

Back to Level 1: Taking a phased approach to resuming corporate travel in 2021

By Oz Desai

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As President Cyril Ramaphosa announced a return to Level 1 this week, there is a renewed sense of positivity in the air and the potential for new beginnings. Now is the time for businesses to rebuild what was lost or damaged as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and to start getting back to 'normal'. It's time to get up, get moving (literally) and resume corporate travel.



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Looking ahead

According to the Corporate Traveller State of the Market report, when reviewing business travel programmes in August 2020, 50% of customers already had employees travelling or booking to travel in the immediate future. This is reassuring regarding the revival of the industry.

Unfortunately, though, the research also indicates that the recovery process may take a few years. It is estimated that while the average number of business trips per traveller was six to eight per year in pre-Covid times, this number is forecasted to fall to three to four trips per annum until the year 2023.



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According to Andrew Stark, MD for the Flight Centre Travel Group in the Middle East and Africa, although business travellers definitely have an appetite for travel, and travel confidence has started increasing, we can only expect corporate travel to recover to 60% of pre-pandemic levels by June 2022.

This may sound disheartening, but a slow and steady approach could be a much better long-term strategy and work to keep the industry stable going forward.

Virtual meeting fatigue

Technology swooped in and saved the day during the lockdown, making it possible for executives to continue communications with clients and suppliers from far and wide. However, there is no denying that almost everyone is suffering from virtual meeting fatigue and is looking forward to conducting meetings face-to-face once again.

After all, it is easy enough to switch on a computer, send through a digital brochure, and chat to a potential client for 30 minutes – but does it make as significant an impact as making the effort to show up in person? Does it demonstrate the same level of respect and desire to do business with the client? Does it provide the same reassurance as sealing a business deal sitting across from one another eye-to-eye? Certainly not.

Having said that, while the desire to get back to in-person meet-ups is strong, the complexity and uncertainty that envelops the post-Covid world is stronger.



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Businesses are encouraged to resume corporate travel by taking a phased approach. The focus needs to be on crafting a comprehensive 'return to travel' plan that takes various components into consideration.

Travel managers must begin by examining company confidence. For example, is the company adequately prepared to get back to travel? Has it been decided what the goals of future corporate travel should be? Are there financial limitations that will dictate how business travel will gradually get back on track?

Next, travel managers must examine traveller confidence.

Even if the company is financially equipped to resume corporate travel, the real question is, are the employees confident enough to do so? Travel managers must go out of their way to establish whether or not their prospective travellers have any concerns relating to travel and work hard to provide peace of mind in this regard.

If company or traveller confidence is lacking, the phased approach to the reintroduction of business travel, as mentioned above, could prove beneficial. Numerous companies have opted to kick-start domestic travel for a few months before considering getting back to international travel once again.

Others have allowed senior executives to 'test the waters' and report back to colleagues regarding their experiences.

This is a great way in which to help employees feel comfortable about hopping aboard an aeroplane in the near future. After all, the main reason why many are hesitant to embark on a business trip is because it is impossible to know what to expect. Real-life encounters from trusted members of the company can provide a sense of equanimity.

Technology and intensive planning

The key to restoring traveller confidence lies in adopting new technologies to aid businesses and corporate travellers in navigating the many changes, challenges, and uncertainties that surround the act of business travel in a post-Covid world.

These technologies should be geared towards allowing for optimal planning so that travellers know exactly what to expect at every step. 'Go with the flow' travel has little place today. Rather, travel managers will need to coordinate every single business trip in a similar way to planning and overseeing an important corporate event.

Internal and external reviews

Once confidence has been thoroughly assessed and addressed, travel managers must conduct internal and external reviews before corporate travel can resume.

Furthermore, a consensus should be reached regarding what constitutes essential or permissible travel within the corporation. Should employees be cleared to travel to secure new accounts? Or should corporate travel be reserved for salvaging existing clients who might be considering alternative options with competitors? Perhaps only certain employees should be allowed to resume business travel for the time being?



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From an external perspective, in an effort to ensure the protection of employees, it is worthwhile to partner with a travel management company (TMC) for an insider's look into which travel suppliers are taking Covid safety protocols seriously.

There's a long road ahead, and it requires carefully calculated navigation. Having said that, with the right technology, forward-thinking, and support, there shouldn't be anything stopping local businesses from getting moving once again.

ABOUT OZ DESAI

With a proven track record in business management and finance, Oz Desai heads up Flight Centre Travel Group's dynamic Corporate Traveller brand in South Africa. Having worked in a retail travel, management and finance environment within the Flight Centre group, Desai's first-hand experience brings great depth to the role of positioning Corporate Traveller as the preferred provider of travel solutions to corporate South Africa.

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