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Business Travel Weighed Down by Omicron, Safety Concerns

Jetting out for work has yet to take off and achieve pre-pandemic levels as cos tread cautiously, encouraging video-con meetings

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Mumbai: For companies, business travel is up in the air. But not literally. In reality, virtual meetings are still taking precedence over long distance face-to-face ones.

With travel restrictions due to the pandemic and its subsequent waves, and now with the arrival of the new variant Omicron, flying out of the city or country for work has not seen the same revival as other travel segments.

According to a survey of global travel industry experts conducted by Collinson and CAPA – Centre for Aviation, business and long-haul travel will remain the slowest-

recovering travel segments in 2022. In predicting travel in 2022, just over a third (35%) of respondents expect a 41-60% recovery to 2019 pre-pandemic levels of short-haul business travel. This is reflected in the way companies are viewing

travelling for work, with many adopting a travel-only-when-absolutely-needed outlook.

Amit Chincholikar, global chief HR officer, Tata Consumer Products, says employee safety is the first priority. "We have been careful

about business travel and encouraged employees to make their travel-related decisions based on urgency, protocol and the location where they need to travel," he says.

Chincholikar says the company is letting employees take a call on

business-related travel. For now, they are at about 50% of pre-pandemic business travel.

Madhur Pandey, vice-president, marketing, Parle Agro Pvt Ltd, also says travel is restricted to crucial trips, adding that while business travel has begun, it has not reached pre-pandemic levels. After developing a good system over the last year and a half, Pandey says Parle is continuing virtual meetings.

Ritu Moitra, chief human resources officer, Duroflex, says the company hasn't gone back to pre-pandemic levels of travelling and is still encouraging virtual meetings that are safe and convenient.

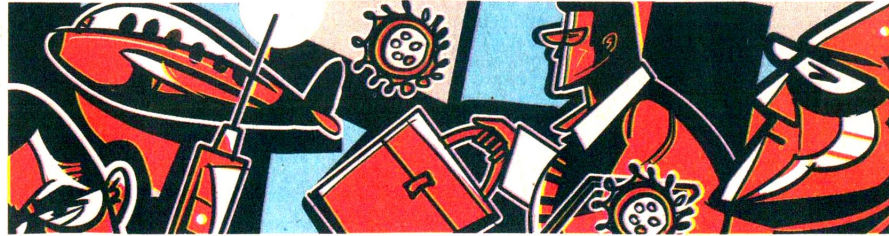


Illustration: ZAHID

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"As an organisation, employee safety is pivotal to us. We make sure to avoid any travel that is not necessary. When it comes to collaborative working, we encourage the teams to meet over virtual meeting tools," says Moitra of Duroflex.

When travel is unavoidable, companies are keeping policies in place to ensure employee safety. "We only permit employees who are fully vaccinated to travel. If someone who is not vaccinated needs to travel, we ensure they take both their shots before the trip. All precautions are being taken by us as we are mindful of the fact that the pandemic is still existent," Parle's Pandey says.

"We are making sure that necessary health and safety protocols are followed and maintained in all travel, and all support in terms of stay, commute etc is provided," adds Tata's Chincholikar.

POST-COVID CHANGES

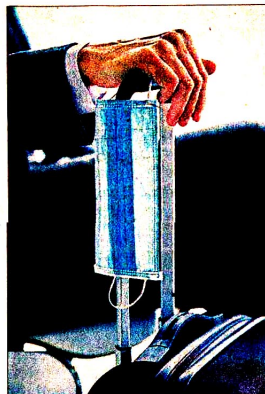
Ritu Mehrotra, regional manager, South Asia, Booking.com, says the online travel agency is seeing corporate travel return, but in a controlled manner, in metro cities. "It is, however, still a small share of the total travel pie," she says.

To encourage recovery, Mehrotra says the travel industry is providing discounts and booking policies such as flexi-cancellations.

Anup Manjeshwar, head, sales and distribution, AirAsia India, says approximately 50% of the pre-Covid level of travel has resumed, and that companies are encouraging business travel in a graded manner for conferences, essential meetings, trade shows and exhibitions. Manjeshwar says AirAsia is providing policies such as flexible booking and cancellation, or even the facility to book an extra seat.

BRIGHT SIDE

Aditya Sanghi, cofounder, Hotelogix, a hotel and property management solutions provider, says, "Average rates have fallen for city hotels so business travellers are able to get a higher category stay in the same budget. This is what



the sector is leveraging today." He adds that the average business traveller has increased the length of stay, saying, "People prefer to reduce the frequency of travel and make it a longer business trip."

Arun Bagaria, cofounder of B2B travel platform TravClan, agrees, adding that post-pandemic, "people prefer hygiene first. A lot of emphasis has shifted towards good premium/luxury hotels and not just conveniently-located ones."

Both corporates and travel companies believe business travel will pick up in 2022, and that Omicron is a short-term scare. "Companies have started bringing their employees back to office. This is the first step in accepting the fact that as humans, we crave in-person social interactions and that is the most effective and sustainable way of working productively," says Bagaria.

"Since there are several new people who have joined us over the last 18 months and the nature of our work is based on collaboration and inter-dependencies, we are seeing more people wanting to do meetings face to face," says Chincholikar of Tata Consumer Products. "Whenever there are cross-functional or critical issues to resolve, face-to-face conversations always help us collaborate better and give a better sense of ownership, working together and seamless work."