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# Why Bill Gates is wrong and business travel won't die in 2021

By Steve Black - Topia (<https://www.topia.com/>) | January 19, 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic will no doubt drastically change the way business gets done moving forward, especially when it comes to travel. Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates has even predicted that over 50% of business travel will go away permanently now that remote work and virtual meetings have become the norm.

While I'm sure he would offer Microsoft's Teams as a worthy substitute for face-to-face business deals, Gates' dire travel prediction substantially underestimates three key factors:

- **Human connection is how work gets done.** We are fundamentally relationship-driven creatures and even with the most advanced technology, when push comes to shove, business still gets done in person. By his own admission, Gates himself hasn't made a single new friend or business

connection this year, and most of us can relate. We're talking with people we already knew through happy hours and team collaboration, but with conferences, trade shows and other networking events cancelled, new connections are much harder to come by.

- **There will be an arms race in sales.** Your CFO may be thrilled about the lower travel and entertainment expenses this year but ask them how they feel about sales numbers. Most won't be so thrilled because you can't have one without the other. Your sales team might say they're perfectly happy to sell virtually—it's much more convenient—but as soon as your competitor gets in the same room with a prospect, you've essentially lost the deal. Not to mention, there's a tremendous amount of upsell, expansion and retention that hinges on personal relationships. It's often over lunches, coffee or drinks that consultants and vendors learn about other challenges their client is facing and can offer support. That's how a one-off project turns into a long-term engagement. The reality is the weaker the relationship, the more likely you are to get unseated by your competitors, and if you're not physically there, your risk is much higher.
- **"Never travelers" will become travelers.** When everyone was in the office, we could easily meet up to brainstorm, either formally around a conference table or informally in the breakroom. With the loss of connection and the challenges of remote collaboration inherent in distributed work, innovation has slowed. At the same time, remote recruiting makes it tougher to onboard new employees and bring them into the fold. Companies need to get their teams together to push the organization forward. As a result, we can expect to see more in-person team building, project kickoffs and collaboration sessions with people who never traveled now hitting the road to meet up twice a year or once a quarter. Where you once had 20% of staff always on the road and 80% who never traveled, now you might have half or more who travel once or twice a year. Road warriors may travel less, but the volume will be heavily offset by large populations that may be travelling for work for the first time ever.

While it's true that the threshold for justifying travel may increase—companies will need to focus on the ROI—business travel will still be essential for growing sales, building teams and maintaining culture.

A good CFO isn't just thinking about the bottom line and cost savings but also how the talent experience and overall company growth comes into play. Getting people together is critical for rapidly building trust and relationships, rallying around a cause and re-energizing and motivating the team—all of which are critical for innovation.

So, how can companies prepare for this shift in business travel? By establishing smart policies, compliance standards and iron-clad record keeping.

- **Map out a strategy.** While the stakes are higher and companies need to control costs, a hard "no" on all travel puts you at risk of losing ground to your competitors. Instead, establish a protocol for determining the business case for travel and how you'll justify the expense, not only for new

business but also teambuilding and onboarding. New hires will want to know the rules of engagement up front—if they're fully remote, how often will they get face time with their colleagues to build relationships?

- **Build inclusivity into the travel policy.** You may have many employees chomping at the bit to hop on the next plane. But for others who are high-risk or have challenging family/personal situations, like child or elder care, homeschooling, etc., it may be unsafe or impossible for them to travel anytime soon. You'll need to be thoughtful about how you manage opportunities so that you don't disadvantage that portion of your employees who can't leave home.
- **Maintain records and compliance.** At the risk of adding insult to injury after a long year, 2021 will very likely be the Year of the Audit. With travel on lockdown over the last year or so, governments have been extremely lenient about tax and legal issues related to where employees are working. With most of them now facing massive budget shortfalls, don't expect that to continue—they're going to come calling and holding companies accountable. Companies need to stay on top of who is/has been where for both compliance and health/safety. Tracking employee location automatically, in real time, provides the most reliable, auditable solution to ensure and validate tax and legal compliance, as well as keep your employees safe.

The reasons for business travel have not changed—we still depend on personal connections to get work done—and for that reason, we can expect to see a rebound in travel as soon as it's safe and people feel comfortable.

But as travel returns, which it no doubt will, it will bring with it a whole host of new complexities around keeping costs and risks low. Companies will need to be prepared with a sound strategy and technology to support it in order to stay on top of the competition.

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