

**Business travel: exploring how changes in the arrangement and negotiation of professional work generate demand for travel**

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## Abstract

Reducing carbon costs of travel remains a key policy objective for most westernised governments; including the UK. Though specific business travel data is limited (Beaverstock and Faulconbridge, 2010), available data indicates international and national business travel is stable or growing, irrespective of telecommunication use (Strengers, 2014). Studies examining the link between business travel and globalisation, meetings and technology/ infrastructure are now developed (Beaverstock et al, 2010; Jones, 2009; Sassen, 1999). Yet, this work points to more questions than solutions to reducing travel. In particular, the extent to which business travel correlates with company strategy and spatial work arrangement is uncertain (Aguiléra, 2008).

Faulconbridge et al. (2009) propose viewing business travel as one component in a wider ecology of mobility. Jones (2013) suggests shifting from description and classification of travel to understanding how travel helps achieve business outcomes. These propositions allude to adopting a sociology of business travel (Haynes, 2005); such as business travel studies informed by the 'mobility turn' (eg: Haynes, 2010; Strengers, 2014; Urry, 2003). Understanding growth in business travel therefore, requires a critical exploration of how the demand for business travel arises from the arrangement and negotiation of work; the topic of this paper.

This paper applies a *system of practice* perspective to help reveal the multidimensional factors that contribute to business travel. Preliminary findings from a case study are drawn upon to reveal how UK-based global engineering consulting firms bid and arrange work help to generate business travel. Arrangement is informed by factors such as office location and composition (eg: expertise and disciplines), public and private client relationships and coordinating multi-office project teams. Negotiation is shaped by factors such as bidding, bid assembling and project location, and how bids account for project teams and travel and the subsequent doing of work. Evidence indicates demand for business travel is not a simple story of substitution. The way work is done is changing, some of the reasons for travel are also changing. The relationship between globalisation, meetings and technology/ infrastructure and travel is acknowledged. Yet, analytically re-focusing attention to understanding how arrangement and negotiation of work generate business travel is found to create new productive research avenues to understand demands for travel. A set of factors which encourage continued high levels of business related mobility are identified and discussed; prominent being client demands, firm strategies, technology and intrinsic properties of work and projects.

## Introduction

Travel is often considered an afterthought and a part of doing business, or in an ever globalised workplace, understood as facilitating face-to-face contact crucial for building trust and reciprocity. Yet, in not critically unpacking this assumption, we get questions in the literature like: Why do you travel?, with the result often being a key list of tasks. Such tasks are of course important, but they don't tell us much about what creates demand for business travel in the first place.

Davidson and Cope (2003: 3) identify five types of business travel:

- Individual business travel is to fulfil a particular task requirement, for example to repair a piece of faulty machinery;
- Meetings are tied to the benefits of face-to-face contact;
- Exhibitions, trade fairs and conferences merit travel because of their potential for allowing combinations of sales, research and development and networking;
- Incentive trips are rewards to employees, for instance a week's holiday;
- Corporate hospitality relates to trips with clients, for example to sports events, designed to garner future business.

Since the 1980s and up until the onset of the post-credit crisis recession, the five types of business travel identified by Davidson and Cope (2003), and the first three especially have proliferated. For instance, the Barclaycard Business Travel Survey, first launched in the mid-1990s, reveals a 32 per cent increase between 1996 and 2006 in the miles travelled by those surveyed (Barclaycard, 2006). Perhaps surprisingly, 50 per cent of those surveyed in 2008 claimed that the global credit crisis and recession, alongside worries about the carbon impact of business travel, had limited impact on miles travelled, although as noted below more recent surveys suggest otherwise (the Barclaycard survey has not been repeated since 2008).

In a national context, the UK International Passenger Survey (see Office for National Statistics, 2013) similarly documents a continuous rise in the number of visits to and from the UK for business, with a 345% rise in arrivals and 335% rise in departures between 1980 and 2007. Consequently, the volume of business travel by air in 2010 was equal to total air travel in 1980 (Haynes, 2010). This trend equates to 3.5bn individual annual business trips by air worldwide (World Bank, 2010), resulting in a worldwide annual spend of US\$856 billion on business travel (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2011).

Table 1 reviews how a number of recent studies examining the connection between spatially stretched business and the proliferation of travel. It reveals that different forms of travel are associated with functional needs (travel to complete a specific task), compulsions of proximity (travel to share a social space and time with others), and hybrid situations (when both functional needs and social compulsions exist). As Strengers (2014) points out, explanations such as those in table 1 are firmly rooted in work on the sociology of face-to-face encounter and the way (see Urry, 2003). Strengers (2014) shows, however, that travel's role also needs to be understood in terms of what the wider embodied encounter facilitates; the way touch and corporeal co-presence build mutual understanding and trust. Confirming this relationship, the industrial sectors the World Travel and Tourism Council (2011: 15) class as having high business travel demand, are those where corporate globalization and the needs for face-to-face embodied encounter outlined in table 1 have been extensively documented (Faulconbridge et al., 2009; McNeill, 2008; Millar and Salt, 2008; Jones, 2007). In these sectors, information communication technologies, and particularly videoconferencing, do not necessarily substitute for travel when the kinds of demand for mobility outlined in table 1 exist, but do act as mobility allies (Haynes, 2010) in ecologies that simultaneously use embodied travel and virtual interaction (Faulconbridge et al, 2009; Millar and Salt, 2008). There is, then, a convincing economic story tied to corporate organization and the need for face-to-face contact which forms part of the explanation of the proliferation of business travel.

A system of practice perspective however, cautions that focussing purely on economic explanations risk missing other important effects that underlie the proliferation of a practice. As part of the mobilities turn (Sheller and Urry, 2006) significant effort has been made to analyse the 'portfolios' of business mobility which produce an internationally hyper mobile class of workers (Faulconbridge et al., 2009; Millar and Salt, 2008; Salt and Wood, 2012). This literature considers how changed business practices associated with corporate globalization have, since the late 1970s, created new needs for international travel; attending meetings and conferences, and working on global projects being identified as the main reasons (Davidson and Cope, 2003; Lyons, 2013; Jones, 2007, 2013; Lassen, 2006; Strengers, 2014). The dominant explanation of mobility growth in these literatures is face-to-face contact builds trust and reciprocity which is crucial in business.

**Table 1: The forms and roles of business travel identified in existing studies**

	<b>Functional need</b>	<b>Compulsions of proximity</b>	<b>Hybrid functional &amp; proximity compulsions</b>
<b>Jones (2007): intra-firm management practices</b>	<i>Operation</i> – doing the work of the firm	<i>Corporate control and coherence</i> - culture management and team building	<i>Knowledge and innovation practices</i> – working together to solve problems
<b>Lassen (2009): knowledge and innovation</b>	<i>Problem solving</i>	<i>Intimacy and trust</i> – building bonds with colleagues and clients	<i>Networking</i> – finding business opportunities and developing relationships to allow their exploitation
<b>Millar and Salt (2008): task functionality</b>	<i>Commuters and workers on rotation</i> – those travelling or permanently mobbing between sites to execute a task; <i>extended travel</i> – those at a location for months on end to complete a project)	<i>Business travel</i> - trips designed purely to meet and greet	
<b>Urry (2003): events that presence is essential at</b>	<i>Legal, economic and object obligations</i> – when rules, functional need, or when touching/seeing/sensing an object makes being there vital	<i>Social obligations</i> – expectations of co-presence (e.g., when pitching to a new client)	<i>Event and place obligations</i> – the value gained from being at a conference or visiting a place (e.g., the identification and building of new business opportunities and contacts)
<b>Wickham and Vecchi (2009): the multi-dimensional production and deliver role</b>	<i>Plumbers &amp; missionaries</i> - those who have a specific piece of work to complete on arrival	<i>Commuters</i> – those who travel not to complete a specific task but simply to meet face-to-face with others	<i>Explorers</i> – those who travel specifically to identify and build new business opportunities; <i>nomads</i> - those who are rarely at home and fulfil all of the other roles identified as part of constant movement from place-to-place

In this context, the aim of this paper is to develop a *system of practice* perspective that can help reveal the multidimensional factors that contribute to business travel. Inspiration for this perspective comes from work associated with the mobilities turn which draws on ideas from science and technology studies to analyse systems (Cohen, 2010, 2012; Geels, 2012; Urry, 2004) and practices (Shove et al., 2012; Watson, 2012) of mobility. The practice perspective on mobility is one distinctive approach to operationalising a system of practice perspective (see for instance Shove and Walker, 2007, on the similarities and differences compared to the approach of Geels, 2012). In acknowledging differences within this body of literature, collectively, the work share a focus on the way systems of culture, economy, technology and policy *together* produce and sustain expected, normal and needed forms of mobility. It is this approach that frames our empirical analysis of to understand how UK-based global engineering consulting firms procure and arrange work helps to generate demand for business travel.

## Research methods and data collection

The two case study firms examined and discussed in this paper have a strong England presence, yet are sufficiently large with a global reach and reputation. Business travel is defined as briefcase travel (i.e. encompassing training, conferences, internal and client face-to-face, and sales). A list of potential candidate firms was obtained from the Guardian UK 300. Based on the ranking of the top 10 firms over the past 5 years, a list of potential firms was identified and culled to two case study candidates based on professional connections with each of the top 10 firms.

The limitations and strengths to conducting a case study of a phenomenon are documented (Bryman, 2008; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006). The case study methodology adopted here reflects an information-oriented selection (see Flyvbjerg, 2006, for distinction between random and information-oriented selection). Based on four case study types identified by Flyvbjerg (2006), several relevant factors inform classifying our two case study companies as a ‘critical’ case study of business travel. First, the global reach of the firms are ideal to develop new knowledge around how demand for business travel is created and maintained. Second, compared to law, finance, IT and mining, the construction, civil engineering and survey consulting business sector has received significantly less attention by scholars. Third, since 2000, consolidation, globalisation and more recently the Global Financial Crises (GFC), mean our business sector constitutes a dynamic and interesting study. Finally, employees in this business sector often have higher than average annual travel trips and higher than average annual travel distance (ie: national and international).

One-on-one interviews, based on a semi-structured interview protocol was adopted as the principle research method (Denscombe, 2001); and a snowball interview technique applied (Bryman, 2008; Neuman, 2011). Slight alterations to the interview protocol reflect a decision to interview senior workers towards the end of the study. After initial introduction into each case study firm by professional contacts, participants were identified by snowball (i.e. feedback from interview participants) and criteria-specific identification (i.e. from review of corporate documents). In total, 20 interviews were conducted. Interviews were taped, transcribed and coded and analysed through QSR NVivo software. Interviews generally lasted one hour, and began by participants describing their day-to-day tasks, and then shifting to procuring and arranging work.

## Findings

Table 2 provides a high-level summarised account of how our case study firms create, suppress and re-constitute demand. The far left column illustrates where the agency remains strongest in relation to demanding and suppressing demand. Though not exhaustive, four key themes which emerge relate to clients, firm strategies, technology and projects and work activities. Letters adjacent to each theme reflect examples drawn from interview material. The remaining three columns summarise of how each example creates, re-constitutes and suppresses demand for travel in different ways.

**Table 2: Summary of key examples drawn from case study firms illustrating how demand for business travel is preserved, suppressed and re-constituted**

		<b>Persistent demand</b>	<b>Re-constitute demand</b>	<b>Suppress demand</b>
<b>Clients</b>	<b>A</b>	Expectations placed on firm by client create persistent demand	Negotiation between client and firm suppress demand in short term, re-constitute demand over long term	Firms actively controlling and itemising travel costs helps suppress demand
	<b>B</b>	Clients without virtual technology create demand	Firms use virtual for intra-office travel suppress demand, but not external travel demand	Convincing client to use virtual communication results in suppressed demand

<b>Firm strategies</b>	<b>C</b>	Firm restructuring facilitates increased multi-office work arrangements, creating new persistent demand	Firm size resulting in suppressed short-term travel via secondments, re-constituting travel in long term	Firm mechanisms, infrastructure and policies actively suppress worker travel to client and offices
	<b>D</b>	Firm procurement strategies based on client needs and firm skills, not office location, create new and persistent demand	Client relationships provide steady continued stream of work, demand therefore based on original project location	Firm strategies accounting for scope creep helps to suppress unexpected demand
	<b>E</b>	Firm staff and project management policies explicitly create persistent demand	Active bundling of activities by workers suppresses some travel, but re-constitutes importance of geographically far locations	Competencies and norms held in different business areas and disciplines lend themselves to suppressing demand
	<b>F</b>	Firm workforce deployment strategies explicitly advance new and persistent demand	Firm strategies advancing centralised, unified approach to procuring and arranging work activities re-constitutes demand	Workers actively questioning work assignments
<b>Technology</b>	<b>G</b>	Technology reduces corporeal requirements, creating new work arrangements and demand	Constitutive properties of IT opens new unexpected communication opportunities	Firm adoption of IT actively facilitates and affords virtual work, resulting in suppressed demand
	<b>H</b>	Firm advancing technology as means to offshore work require new skills and creates new work possibilities, resulting in new demand	Offshoring work results in increased travel over short term, potential suppressed travel over long term	Workers actively questioning firm adoption of IT to facilitate offshore work
<b>Projects/Work</b>	<b>I</b>	Technology can't overcome intrinsic and emergent properties of work activities which create persistent demand	Technological advances in communication re-constitute demand by facilitating multi-office work arrangements	Advances in technology, coupled with firm support, can result in suppressed demand
	<b>J</b>	Technology cannot overcome constitutive properties of projects themselves which intrinsically create persistent demand	Technology and office layouts re-constituting demand in unexpected ways	Technology can unintentionally accommodate constitutive project properties and suppress demand

### Clients

A clear theme which emerged concerns the stable and persistent relationship between demand for travel and demands placed on firms by clients. Starting with *Constructing the Team* (Latham, 1994), the UK government has conducted over 10 inquiries into procurement and contractual arrangements in the UK construction industry (CIC, 2012). Though evidence is not definite, there is some indication that a difference remains between public and private sector clients.

The private sector is some ways perhaps more demanding in terms of deadline but they don't want to meet you unless they absolutely need to. Whereas public bodies I suppose, from having worked for one for a little while myself, there are more meetings internally there so I think that expectation almost comes out to their projects that they commission other people to do because they have to themselves feed back into so many processes and so many management boards that they have internally that, actually, they need almost a greater level of engagement with us than one of our private clients would do. (Interview 6)

Clearly, a professional tension between clients and firms has always constituted an aspect of the consulting world. Participants continually identified the importance of nurturing and maintaining client relationships. Yet, in relation to demand for travel, some clients demand less travel (private

sector) but others continue to demand a lot (public sector). As such, there is no easy way 'manage' demand – client expectations have powerful implications for demanding less or more travel. For example, when a senior director was pushed to explain to what extent they advance virtual communication with clients, they immediately replied,

There are certain clients I would never even dream of suggesting some of the things I have spoken about... There is a certain amount of reverence there, and they are extremely busy people who find it easier to have face to face meetings. (Interview 19)

Persistent demands placed by clients on firms are not necessarily one directional. For example, during times of uncertainty, such as the previous GFC recession, bids placed by some firms were more influenced by the need to keep staff busy, compared with costing every single F2F meeting. As such, firm strategies for client corporeal demands appear contingent based on a variety of factors such as global and business sector financial changes, a project's prestige, and client demands.

Sometimes the difference, where it's not quite so clear is if you've done a bit of work and they ask you to have one extra and you generally swallow one or maybe two extra meetings, depending on where you are, but what you might do is just to flag it to them just so you know, we're actually, we've said we've got this many meetings, we've been in this many meetings, we'll come to this one or we might come to these two, but beyond that, if there are any more then we'd have to ask for an additional fee, so it's trying to be clear with them. (Interview 03)

Emerging research suggests that firms now often have large uninterrupted construction portfolios (referred as 'framework' type projects) rather than, or in addition to, single one-off projects (Blismas, Sher, Thorpe, Baldwin, 2004). As such, though drawing lessons from UK government inquiries into procurement practices, project management practices continue to evolve.

A second narrative that emerged in the client theme centres on uneven technological adoption. Many interview participants commented on the importance of experts. "You're always going to get international experts that are sought after by clients" (Interview 16). In some instances, the pull of expertise came with a further assumption of co-presence, and thus re-constituted demand for travel, but in other instances, firms could convince clients of the merits of virtual communication.

Well, I mean we've just put a bid in now where we're using somebody from Campus as like an expert in that area, but he doesn't come to meetings, he dials in as an expert because it was a small, I mean this is the issue really. If it's a small commission we could blow the budget just him coming to like four meetings. But we want his expertise, so we agreed with the client and him, he'll dial into those progress meetings. (Interview 3)

In seeking to balance tight budgets, disciplinary expertise and client relations, virtual communication (from basic telephone to large data transferring and video conferencing) does provide critical affordances which suppress demand for travel. Further, use of computers, internet and telephone (for personal and conference calls with large groups) are now common everyday work items. Yet, differences between private public sector clients, along with budget cuts to local governments, interview participants almost universally reflected that tools like Skype for Business was used for internal communication between offices, rather than between firm and client.

So there are several organisations out there who people don't use the technology on a daily basis and therefore aren't familiar with it, and we obviously are all set up for video conferencing etc. which is great internally but sometimes – particularly with public sector authorities, they are facing cuts themselves and they are not going to invest in things like this. (Interview 06)

Local authorities aren't very well funded. Local authorities would not have a VC capability, I can almost guarantee it. (Interview 20)

Increased uptake of Skype for Business reflect an evolution of existing technology. Improvements to the operating system represent a change in how some daily activities are conducted, yet adoption of such technology remaining uneven between firms and clients (both private and public).

### **Firm strategies**

Firm strategies appear as one of the strongest themes to emerge. Though not exclusive, strategies related to restructuring of firm business areas, procurement strategies and staff and project management and workforce deployment, were found to significantly create, facilitate, sustain and advance demand for business travel. Compared with broader trends identified which are occurring across the wider engineering consulting sector, the level of agency enacted through firm strategies represents a clear, persistent and identifiable factor in relation to suppressing or demanding travel.

So South Africa at the minute's quite quiet, so we can pull people in from other bits, and that again is quite easy to do, I'm talking about getting somebody from South Africa involved in a project in Scarborough, because she's got the right skills and South Africa's quite quiet, and that's relatively easy as long as she wants to do that. (Interview 3)

Like I said, they try and discourage you from travel, so I have worked on projects that I have never met the client, never met the project manager, never met anyone else who is working on it, it is just it is run out of a different office, and I have been asked to be involved. (Interview 8)

Yet even in relatively clear examples of a causal link between demand and travel, how firm strategies play out is temporally and contextually emergent. For instance, the net result of firm size and travel policies appears to almost re-constitute demand. Firm size can both suppress and re-constitute demand via secondments, and firm policies explicitly advance travel reduction. Central to understanding the existence of these opposing forces is continued organisational re-structuring.

Interview questions explicitly identified recent firm restructuring as a method to temporally orient participants and help with recall how things used to be, and how they are now. Yet, participants employed in either case study firm for a decade or more often remarked, "Sorry, when you said a restructuring, do you mean the recent.... I just flag that up because there have been quite a few restructures over the years within [Firm A], but we're just referring the UK one?" (Interview 16). Such remarks speak to the dynamic nature of our business sector and evidence a central motivation for choosing the sector. Both firms to varying degree had for example, altered their profit and loss accounts from traditional single office accounting to discipline and business areas. This alteration lessened financial pressure to draw staff from a single office. Further, many interview participants mentioned explicit job indicators which had important implications for demanding travel.

It's on our, sort of, KPIs at senior management level, so visibility, being mobile, agility, geographical agility is in very much the KPIs of the senior management team, and that's cascaded down to staff of all levels, to be fair. Probably more so for the senior component of staff and less so for, sort of, technician, graduate level, but it's definitely geographical mobility and visibility is definitely, you know, coming from the top down, very much so. (Interview 2)

Clearly the demand and need for senior staff to be visible has remained constant. Similarly, co-locating a project manager near a client is critical to managing a project. Yet what has altered is the spatial distribution of staff and projects. In the case of project directors managing multiple project managers, or skill network managers managing specific skills like rail engineering, architecture or energy, the spatial distribution of these networks has expanded from one or two offices to multiple



offices. Further, firm procurement strategies now often target specific market sectors, such as energy and transport, resulting in looking for work, irrespective of geographical location of staff.

so their geographical location made no influence on how we selected individuals. The project will be based in Bristol, so perhaps bar one, the project manager, we thought they were best to be based in Bristol. I think everyone else was based on the merit and the capabilities of the individual, not their location. (Interview 8)

Finally, alongside such firm procurement strategies is a deep awareness at the firm director level of a need to have a mobile workforce; strategies which are still unfolding and unsettled.

it is made explicit to everyone that you might be required to travel to India to work, because we have got a big organisation, bigger office there, they provide support, so it has been made quite clear that not only you might have to travel around the UK, which people don't usually have an issue with, but you would probably have to travel to India as well. (Interview 8)  
Project managers who need to resource a project there will do everything they can from, 'Go and read your terms and conditions again,' to, 'You're not busy on anything else and you need to be busy to keep your job.'  
There's quite a... it's not a nice... it's the dark underbelly I think of the fact we are just a resource. (Interview 7)

Some participants mentioned joining the two case study companies because of their international reach and reputation. For staff without family or other obligations, the potential to travel to different countries remains a significant draw card. Yet, other interview participants clearly were less enthusiastic about the potential for such a mobile career.

### **Technology**

Technology is another clear theme which emerged. One of Mokhtarian's (1990) four types of relationships between technology and mobility is substitution. Historically, the rise of the telephone, followed by the internet and computer reflect textbook examples where a device did help substitute an action previously requiring co-presence. Yet, two clear narratives that emerged from the interviews question substitution.

Recent adoption of technology along with coordinating office fit outs by our case study companies concur that advances in technology can and do suppress demand for business travel.

The ability to send massive files around to each other as well...it really has cut the amount of travelling down significantly now. (Interview 14)

Although technology has helped to transfer data and speed up technical drawings, it has simultaneously fostered a work environment where workers can and often are, located everywhere.

So with IT, it doesn't matter where anyone is, and that is increasing. (Interview 13)

The result of increased geographical worker dispersion is a work environment where traditional work bonds are uncultivated, suppressed or severed. Increased mobility not only makes cultivating professional ties challenging, but supported by increased reliance on technology and coupled with professional KPIs and responsibilities, compulsory travel by workers to accomplish staff and project management activities results in a net increase in total communication.

Skype's brilliant, we rely on it all the time, it's a great tool. But even though technology has increased I think generally, in totality the level of communication on projects has increased in its, sort of, totality, you know..... So even though the use of Skype and everything has increased, the level of face to face meetings is still as significant as it was six, seven,

eight years ago because you're still going to get the clients and the project team that need that face to face support as well. So I suppose the total level of communication and interaction has gone up, but the face to face to has also, because the use of Skype's gone up and probably face to face has gone up as well, or least stayed the same over the last five, six, seven years. (Interview 2)

An increased more mobile work population therefore, does not reflect a strict substitution of non-virtual for virtual communication, but a transition in work practices. The nascent nature of current technology (ie: screen share not telephone) and its deployment in everyday work activities also means that professional expectation and conventions around meeting, communicating and working are in transition. A tension therefore exists between traditional modes of working, and new expectations and norms required to more fully transition to more mobile ways of working. One clear narrative demonstrating this point concerns 'the long corridor'.

But they call it the long corridor.... rather than walking down your corridor to your CAD technician down the road, down the corner of the office, you've got this big long corridor which takes you all the way to India. So we call it the long corridor to India and they... I'm not saying doing it weekly, but we have definitely seen a marked increase in travel as a relation to that, so as a corporate we're trying to push more work their way, but it's also almost like sucked people there as well, you know, to want to travel there and have meetings and conversations and stuff. (Interview 15)

Technology and firm strategies advancing the long corridor have been in place for many years. It is therefore the combination of technology and a more explicit firm expectation to increase offshoring work which is new. In the short term, this results in increased travel; since facilitating such virtual work arrangements require new expectations and project and staff management skills. Some participants mentioned outright opposition by workers towards such virtual work arrangements. Further, though the long corridor could potentially suppress travel over the long term, reaching such a conclusion remains unclear, as many spoke of how international visits in turn opened up unexpected new work opportunities.

### **Projects and work**

A fourth and final theme which emerged in the research concerns the intrinsic properties of projects which workers work on, and work itself, or the doing of work. Strengers (2014) has previously noted the importance of understanding travel's role in terms of what the wider embodied encounter facilitates. We push this idea further by showing two related narratives which describe the limits of technology to overcome the intrinsic and emergent properties of work and projects themselves.

Many interview participants discussed their day-to-day work activities as quite developmental and multi-disciplinary. As such, completing activities and tasks can't be accomplished by locking oneself in the office alone, but instead requires contributing different parts of a project over a project's lifetime, often in different stages which have long time frames.

So a lot of the time on this, we will review a project and we will look at the photos and we will go oh I wish we had got these sort of photos from this area, maybe we need to go on a site visit to double check? Before we do that, we will use Google Street View and if Google gives us the answer, we won't go on site. (Interview 8)

Use of technology not explicitly tailored for travel demand highlights the dynamic nature of technology. Irrespective of the original aim of Google Street View, the result is engineers not travelling to a section of motorway to take photographs. In other instances like Skype for Business, almost every participant interviewed commented on the merits of the recent version. The capability

to share screens and instantly connect to a conference call at one's desk provided workers similar work experiences comparable to non-virtual methods.

I think it maybe reduces the need for lots of phone calls. It's a step change between needing a meeting or not.... Let's say you are trying to talk someone through a spreadsheet that they sent you.... You ring them up and you say, 'Okay, let's go to tab five, cell 69, let's look at the formula...'. And then you can get there eventually and you can see it and you can agree it and you can spend a lot of time talking to them on the phone about all these different formulas and sharing screens actually is very useful, sharing your screen.... That probably takes at least half way towards a face to face meeting. (Interview 7)

Both case study firms have continued to promote virtual communication as a means to cut overhead costs and to increase staff billability. Though the majority of interview participants saw the benefits of technology, few could imagine a future where most of their activities were accomplished virtual.

They don't, the dynamics are such that it doesn't, it never works as well. If Dom had been in the meeting on Tuesday in person I'm sure he would have spoke, as it was he put himself on mute and listened and then at the end I said, "Are you still there, Dom?" "Yeah." And he's like a senior guy but the dynamic is difficult to join in if you're not there in person. (Interview 3)

There is something about the intrinsic emergent properties of work and the projects worked on, which technology cannot replicate; at least in its current form. In some ways, the tether to one's desk has become stronger, and thus, the blended approach to virtual communication with the new technology, stationed at one's desk, sharing screens virtually, potentially video chatting (or not), appears to at once signify change, yet constrained by very stable aspects of daily work activities.

## **Conclusions and general reflections**

We set out to explain the change in business travel. Travel appears to be an outcome of the way work is done. The way work is done is changing, some of the reasons for travel are also changing. There remains a strong set of factors which encourage continued high levels of business related mobility. Evidence from our two case study firms suggest prominent being client demands, firm strategies, technology and intrinsic properties of work and projects.

Demand for business travel in our two case study firms illustrate a multi-layered co-evolutionary account of business travel. Different factors create new demand or preserve demand, suppress demand and re-constitute demand with often contradictory outcomes. Business travel is notoriously difficult to reduce; the emerging narrative from our two case study firms suggests why. For example, a technological bottleneck remains between what a firm can do, and what a client can do. Firms appear to recognise this gap and are applying strategies to mitigate the gap. However, technological hype continues to be proven misleading at times by very simple things like the obduracy and incompatibility of systems which renders virtual interaction problematic. Consequently, it remains unclear whether the firm-client technology gap will diminish as clients shift from older to newer systems, whether firms offset technology limits by provide systems at their end, or whether a gap will persistent into the foreseeable future. Further, business practices are premised on a mobile world; the way our case study companies have reformed exemplifies this. Both firms lock themselves into a mobile world in a variety of ways. The evolution of organisational restructures over the past decade have placed firms operating in this business sector in a trajectory that emphasises firm-wide working rather than office/regional. This trajectory geographically stretches work practices. During the recession, our case study firms minimised staff dismissal by shifting staff to over seas offices. Whereas our firms used to apply a soft glove approach to sending staff to a different office or project site, both have more explicit expectations around workforce

deployment. The evidence is mixed, but there is indication that this change is partly the result of working in a post-recession environment, but additionally, many senior directors commented on this change as a slow decade-long trend towards targeting specific market sectors.

Highlighting the role that procurement and work arrangement practices are intimately interconnected with firms advancing a more mobile workforce helps reveal how stable and dynamic factors push in contradictory directions. Stable factors found in the business sector, along with firm culture and the physicality of the office buildings, not discussed here but identified in both case study firms, generate stable path-dependent outcomes. Yet, continual organisational restructuring generates dynamic outcomes that often pull in an opposing direction. For example, seeking to become a world leader in airport construction can provide a firm a project in which to employ and utilise their full array of specific skills sets, from geotechnical, seismic and acoustics, to civil and structural engineering and architecture. However, becoming world leaders in airport construction severely limits the potential number of projects within a specific region. Once airports are constructed or retrofitted in the UK, this means shifting staff to where the airport business is located. Consequently, in concert with the above examples concerning multi-office work arrangements and travel reduction policies, decisions made at the director/CEO level to restructure a firm based on targeting specific markets, is overall constituting more demand now than in the past due to the implied organisation of work practices.

There remains important flaws within the substitution argument. Some of the work workers do are ideal candidates for technological suppression of travel. The ability to screen share was identified by most interview participants as a fantastic advancement and used extensively whenever possible or appropriate. Yet, simplistic response to external factors explaining changing travel patterns do not hold. For example, affordances provided by technology such as flexible work and virtual communication appear to be driven (or an outcome) of dynamic external-firm factors such as the GFC and technology, but also dynamic internal-firm factors like procurement and workforce deployment strategies. Continued focus on technology to suppress demand for travel or substitute virtual for F2F presents a narrow and simplistic framing of how demand for travel is created, facilitated and reinforced. Technology has helped to challenge the need for travel, but not fully eliminate compulsion for co-presence. Specifically, technology seems to increase communications and weaken the barriers of distance. As such, whatever savings it can offer compete with a reconfiguration of work spatially which is based on easy access to an entire national skills base.

Possibilities but also limits for agency (both material and human) exist. For example, a narrow conclusion of the offshoring of work might be to highlight how the lack of skills to successfully navigate offshore work, along with sometimes outright opposition by workers towards such virtual work arrangements, undermines firm strategies aimed at reducing travel. This conclusion acknowledges material agency via affordances by technology and human agency via existing professional expectations concerning firms respecting employee work/life balance. Yet, this conclusion discounts the constitutive properties of technology identified and discussed. Technology affords and facilitates stretched working practices, which in turn further encourages more stretching. As shown, this always leads to travel of some kind. Hence technology is actually creating more demand for travel in complex but important ways.

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