

Winds of change: Why now is a good time to relook your travel policy

With 2023 fast approaching, many organisations are looking ahead to a new year and new opportunities. ESG (environmental, social and governance) obligations are top of mind, with issues around sustainability and diversity, equality and inclusion driving broader strategy for many businesses around the globe. Companies are still grappling with new ways of working - not to mention navigating the current economic environment.



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In other words, there is a lot going on. And while companies have started implementing new hybrid work policies (which not only offer flexibility, but also support diversity, equity, and inclusion) as well as re-examining their sustainability efforts, many have yet to update their travel policy.

For Bonnie Smith, GM of FCM, this is the perfect time. "With RFP season upon us, it's a great opportunity to relook your organisation's approach to travel. Whether it's exploring new tech, relooking travel behaviour or integrating sustainability in a more meaningful and measurable way, now is the time."

According to Smith, while your travel policy should always reflect the values and regulations contained in all company policies, implementing a new travel policy requires staff buy-in to succeed, which is often trickier than it sounds.

"New business travel policies often come up against stiff resistance, either because people are comfortable with how things 'have always been done' or travellers have got used to booking how (and where) they like. But the truth is the world is changing, and travel policies have to move with the times."

So, how can you ensure the process is as smooth as possible without ruffling too many feathers along the way? Enter change management.

Smith has the following tips for effective change management when it comes to your travel policy:

Consult, track and report

A travel management company (TMC) will work closely with you to analyse your current travel policy, identify gaps and opportunities, and provide guidance on what a 'best-in-market' travel programme could look like for your organisation. This includes benchmarking against similar-size organisations within your industry.

"Of course, you can't change what you can't measure," says Smith. "Make sure your TMC makes it easy to measure – and track – policy compliance and important travel programme KPIs."

Consider all your employees

We've never had a more diverse or multi-generational workforce. All with different needs, expectations, priorities and values. Research conducted by the global HR consulting and recruitment agency Robert Half, shows that communication skills, the ability to adapt to change, and tech skills are the top three areas where generations differ the most in the workplace. Here a collaborative, flexible approach is key.

"Encourage open dialogue with all your travellers, and work with your TMC to anticipate issues and propose solutions. For example, LGBTQ+ travellers need to feel comfortable and safe on the road, which means a thorough pre-travel risk assessment – and the flexibility to say no to certain destinations," says Smith.

Another example? Consider a 'blended tech' approach to help bridge the generational divide. In other words, acknowledge the importance of human interaction (i.e., between the traveller and agent or consultant) in travel booking – while providing tech for those who are comfortable using an OBT or booking platform.

Communicate your vision

A common cause of traveller friction is a poorly communicated rationale for change. And it's easy to avoid. Involve your team, discuss policy changes openly and often, and develop training on new booking systems and procedures. Whether your goals are around creating efficiencies; spend reduction; reporting and visibility; health and wellbeing; traveller safety; or sustainability, change should never come as a surprise.

"Remember, no matter how practical or necessary, changes to your business travel programme will impact individuals in your organisation. Encouraging their input throughout the process will help to ease apprehension that can arise during this time of change," says Smith.

Lean on your travel partners

Will any of your travellers incur a loss in status or rewards as a result of your new policy? Leverage your TMC's network to compensate for lost benefits due to the changes, this can take the form of perks such as airline lounge passes, individual discounts for higher booking classes, or even free upgrades.

Identify and recruit change evangelists

Having a clear and accessible policy that is widely shared is important, but so is having key people in place to ensure that the changes are successful in the long term.

Monitor the process

After implementing your new policy, you need to focus on driving compliance. Work with your TMC to track progress against goals, identify areas of non-compliance and develop strategies to improve compliance.

"Behaviour change comes down to leaders leading by example, providing tools and support, and encouraging employees to participate in the change," Smith says.

Don't get too comfortable

According to Smith, your travel policy should never be a static document as people, trends and technology change all the time.

"Create a culture in which change is embraced and communicated as a catalyst for improvement," says Smith. "You should review your travel policies on a regular basis. Ensure that your employees have a platform to provide constructive feedback on your travel programme so that when change does occur, it is relevant and effective.

"Transparency throughout the process is essential. A successful travel programme relies on a strong, flexible and people-first travel policy."

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