

Direction of travel – How to write your corporate travel strategy



It's time to create a plan that ensures your travel programme aligns with your business's overall strategic goals.

Whether a full-time or part-time role in your organisation, managing travel is a very time-consuming undertaking. Solving the questions and problems of individual travellers, making sure you are finding the best hours, gathering and analysing data – all these and many other issues can suck up your available time and leave you firefighting from day to day instead of taking the longer view about why you are managing employee travel in the first place.

That's why, according to TravelpoolEurope managing director Søren Schødt, it's well worth taking a little time out to write a travel programme strategy. "Writing a strategy makes your direction much clearer," Schødt says. "Once you have created the document, you can revisit everything you do to validate that all your actions are helping move your programme in the direction you have defined."

Another important reason for having a written strategy is that it helps win the support of senior management and other important stakeholders within the organisation. "A strategy document provides an opening for a dialogue with those stakeholders," says Carol Randall, founder and managing director of Sage Travel Consulting. Schødt agrees. "If you set out the benefits of the programme and the challenges, then you can explain to senior management where investment is needed to gain those benefits," he says.

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How long should the document be?

Short, especially if you want to capture senior management attention. And keep it simple too. TravelpoolEurope's own strategy sets out 19 goals across just two pages, using language that any non-travel professional can understand.

According to Randall, a strategy can be outlined in "as few as 3-4 PowerPoint slides." However, at companies where the travel spend is high enough to warrant employing a full-time (or nearly full-time) travel manager, it is more usual to have a longer version as well, setting out greater detail for the benefit of everyone in the business with a direct or indirect travel supervisory role.

What should the strategy contain?

Above all, says Randall, the primary purpose of the travel strategy is to "align the travel programme with company strategy." For example, what is the balance within the organisation between cost control and recruitment/retention priorities? At times, levers such as policy and supplier relations may have to be adjusted to place more emphasis on saving the company money. On the other hand, if the fight for top talent has become a dominant boardroom issue, then policy and supplier agreements may need to be shifted in a different direction. "If you haven't got the appropriate policy, it could affect whether top candidates take a job or not," says Randall.

Randall suggests taking the lead for the travel strategy from the general company mission statement, which is normally summarised in four or five bullet points. If the strategy you write demonstrably supports the stated mission, then it is probably on the right lines.

The document should also give some headline pointers to how the programme will support the defined strategic goals. Schødt points to four key issues worth covering in particular:

- Ensuring access to the content travellers need to book.
- Ensuring access to data that will drive key functions like monitoring policy compliance, and expense and insurance reporting.
- Ensuring travellers follow the managed travel programme.
- Ensuring costs will be controlled.

This can be taken a step further by setting out the key performance indicators which will reveal whether the programme is proving successful or not. KPIs, says Randall, need to be measurable, controllable and have a clear connection to overall company strategy.

How often should I revise the strategy?

"Every two years is about right to ensure your goals remain relevant and reflect developments in technology," says Schødt. Randall broadly agrees but notes that the strategy may need to be reviewed more urgently if overtaken by events, such as a restructure of the business (for example reorganising by business unit instead of geographically), expansion into new markets or major changes in the travel industry.

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The TravelpoolEurope perspective – An exercise well worth doing

Writing a travel strategy may sound like another burden on the time of people who are already busy enough, but it is time well invested. Putting something in writing can really help test whether your current travel management activities are coherent and serving the true needs of the business. You will see very quickly not only what you should be doing that you aren't doing today, but also what you are doing that isn't really necessary. Getting rid of or modifying unnecessary tasks will ultimately save much more time in the long term.