THE PATH TO INNOVATION:
INSIGHTS ON THE NEW FREQUENT BUSINESS TRAVELER

Strategies and Ideas for Travel and Expense Program Management
The job of today’s travel and expense program manager is more exciting and diverse than ever. New technologies, changing corporate demographics and increased global business travel have created an environment of almost constant change in travel and expense management. Many organizations recognize that business travel is undeniably important, relevant and here to stay. In an era of ongoing change and increasing global business travel, corporate and expense travel program managers find themselves needing to stay ahead of the major trends that impact their programs and the travelers they serve.

At the same time, the role of program managers is increasingly important to the organization. In addition to having a myriad of responsibilities, program managers act as conductors of the tools and services that protect, comfort and assist business travelers on the road while still focusing on driving savings to their organizations.

In 2012, the Global Business Travel Association reported that travel professionals have more control over travel policy compared to a few years ago. The inevitable tensions that arise when travel program managers exercise control over the services available to the traveler are driving the need for greater innovation in travel programs.

To further unearth and understand the key areas of change and opportunity in travel and expense management, we conducted a research study to get to the heart of these issues. As a leader in the global travel industry, American Express noticed that consumer-like technologies, combined with changing travel patterns and shifting demographics, were potentially disrupting corporate travel programs while also creating new efficiencies and opportunities for both travelers and companies alike.
Through a partnership with PhoCusWright, we discovered that travel program managers are already enhancing their programs by harnessing the power of technology, as well as tapping into frequent traveler insights that present the optimal win-win-win: traveler benefits, program manager benefits and company benefits.

This white paper examines the impact of these converging trends on managed travel programs and the implications for both the traveler and the company. It uncovers the expectations of frequent business travelers and reveals what innovative travel and expense management program managers are doing to modernize their roles, engage travelers to boost traveler performance and transform the traveler experience to drive compliance and program success.

About this White Paper:
American Express collaborated with PhoCusWright, the travel industry research authority, who performed a qualitative assessment of the impact of globalization, digital transformation and shifting demographics on managed travel programs. This report also utilizes quantitative data from PhoCusWright research, including “U.S. Business Traveler: Managed, Unmanaged and Rogue (2012),” “Traveler Technology Survey (2013),” “European Managed Travel Distribution: Market Sizing and Trends (2013),” “Payment Unsettled: Cost Opportunity and Disruption in Travel’s Complex Payment Landscape (2013)” and “U.S. Corporate Travel Report, Market Size and Technology Trends (2012).”

The collective research was used by American Express to author this report. In addition to the PhoCusWright research, further expert sources on the topic were utilized and are cited in this report.

About the Qualitative Research:
The research uncovered the changing expectations of frequent business travelers and revealed what innovative travel management decision makers are doing to modernize their roles, optimize their programs, engage travelers to boost traveler performance and transform the traveler experience to drive compliance and program success.

PhoCusWright Qualitative Research Methodology:
PhoCusWright Inc., commissioned by American Express, conducted in-depth telephone interviews in February and March 2014 with 15 innovative travel and procurement decision-makers. Participants had global or multiregional T&E responsibilities and were characterized as innovators within the travel industry or within their company (even if the industry or company self-identified as a laggard). Many companies with mature managed programs had T&E spend ranging from US$25 million to $1.5 billion globally and were in the process of improving their travel programs with input from frequent business travelers. To provide a balanced perspective, interviewees represented a cross-section of markets and territories in North America, Latin America, Asia Pacific, Europe, the Middle East and Africa. They also represented a range of industries, including technology, health care, consulting and financial services. Some travel programs were formally mandated and global; others were informally managed and regional. Many were somewhere in between.
Business travel spending in APAC has grown 8% annually since 2000, more than doubling in size and totaling $393 billion in 2012. China, in particular, is poised to become the number one business travel market in the world by 2015, with spending on business travel forecasted to grow 16.5% in 2014 — more than double the rate of the country’s GDP growth.

With 13% growth in business travel spending forecasted for 2014, India is set to become a major business travel market. In 2012, India surpassed Canada to become the 10th largest business travel market globally, spending a total of $22.1 billion on business travel.

Brazil is now by far the largest business travel market in Latin America with total business travel spend reaching $30 billion in 2012. It is forecasted to see 15.9% growth in spending in 2014.

Additionally, even as business travel spending is increasing, global business travel costs continue to rise — with hotel and flight price increases in Latin America and Asia likely outpacing increases in North America and Europe. As such, the travel program manager is challenged to play an important fiscal role in managing the costs of business travel while supporting corporate international growth objectives.

An additional driver for innovation is the changing demographic of the workforce. While frequent travelers of all ages are influencing travel programs, millennials, generally defined as people born between the early 1980s and early 2000s, are a generation of independent thinkers and tech-savvy consumers. As such, millennials are having an outsized effect on corporate travel. The influence of this segment will continue to grow within corporations and in travel: by 2025, this generation will represent approximately 75% of the workforce.

This group has shown a preference for strategies actively directed at them and their preferences. One travel program decision-maker at a global technology company stated, “Our job is to figure out how to wow our employees, not just serve them. This is what is particularly compelling about millennials.”

Within the context of this diverse landscape, our research uncovered a number of insights that lead to key recommended approaches for global corporate travel program managers. These insights summarize a number of ideas relating to changes in technology, demographics and the expectations of frequent business travelers and are designed to help program managers develop new and innovative approaches.

Travel program managers are innovating travel programs around the needs of frequent business travelers as part of company-wide efforts to increase employee productivity, reduce service interruptions and drive program compliance to deliver savings for their organizations. Innovation in consumer applications, for example, is impacting travel programs. According to a report by PhoCusWright, “Managed travel programs and applications increasingly resemble consumer-oriented apps or incorporate gaming elements that travelers are familiar with in their personal lives.”

Travel programs are also growing. While budgets may vary by region, industry sources report that global business travel spending is growing in aggregate, especially in areas such as APAC, India and Brazil as travel within emerging markets increases.

Catalyst for Innovation

Brazilian business travel spend in 2012

By 2025 millennials will represent approximately 75% of the workforce

Our job is to figure out how to wow our employees, not just serve them. This is what is particularly compelling about millennials.

Travel program decision maker at a global technology firm
Engagement works – the value of treating frequent travelers like customers:

The most innovative travel program managers are successfully engaging frequent travelers and driving program adherence. How? By treating their business travelers as customers and employing engagement strategies along with mandates. According to the PhoCusWright qualitative research, frequent travelers’ experiences and expectations are key drivers of change in travel programs, as these travelers want to have the same experience, from servicing to user interfaces, in personal and business travel.xv

Leveraging engagement strategies has created two major business values for travel program managers.

First, this approach allows them to think about communications as a tool to encourage compliance. Travel program decision makers hear things from their frequent travelers like: “If you force me to use the program, you better make it great and wow me.”xvi Communications based on engagement is crucial in cutting through the noise, steering travelers away from competing noncompliant options and helping to create “better than elsewhere” programs; a 2012 report from PhoCusWright found that 26% of travelers think they can find better pricing on travel components on their own. xvii As such, travel program managers are increasingly challenged to create greater program loyalty among their travelers. One North American travel program decision maker at a consulting firm stated, “We created a traveler experience unique to our company that provides a consistent set of rewards or perks that travelers can only get through us.”xviii

Second, engagement strategies help lead to more satisfied and productive employees, ultimately helping to support the organization’s bottom line. Travel program managers can increase employee satisfaction by connecting with travelers to remind them of the best, most relevant information that will help them minimize the disruptions of the travel experience. Satisfied employees mean improved retention rates, which in turn can positively impact business performance and productivity.

Recommendations for engagement strategies:

As we found in the interviews, globally, travel program managers are focusing on increasing the level of traveler engagement. By steering frequent travelers away from competing noncompliant options, travel program managers find that they are able to employ the most effective strategies. These include:

Providing “better than elsewhere” tools and service: Implementing strategies to anticipate the unexpected in travel situations creates loyal advocates for the program. Program managers are increasingly vetting suppliers to ensure that vendors meet the travel program service standards.

Giving perks and incentives: In highly competitive industries (e.g., professional services, financial services), travel program managers can extend road warrior perks and privileges to employees as a way to differentiate the company. For example, frequent travelers appreciate business-class seat upgrades, access to airline and rail lounges, and memberships in security expediting services. These incentives can cement travelers’ relationships with their organizations and their programs. Other effective incentives, such as allowing employees to retain points earned for business travel, make up for their expense by cultivating program loyalty.

Gamification of travel activities: According to the PhoCusWright research, travel program managers are rewarding certain program-supporting behaviors and breaking noncompliant ones using gaming mechanics (e.g., challenges, points, levels, leaderboards and rewards). We reported in a recent American Express paper, “Update Your Playbook,” that by using game mechanics such as competitions and leaderboards, gamification presents an opportunity for travel managers to influence traveler behavior.xix Further, gamification is connected to incentivized thinking. One travel program decision maker at a financial/insurance firm said, “We are a very incentivized culture, so it seemed only natural to gamify travelers’ compliance to policy.”xx
The availability of mobile technology impacts both traveler expectations and opportunities:

The impact of mobile technology on business travel is significant. A 2013 survey conducted by PhoCusWright found that 92% of business travelers own a smartphone, and more than six in 10 own a tablet.xxix This reliance on mobile devices creates a number of tensions and expectations on the part of these sophisticated travelers.

Due to the proliferation of expense management, itinerary management and third-party consumer-travel-related apps, frequent travelers know where to get the information that they want and expect access to this data and the same level of service 24/7. According to one travel program decision maker at a global technology firm, “The days of 24-, 48- and 72-hour service-level agreements are gone. Technology has conditioned travelers to expect immediate responses.”xxi

The ease and intuitiveness of these mobile consumer tools and applications sets a high bar for all travel programs. In response, travel program managers have begun adjusting how program services and tools can be delivered via mobile technology. A global travel program decision maker at a technology company stated, “Because travelers were already starting to embrace mobile, social and open technologies, we focused on how we could improve our level of service through these tools and apps, or extend our services to travelers in ways they haven’t used before.”xxii

Additionally, while 32% of companies do not have a mobile app policy in place with regard to travel-related applications,xxvii we found that some companies are developing their own apps to increase productivity and service satisfaction. Said one global travel program decision maker at a technology company, “We are creating a mobile app to provide travelers with the travel policy in an easy-to-access and easy-to-read format.”xxiv

Further, most travelers don’t want to be inconvenienced by shopping around – they want an interactive process that works well, delivers everything they need in one place and allows them to focus on their job responsibilities, not on managing travel. “If travelers are going to have to comply with policy, we can’t have them thinking or expecting the experience will be worse than a leisure trip,” said a European, Middle Eastern and African travel program decision maker at a consulting firm.xxv

In 2012, 65% of travel buyers cited automated capture of miscellaneous trip expenses and receipts as their top technology priority, followed by mobile / tablet integration.xxvii

Recommendations for tools and services:

- Providing access to the tools and interfaces travelers are familiar with, making it easier for them to stay within the parameters of the program.
- Utilizing cloud technology to securely link travelers with the same tools, apps, interfaces and files they have in the office, maintaining productivity no matter where they go.
- Employing mobile technology to make it easy for road warriors to focus more on their work and less on the burden of expense management, such as by offering automatic pre-population of expense receipts.
Understanding the purchasing path provides new opportunities to influence travelers:

Frequent travelers make purchasing decisions at many different points while on the road. In order to help provide truly impactful technology, travel program managers must understand every step of the purchase process, from booking travel to completing expense reports. Frequent travelers are using advanced mobile technology to make purchases, process bookings, manage itineraries and receive recommendations when on the road.

Additionally, mobile technology provides new opportunities for travel program managers to influence choices along the traveler’s purchasing path. Rather than only influencing purchasing decisions prior to departure (such as booking a hotel, airfare or train tickets), mobile technology can enable managers to communicate with and influence travelers at every single step of the trip.

Program managers can expand mobile technology’s role in their programs beyond air, car and hotel bookings to include the many other incidentals throughout a trip, such as meals, ground transportation and Wi-Fi access. Mobile technology empowers program managers with valuable contextual information and visibility into secondary expenses so that they can manage compliance remotely and influence purchasing decisions and efficiency. The power to influence mid-trip decisions may mean influencing micro-purchases, but with larger programs, those micro-purchase decisions can amount to mega dollars.

By understanding each step of the travel journey, travel program managers can identify key points along the purchasing path to encourage frequent business travelers to make choices that meet the needs of both the company and the traveler. Recommendations to influence purchasing decisions include:

- Expanding mobile’s role as a touch point that can be used to increase the program manager’s influence on in-transit traveler decisions.
- Leveraging GPS-based tools to provide just-in-time recommendations and reminders, such as program compliant restaurants, based on the employee’s location.
- Pushing out real-time alerts to take advantage of pre-negotiated rates with suppliers as well as services such as a free shuttle to a hotel.
- Configuring SMS tools to respond to keyword inquiries such as “taxi,” “hotel” and “restaurant” by sending an automated message with in-policy recommendations.
- Leveraging GPS-based tools to provide just-in-time recommendations and reminders, such as program compliant restaurants, based on the employee’s location.
- Providing policy reminders unique to the traveler’s destination and needs, as well as alerts in the event of disruption. This is especially valuable for international travel.
Enabling traveler productivity and revenue growth:

Program managers understand that frequent travelers need to be as productive as possible while en route, in addition to being well prepared and well rested at their destination. By understanding the real costs, as well as the revenue value generated by business travelers while on the road, travel managers can ensure that travel time is not lost time.

One travel program decision maker at a multiregional consulting firm serving Europe, Africa and the Middle East stated, “Even global travel procurement decision makers are now concerned about value and delivering the best and appropriate experience for the traveler.”xxx The trend to improve the experience for the frequent traveler is clearly permeating travel management decision making.

For this reason, factors such as the location of accommodations can be tremendously important in the calculus of cost versus productivity. As an example, travelers may choose hotels that are higher in cost but closer to work locations, thus increasing total trip costs. However, although hotel costs may be higher, revenue-generating employees end up spending less time on the road.

There is also recognition that secondary expenses, financial costs or time expenditures incurred by travelers can affect these workers’ ability to create value. For example, program managers may make the mistake of negotiating reduced hotel rates while overlooking the common add-ons of fitness centers and Wi-Fi. According to a travel program decision maker at a healthcare firm with a European, Middle Eastern and African footprint, “My job is to ensure cost-effectiveness versus strict cost-cutting.”xxix

Across various industry verticals, companies understand the importance of enhancing productivity on the road and viewing business travelers as assets, balancing their needs with the goals of the company.

One travel program decision maker at a European, Middle Eastern and African consulting firm said, “Because of the industry we are in and the business we do, our people are our assets. We do not manufacture a product, so our travelers’ expectations and requirements are quite key to delivering our business.”xxx

Travel program managers can boost both traveler productivity and revenue opportunity by:

- Viewing the traveler as a valuable asset and seeing the travel management program as an opportunity to empower these employees to make the most financially sound and policy-compliant decisions.
- Empowering travelers with on-the-go access to the tools, applications and files they use in the office to enhance the travel experience and add more revenue value into the organization.
- Evaluating programs through a lens of opportunity, e.g., based on annual revenue per average employee, ratio of travel spending to sales and travel spending as a percentage of net service revenue.
- Negotiating with vendors to provide additional productivity services, such as Wi-Fi, instead of simply reducing costs.
- Evaluating hotel suppliers based on proximity to frequent travel destinations.

According to an Oxford Economics study, U.S. companies have experienced a $9.50 return in revenue per dollar invested in business travel, U.S. companies have experienced a $9.50 return in revenue.xxxi
Leveraging the insights of travelers to optimize the travel program:

Today’s road warriors enjoy sharing information about their travels with their networks. Forty-five percent of travelers use social media channels or mobile device apps in their daily travels to connect with others and quickly find information they need while on the road.xxxii

In addition, according to PhoCusWright’s “Traveler Technology Survey,” 92% of business travelers participated in ratings or review sites, and more than four in 10 log on to a preferred online social network each day.xxxiii

While some program managers are reluctant to embrace social networks, many others are listening, collaborating and taking action on traveler feedback to innovate their programs. The PhoCusWright research found that some managers are taking actions including removing suppliers from their programs in response to repeated negative feedback from users. In addition, respondents use positive traveler feedback. Said one global travel program decision maker at a technology company, “We measure the success of the program by how well socialized it is (by the number of posts, reposts and likes).”xxxiv

Offline channels, such as travel councils that gather a group of frequent travelers to provide regular feedback, can be valuable opportunities to access feedback and ideas. Some noted that engagement on social media is a great alternative or addition to travel councils. Social media is an existing, popular medium through which travel program managers can tap into the needs of frequent travelers. Said one global travel program manager at a global financial firm, “If you don’t have travel councils (with frequent business travelers), you should use social media. If you don’t have social media, you should use councils. You need at least one method of tapping in to travelers in different markets to stay on top of their needs.”xxxv

Travel program managers have a unique opportunity to utilize traveler insight to integrate end-to-end value and kick-start a collaborative approach that captures critical data, creates stickiness for the travel program and offers tangible benefits to the traveler.

Recommendations for integrating traveler insights:

- Utilizing social media platforms as valuable opportunities to get regular feedback and as a collaboration tool between travelers.
- Leverage the company’s internal social network or collaboration tools to provide access to information when program managers are not available or are halfway around the world to educate travelers about policies for booking and expense reconciliation. These tools can also support traveler-to-traveler communications in times of need. Road warriors expect 24/7 live agent or concierge access, whether they are rebooking travel or facing an emergency situation.
- Using offline options such as travel councils and quarterly business reviews to garner feedback from frequent travelers.
- Encouraging road warrior collaboration through private, secure platforms and enterprise social software (e.g., Yammer, Chatter and Jive).xxxvi
- Leveraging feedback from your travelers in supplier negotiations. If a preferred vendor is not meeting the expectations and needs of travelers, program managers can use this feedback to help identify areas of opportunity or negotiate more benefits for the organization, including lower prices or access to premium services.
IT partnerships are crucial in innovating travel programs:

Frequent travelers are utilizing a variety of technologies, such as mobile tools, social media and enterprise platforms, all of which touch their organizations’ IT departments. IT needs to be involved both from a device perspective and an application or software perspective.

In terms of devices, policies allowing BYOD, or “bring your own device,” are infiltrating organizations, modifying expectations of travelers regarding mobile devices and increasing the opportunities to maintain a seamless experience – inside or outside the office, especially with global travel. According to one source, “54% of companies have formalized bring your own device (BYOD) policies,” North American companies are more likely than European companies to have formulated policies regarding BYOD.\(^{xxxvii}\)

Regarding applications, consumer tools and sites often compete with corporate solutions in terms of ease of use, making it imperative that travel program managers work with IT to develop a matching experience for its own solutions. Said one travel program decision maker at a global technology firm, “You have to think differently and embrace new platforms, because if you don’t, you won’t survive.”\(^{xxxviii}\)

Another crucial aspect of connectivity and integration with traveler devices is security. Because frequent travelers have their mobile devices with them the majority of the time, this channel enables delivering real-time security information. Travel program managers have cited access to connectivity as important to travelers as they consider safety in high-risk areas. They also see connectivity as a way to keep travelers safe in relatively high-risk areas (e.g., parts of the Middle East and Latin America).

Program managers are also partnering with IT departments to identify tools that can be added to the program under the main company IT policy, as well as services such as mobile payments, which could improve corporate travel expense management.

Seamless integration with IT can help to ensure quality of service and open up opportunities for efficiency and innovation. In fact, partnering with IT can help you leverage this paper’s findings within the organization.

Recommendations for partnering with IT:

1. Working with IT to consider what is best for the travel program. Build it internally or partner with best-in-class third-party providers.
2. Incorporating IT personnel every step of the way. They know the organization’s systems best and can help during implementations.
3. Integrating traveler feedback from online and offline channels into an ongoing IT partnership. By experiencing the travelers’ pain points firsthand, the IT department will be more open to change.
Conclusion: The Path to Travel Program Innovation:

We recognize that not all industries, corporations and cultures are alike. Some travel programs support a more traveler-centric approach, while others rely on traditionally managed and top-down practices. There are those that are innovative and quick to adapt, and those that are risk averse. However, all corporate travel program managers want to improve the way they do business and increase their value to the company. The recommendations provided in this paper are tools to help navigate today’s increasingly challenging landscape and potentially increase program value.

Travel program innovation can involve making significant cultural, behavioral and operational changes. With that said, all programs can enhance value starting with one small step: soliciting input. We recommend two sources:

1. A multidisciplinary team led by the program manager and comprising professionals from accounting, human resources, IT and risk management and compliance.

2. A group of frequent business travelers in your organization, to understand the aspects of your program that could be optimized from their perspective.

Notably, it is important for program managers to obtain the support of senior management when implementing changes, whether small or transformational.

There could be serious consequences for not innovating and adapting. Companies could leave a huge amount of money on the table because they are relying on inaccurate or insufficient information and inefficient processes. Employees who travel frequently may become frustrated and move to a job with a more progressive company or simply engage in out-of-policy behavior, reducing savings opportunities for their organizations. Over time, all these results could destroy shareholder value.

Travel and expense program management is evolving rapidly. Program managers play an increasingly important role in employee satisfaction and productivity, corporate innovation and ultimately business growth. By harnessing the power of new trends and new technologies, program managers can propel their programs and increase their impact.
About American Express Global Corporate Payments:

American Express Corporate Payment services provide Corporate Cards, Corporate Purchasing Card and other expense management services to midsize companies and large corporations worldwide. Globally, American Express is a leading issuer of Commercial Cards, serving 62% of the FORTUNE 500⁴ companies in 2013 and tens of thousands of corporate clients.⁵

About American Express:
American Express is a global services company, providing customers with products and services that enrich lives and can help build business success. Learn more at: business.americanexpress.com/ca

About PhoCusWright:
PhoCusWright is the travel industry research authority on how travelers, suppliers and intermediaries connect. Independent, rigorous and unbiased, PhoCusWright fosters smart strategic planning, tactical decision making and organizational effectiveness.

PhoCusWright delivers qualitative and quantitative research on the evolving dynamics that influence travel, tourism and hospitality distribution. Our marketplace intelligence is the industry standard for segmentation, sizing, forecasting, trends, analysis and consumer travel planning behavior. Every day around the world, senior executives, marketers, strategists and research professionals from all segments of the industry value chain use PhoCusWright research for competitive advantage.

To complement its primary research in North America, Latin America, Europe and Asia, PhoCusWright produces several high-profile conferences in the United States and Europe and partners with conferences in China and Singapore. Industry leaders and company analysts bring this intelligence to life by debating issues, sharing ideas and defining the ever-evolving reality of travel commerce.

The company is headquarterd in the United States, with Asia Pacific operations based in India and local analysis on five continents.

PhoCusWright is a wholly owned subsidiary of Northstar Travel Media, LLC.

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