

Business Travel 101: Choosing between tech and the human touch

Entrepreneurs, business owners and managers know what it's like to burn the candle at both ends when it comes to doing their accounts, marketing their business and dealing with HR issues. The perception is that if you do it yourself, it will be quicker and cheaper, however, this is simply not true.



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Considering the half hour you've spent comparing flight costs and travel times, getting to the airport for the 5.55am OR Tambo flight to Cape Town, only to realise you've booked it from Cape Town to OR Tambo and you now have to pay to change it, not to mention sit around in the airport waiting for the next flight. Consider the pain of having to reschedule all your meetings because of that delay and the time it will now take to reconcile any unnecessary expenses as a result.

"No matter how big or small your business, every penny saved can make a difference to your bottom line. And if you charge by the hour, what does it cost you every month to do your own travel instead of outsourcing it."

"Knowing when to do it yourself, use an online booking tool or entrusting your travel requirements in the hands of a travel expert can deliver savings and enhance your productivity," says Ryan Potgieter, brand manager at Flight Centre Business Travel.

The truth is that there are a time and place for each of these tools.

Knowing the difference:

Online booking tool

An online business travel system (usually built and supported by a travel management company), the Online Booking Tool (OBT) is designed to meet a company's needs around complying with travel policy, reporting, tracking staff for duty of care

purposes and using preferred suppliers.

Unlike an online travel agent or a supplier website, the OBT can help streamline the booking process by automatically incorporating fares and rates from preferred suppliers and automating approval processes. It is best suited for very basic domestic flight requirements and simple point-to-point transactions.

Travel management company

Today's TMC isn't just in the business of booking the odd flight or hotel for a business traveller. A TMC offers comprehensive and personal travel management services that include helping to guide your travel policy, supplying an array of quotes and travel options, negotiating supplier deals, providing reporting so you can see what you spend on travel, helping consolidate your spend and doing complex travel transactions that cannot be fulfilled on an OBT.

"The goal of a TMC is to help you manage your travel better, save time, deliver savings and help ensure the safety of your travelling staff," says Potgieter.

When you should use each of them

Money and time savings

Booking travel through an OBT can be cheaper than booking through a travel agent, but you need to factor in the cost of setting up and installing the OBT. It is also only optimal for simple travel itineraries so if your itinerary is more complex, you would be better served speaking to a travel agent who has access to a global network and buying power so you save money. A TMC can deliver cost savings when last minute changes need to be made to your travel itinerary.

Delivering efficiencies

You can set up business traveller profiles on an OBT so that there are fewer errors when you make a booking. A travel agent will also have the traveller profiles on hand and get to know each traveller's personal preferences, including managing your airline loyalty programmes and enforcing your travel policy.

Keeping track on reports

OBTs provide insightful reports that help you assess the return on travel investment and identify additional savings. Similarly, a TMC can provide you with travel spend reports and assist in identifying travel trends and highlight how to adjust your programmes to deliver savings.

Flexibility

If you need last-minute changes made to an itinerary, a travel agent can make these for you while you're on the road. Although business travellers can access their OBT on the go, it still takes time to cancel and rebook flights, and make other changes to travel arrangements.

Simple transactions VS complex transactions

OBTs are useful for simple itineraries like point-to-point routings. If much of your business travel is point-to-point, you could benefit from implementing an OBT. For more complex transactions, you would benefit from working with a travel agent, which has the expertise to assess an itinerary as a whole and ensure you get the best routes and stopovers.

Turnkey solutions

A good travel agent will take care of all the little details. From arranging your forex to assisting with your visa, from arranging airport transfers to ensuring you're booked in your favourite seat. You'll also have access to a travel expert 24/7, so when things go awry, as they frequently do when you're on the road, you have a friendly voice to turn to.

Supplier relationships

Your travel agent will have relationships with suppliers and buying power so you benefit from reduced rates and special privileges, for example not having to pay a hefty deposit when you rent a vehicle. What's more, if something goes wrong, they know who to call to sort it out timeously.

Duty of care

Your travel agent would assist you in fulfilling your duty of care responsibility to your staff. No matter the size of your business, you have a legal duty to mitigate potential risks for your staff as much as possible when travelling.

Strategic insights

Helping you manage your travel strategically and proactively is one of the travel agent's main goals. Your travel agent can assess travel patterns and behaviour within your company and make suggestions on how to improve your travel policy and generate additional savings.

"Travel management is a specialised business function that balances employee needs with corporate goals, financial and otherwise.

"If you spend budget on travel, it makes sense for you to track that spend and improve your control over it. You should be benefiting from negotiated discounts and the expertise of a travel expert so that you can save time and money and make that travel spend work harder for you, your travellers and your company," says Potgieter.

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