



# Bleisure Visitors Opportunities for Every Community

## **Business Travel Is Important to Every Community**

Readers from small towns and rural communities may look at that line strangely, but indeed, business travel is important to every community seeking more tourism in a number of areas and there is a number of ways it can be approached.

- **Business Travelers** - travel to a community where the businesses they interact with are located. Even if a community does not have these business travelers, they could be traveling to a neighboring community and still present an opportunity to attract.
- **Bleisure Travelers** - at least half or more of business travelers now combine leisure activities with their business trips and often add a day or days to explore.
- **Laptop Luggers** - these working professionals can work from anywhere with effective internet connections.
- **Meeting Travelers** - even small communities can accommodate some level of meetings.
- **Conference Travelers** - normally local hotels can accommodate small and specialized conferences.

Business travel took a major hit during Covid and many things changed in the business travel arena appear to have changed forever. As of the end of 2022, business travel was still 30% below 2019 levels and is not forecast to recover until 2028, if then. Businesses determined they could communicate in other ways than in person when things were locked down. Now that Covid has for the most part passed, the communication approaches established during Covid are still being used. As the end of Covid approached, experts predicted there would be “a return

to the office” and a resurgence of business travel. Not only did the return happen very unevenly or not at all, many workers expressed that they are less productive in the office than working remotely. Many companies also saw less value in business travel after they got along without it for two years. Thus, many of the workers that worked remotely during Covid are still working remotely and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. That situation, however, does not preclude opportunities to attract these travelers to various destinations because small and medium sized companies, traditionally nimbler and more innovative, are driving the business travel recovery that is happening.

A second, and much less recognized reason for the curtailment of business travel, especially for small and medium sized companies, is cost. When organizations realized that they did not need staff on the road all the time, they recognized a level of cost savings. The average business trip in 2023 cost right at \$1,300, with an average daily cost of \$325 a day, which represents an increase of nearly 25% over the past five years. Those increases mean that businesses have had to increase their corporate travel budgets by 25% due to the additional costs of travel, that was not necessarily accompanied by better business results in return for the additional expenditures. About a quarter of business travel costs go for airfare, with lodging accounting for more than a third.

In addition to rising costs, there are also additional safety concerns for business travelers, the human cost of delayed flights, and weather disasters that disrupt business travel plans. 83% of female business travelers have particular safety concerns, even though nearly 80% of business travelers are men. Half of all business travelers are between 35 and 54, and nearly 65% have at least a bachelor's

degree. The average business traveler takes 6.8 trips a year and Millennials increase that number to 7.4 trips per year. 83% of business travelers believe their business travel is a positive experience and improves their overall job satisfaction.

Technology is being used to facilitate business travel to a large extent. Nearly 70% book their travel online and over 50% use their smartphone to check in. However, even though 57% of business travelers want a single app to log their expenses, only a quarter believe the corporate booking tool they are required to use does a good job.

If your community does not have regular business travelers, seek out businesses in nearby locations that do, and request the opportunity to make materials about exploring your community available at their facilities. Request the same privilege at hotels in nearby communities as well.

### **Bleisure Travelers**

Blending business and leisure in the same trip is not new, and the approach had begun gaining steam even before Covid. Convention goers often added a day or two to their trips to other parts of the country, and in fact 63% of bleisure trips begin with attendance at a conference. Nearly 50% take place surrounding an external meeting and 42% are part of a sales trip. The concept is so appealing that approximately 60% of all business trips in the United States now include a leisure component and now nearly 60% of companies have a policy in place for staff to extend business trips with vacation days. Taking advantage of this, right at 40% of bleisure trips are extended for two nights, 30% for three nights, and nearly 20% for

four nights. Hilton has seen the length of stay of business travelers increased by 15% over 2019.

Interestingly, about 35% of bleisure travelers have a companion during their trip, and right at the same number visitor family or friends while in a destination.

Almost 90% regard this travel as an important part of their career development, and 40% of staff who engage in bleisure travel actively seek job opportunities that include travel. Many are open to sacrificing other benefits for the opportunity to travel.

On average, these travelers who take an average of seven trips a year earn right at \$80K annually and work in companies with an average of 950 employees. Just over 40% are middle management, while 30% are more entry level. The rest are C-Suite staff. Ironically, nearly 60% of bleisure travelers have children at home. Nearly 40% of business travelers in the South extended their trips, nearly 25% in the Northeast, 20% in the Midwest and only 17% in the West. Motivations for bleisure travel vary widely:

- 46% I can bring loved ones with me.
- 46% It makes the trip more fun.
- 44% Travel to places that would otherwise not be visited.
- 44% I can conserve vacation time.
- 44% I feel more in control of my work.
- 43% It's a destination where I like to spend my time
- 43% Fares are less expensive due to flexible timing.
- 43% I can visit family and friends more often.
- 43% Cost savings because employer picks up a portion.

- 43% I can take longer trips.
- 41% I can spend more time traveling.
- 40% I can travel more frequently.
- 38% It was a new destination I wanted to see
- 37% I can earn more reward points.
- 34% It's a less expensive way to take a vacation.
- 34% I needed time away from home and work
- 31% I wanted to visit friends or family
- 18% I wanted to attend a cultural or sports event

A portion of business travelers choose to stay in the same accommodations as they occupy for business due to convenience (71%), location (57%) and price (48%). Those who chose to stay at a different location for the leisure portion of their trip did so for reasons of location (49%), price (42%), and convenience (38%).

### **The Laptop Luggers**

A whole new class of business travelers has emerged as businesses have finally come to grips with the fact that some workers who chose to work remotely during Covid plan to continue for the foreseeable future. Not only do these workers spend time in communities across the nation when they work, spending their money on accommodations, food, and other necessities, nearly 40% of laptop luggers, added between 3-6 days to their trip to accommodate both work and leisure. Nearly 20% indicated adding a week or more, increasing their travel budgets on average nearly 30%. Even if there was not a combination of work and leisure, nearly 40% of business trips span a weekend.

These business travelers represent a lot of visitors who have sprung themselves from the 9 to 5, to work remotely some portion of the time and visit new places while they do. Small communities are the perfect location for these plans and many companies are even encouraging remote working combined with travel, with stays in local Airbnbs. In fact, vacation rentals that offer all the comforts of home and a place to prepare meals, are the perfect location for the laptop luggers. This signifies a huge opportunity for lodging properties to tap into longer stays, even in low season.

Since this trend is not expected to subside for the foreseeable future, it one of the most important opportunities that smaller communities have available to attract business travelers. Many take vacation time for one week and spend a second week at the destination working remotely. Or they explore at another destination between two business trips. A Deloitte survey indicates that one-third intend to add three to six days for leisure and exploration.

Communities seeking to serve these visitors must identify suitable properties with:

- A quiet and comfortable place to work within the accommodations, yet away from the rest of the traveling party, if accompanied by others;
- Fast and reliable WiFi;
- Convenient access to healthy meals and fitness equipment; and,
- The ability to reschedule activities and accommodations reservations if work responsibilities change.

## **Meetings and Conferences**

In addition to remote workers, meetings and conferences represent a significant opportunity for communities of all sizes, since a meeting is defined as “a gathering of 10 or more participants for a minimum of four hours in a contracted venue.” This illustrates that virtually every community can attract and serve smaller and specialized meetings and smaller conferences.

- 62% of meetings are conferences and trade shows
- 59% of meetings are internal meetings and events
- 55% of meetings are training and workshops
- 46% of meetings are seminars or webinars
- 33% of meetings are fundraisers and galas
- 32% of meetings are sales events and road shows
- 17% of meetings are incentive gatherings or retreats
- 16% of meetings are other than the above

A full 21% of the 1.83 million meetings and conferences held each year hosted between 100 and just under 500 attendees. And another 11% hosted less than 100 participants. An additional 12% hosted under 1000 participants. This represents a tremendous opportunity for smaller destinations with hotels that can accommodate meeting participants, since 85% of meetings were held at locations with lodging.

According to Skift Meetings, 78% of meeting and conferences are incorporating more technology, and 75% are arranged within shorter planning times.

Unfortunately, nearly 80% of conference sponsors are finding it harder to attract attendees, and 73% reported lower attendance. The result is that 70% of meetings



and conferences now provide an option to attend virtually. Since all arrangements have higher costs, nearly 60% of meeting planners believe they are receiving less value for the dollar, and forced to work within tighter budgets.

80% of meeting and conference attendees indicate they attend because they prefer the in-person brainstorming and collaboration that meetings afford. 91% of the organizations holding meetings and conferences measure success by attendee satisfaction, 61% measure success by determining how closely the objectives were achieved, and 60% measure success based on staying within budget.

The destinations at which meetings and conferences are held are chosen based on:

- (1) capacity,
- (2) attractiveness,
- (3) safety and security,
- (4) sector expertise, and
- (5) the level of flights that are available

The actual properties that meetings and conferences are held at are chosen by:

- (1) capacity,
- (2) reputation,
- (3) food and beverage quality,
- (4) ease of access, and
- (5) brand

The destination the meeting or conference is being held at is the number two factor that determines attendance with 78% of attendees reporting that the destination factors into their decision, and 20%-30% indicated that it is the deciding factor.

With the intent to increase the probability of a decision to attend:

82% of destinations provided printed destination guidebooks for attendees,  
79% made the local events calendar available,  
75% provided digital marketing materials,  
74% provided comprehensive hotel and meeting space information,  
70% provided dedicated destination experts on site,  
60% worked directly with meeting planners to select the most appropriate hotel,  
58% assisted in the selection of other needed vendors and suppliers, and  
55% provide a printed meeting planning guide

Many destination marketers are also enhanced services to expand the attention to the attributes of their destination as a way to attract a larger audience. They are developing customized electronic promotions including equipping potential attendees with complete information about what is available to see and do at their location on a dedicated website. Others are providing on-site assistance from DMMO staff to encourage exploration of the area while meeting attendees are onsite. Still others provide gift baskets filled with locally produced items, preview videos of the destination, a give away raffle for larger items, special ticketing, discount coupons, and other value added services for attendees who visit attractions in the community.

In today's digital world, even smaller communities can compete in this arena by delivering with complete information for meeting and conference attendees, and for decision makers who choose the destination, to take advantage of the fact that the destination is a very important part of any attendee decision to attend.