

Travel plans dancing to a new tune?

New research suggests that, as a travel plan matures, there is a shift away from planning conditions as the main motivation to one of environment and CSR.



They say that research into travel plans is a bit like watching Irish dancing, you study them for ages looking for a pattern.

That could be true of Helen Roby's recent research into the subject, indicating that travel plans are beginning to dance to a different tune.

Helen, a student with the Open University, surveyed a number of travel plans as part of a larger PhD project and found that travel plans are starting to link into internal organisations goals, rather than addressing external regulatory requirements.

"I think that the travel plan has come of age but has not totally matured," says Helen.

"But there has been a changing pattern to their evolution and a shift away from the original drive merely to comply with planning regulations.

"Now, the main motivation appears to be a desire to align travel plans within the environmental debate and to make them a fully-fledged part of a commitment to corporate social responsibility (CSR)."

Helen, whose project is part-sponsored by consultants JMP, highlights differences in definition to illustrate her point.

"It's intriguing to compare the Department for Transport and Transport for London definitions of a workplace travel plan," says Helen. "The DfT describes as plan as '...a package of measures aimed at promoting sustainable travel within an organisation, with an emphasis on reducing reliance on single occupancy car travel'.

"But TfL has a different emphasis which says 'travel planning is an effective business management tool which can be used to generate cost savings, lending companies a competitive advantage, and which has additional benefits for the environment and the health of employees'."

So, is the DfT definition too narrow, or that of TfL too optimistic? And, as Helen's research suggests, is the motivation for travel plans evolving?

Original motivation

- Planning 68 per cent
- Congestion/Access 16 per cent

Current motivation

- Planning 12 per cent
- CSR 28 per cent
- Parking 16 per cent
- Business growth 8 per cent
- Recruitment/Retention 8 per cent

Helen's results clearly show that as a travel plan matures, there is a shift away from planning conditions as the main motivation to one of environment and CSR. Travel plans are beginning to appear within CSR reports under an environmental heading.

However, Helen says there is often there is confusion between commuter travel and business travel. "This may indicate a lack of understanding of what a travel plan is, or a potential to link the two together, as undoubtedly it is easier to argue the case for measures that reduce business travel. Business travel is a recognised business cost, but the commute to work rarely is."

According to Helen, the problem lies in linking a travel plan into the environmental agenda.

"The result is travel plans become a way of displaying an organisations environmental credentials, rather than delivering quantifiable benefits, and important issues of accessibility may become subsidiary."

Helen says the research show that a small proportion of organisations are developing travel plans differently, using them to grow their business or while others create a competitive advantage by developing them to become a more attractive employer.

But Helen maintains that the HR profession needs to be more involved if companies are to benefit fully by introducing travel plans. "If travel plans evolve to



become a fundamental part of strategies like accessibility and recruitment, reduced congestion could improve staff wellbeing, and new recruitment areas can be opened up, increasing the depth of the labour market. This requires a more proactive mindset from HR, but will also benefit the organisation as a whole."

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So, should travel plans focus on benefiting commercial objectives or should they make commuters "green"?

"There seem to be two major problems with the way travel plans are developing," reveals Helen. "Linking travel plans into the environmental agenda, though laudable, at the moment offers limited quantifiable benefit, and may just end up being a fad that, with a change in management, could disappear.

"On the other hand, linking the travel plan into recruitment and access strategies to support growth, though more tangible, appears to be poorly understood, so receiving only limited support.

"Ultimately, travel plans should not just be a glorified car parking management scheme, or a way to bolster environmental credentials, but about supporting key organisational goals and enabling an organisation to work more efficiently."

For more information on the research, Helen's contact details can be found by visiting <http://design.open.ac.uk/robby/index.htm>