

HR Insights

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Business Travel After COVID-19

Travel—for both business and leisure—worldwide has virtually come to a standstill during the coronavirus pandemic. At this point, nobody knows when it will come back. Whenever that time comes though, travel will certainly be different than it was before. Airports, airlines, hotels and car rental companies will likely be taking new precautions as companies start greenlighting travel for business purposes.

The Global Business Travel Association (GBTA) estimates that the coronavirus potentially costs the travel industry \$46.6 billion each month as people stay home. A GBTA survey found that employers canceled or suspended nearly all previously booked or planned international business travel. Ninety-two percent of respondents said all or most domestic business travel had been canceled or suspended.

Will Travel Return?

The short answer is yes. After safer-at-home orders are lifted and companies move into recovery mode, business travel is likely to return—just as leisure travel will. In the corporate world, it may be tough to establish a business relationship with someone you've never met in person. Video conferencing has been helping fill that gap during lockdown, but it doesn't necessarily replicate face-to-face meetings.

Major events and tradeshow are continuing to be canceled or postponed throughout the summer. Some organizations have even switched their events to be in a virtual setting. As in-person events start getting put back on the calendar, attendance and travel will pick up.

After months of no traveling or not being in the office, there may be a pent-up desire to travel. Business travelers often are known to grumble about frequent travel and living out of a suitcase, but after the coronavirus pandemic, there's a chance everyone is looking forward to the opportunity to pack a carry-on bag or book a red-eye flight.

What Will Travel Be Like?

There's no way to know exactly what business travel will look like once the threat of COVID-19 subsides. But we can start thinking about the ways that travel may be different:

- **Affordability**—Not all travel industry companies will make it through the global pandemic, and revenue losses may impact companies for several years to come. Just as those companies have been taking a financial hit, financial pains happen at a personal level, too. Overall, it may be tough for companies and individuals to afford to travel frequently again.
- **Transportation**—Post-coronavirus, leisure travelers may opt for automobile or train trips and stay closer to home. However, business travelers will most likely not shift their behavior and return to flying as their main mode of transportation.

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- **Destination**—Additionally, there's a prediction that business trips will be focused on shorter trips within the same region. That means that Americans will focus on traveling within America and limit going overseas.
- **Cleaning**—Cleaning and other health safety precautions will be critical for travelers to feel comfortable in an aircraft, airport or hotels. Cleaning and sanitization standards will improve overall. Safety is going to be critical to get travelers back on the road or in the air.
- **Communication**—As travelers are getting used to frequent and transparent communications from travel industry companies, there will be an expectation for that to continue as people are more comfortable traveling again. Companies should provide the same timely, factual and transparent communications to employees and be proactive about revising travel policies.

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Some business travel may disappear altogether due to company failure. Additionally, businesspeople are learning during this period of severe travel restrictions that some travel can actually be replaced by teleconferencing technology. As people quickly adapted to working from home, teleconferencing became a staple in today's workplace, and—as we move into recovery mode—it may be the new norm. Technology will likely evolve with more functionality and higher quality as time goes on and demand stays high. Businesspeople are learning that they can still get work done with teleconferencing, and at a much lower cost.

What's Next?

Right now, it's a waiting game as states and employers move into recovery mode from COVID-19. Safety is going to be the main priority for all travelers. Therefore, decision-makers should lean on travel advisories from the Centers for Disease and Prevention and the World Health Organization. Companies will do well to err on the side of caution and keep in mind that it's not just the destination, but the trip itself where business travelers are at risk for exposure.

Travel agencies can help when the time is right to travel again by providing guidance on locations and logistics. To learn