced by the extent to which and nature in which an individual is equipped for travel. For instance rail passengers using laptops or personal digital assistants tended to consider their journeys had been better and felt quicker. Travellers exist in two forms – packed and unpacked, with the latter typically having a larger footprint but better lending itself to flexible and worthwhile time use.

Implications from the evidence

A range of implications emerge from closer examination of travel time use. Firstly, doubts can be reinforced concerning the appropriateness of valuation of travel time in appraisal in relation to briefcase travel. Not only is it not clear the extent to which saved time can be considered to have been unproductive but in the knowledge economy it seems increasingly unclear who 'owns' the time which brings into question when the wage rate approach and when the willingness to pay approach should apply. However, a dilemma arises (which is not in fact new): while the orthodoxy is questionable it is measurable and quantifiable – meanwhile, given the difficulty in interpreting productivity of time use, alternatives to the orthodoxy pose serious challenges in terms of measurement.

The research reported above highlights that people can equip themselves both with artefacts and in terms of a state of mind to be able to make better use of their travel time. This gives rise to the concept and prospect of what might be called 'individualised travel time use planning' – transport providers and employers alike could gain from seeking to support business travellers in being able to get more out of their travel time use and experience (whilst needing to guard against adversely infecting the travel time).

There are strong signals of opportunity for remarketing public transport. It need not necessarily see competition with the car measured in terms (only) of journey duration or cost but instead in terms of time use opportunity (associating with the lifestyles people are leading). Consider, for instance, that while it has been found that over half of all business rail travellers spend most of their travel time working/studying or reading for leisure, it is not possible for a car driver to write/type, read/watch or sleep/rest.

An intriguing issue arises in considering car driving versus train travel: if train travel can be more productive than car driving then the value of time for rail would be lower and the case for investment in rail relative to road could be weakened. However, this can be compensated

for by considering mode shift potential but also travel time use valuation as opposed to travel time saving evaluation – as discussed next.

Recognising the opportunities for travel time use to be worthwhile and for its 'worth' to be improved, the suggestion arises that the same effect as saving 'wasted' travel time by investing in transport schemes could be achieved by investing in ways to make travel time itself more worthwhile. Perhaps appraisal should be taking steps to value travel time used as well as or instead of valuing travel time saved. However, a dilemma may arise in moves to improve the experience of travel time – this could facilitate or even encourage greater amounts of travel. Therefore the challenge may be to improve journey experiences while, from a transport system and sustainability perspective, taking steps to 'lock in the benefits'.

Concluding recommendations

Drawing upon the examination above of travel time use and value (in relation to briefcase travelling) the following concluding recommendations are offered:

- briefcase travelling should be reconsidered in terms of appraisal – assumptions are unlikely to hold true at the average;
- notions of clock time in appraisal should be reviewed;
- Investing in schemes to save travel time should be weighed against investing in schemes to make sure travel time is well spent;
- travel time use benefits should be 'locked in' to discourage increases in travel time budgets;
- the multi-modal market for different travel time uses (thinking, reading, sleeping etc) should be further examined (especially for car) to help adapt and promote alternative modes to the car;
- employers could improve their business efficiency and environmental credentials by introducing individualised travel time use planning;
- travel environments must be (further) developed as spaces for activity time rather than (only) people movement; and
- trend data are needed to better understand and monitor travel time use phenomena.

Acknowledgements

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