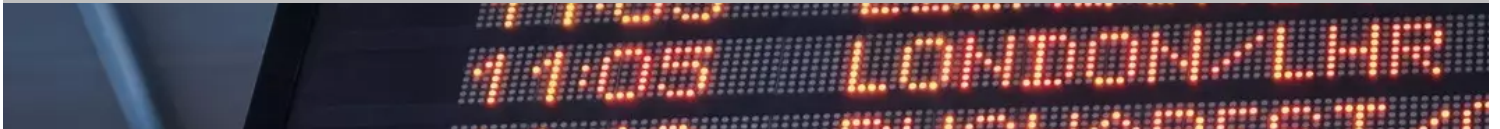

AVIATION, TRAVEL AND TOURISM

Business travel won't be more sustainable post-COVID unless companies take action

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- Employee travel is one of the greatest contributors to corporate carbon emissions, yet research shows most firms aren't taking real action to make such programs any greener.
- For many companies, sustainability programmes just feel too hard to do, yet while sustainability is a commitment, it's not as time or cost prohibitive as it used to be.
- To truly begin mitigating our carbon footprint in transport, sustainable behaviour needs to be widely adopted in organizations and deeply integrated into how we work and travel.

When we talk about why the transportation sector generates such a prominent share of [greenhouse gas emissions](#), we tend to point to its most conspicuous villains: private jets, Big Oil, gridlock. To combat climate change, we encourage consumers to carpool and urge our legislators to invest in clean energy. These are commendable efforts, to be clear. But the discussion often leaves one of the biggest climate actors on the table.

Employee travel is one of the business world's greatest [contributors](#) to carbon emissions. That's due to a few factors. One, because of the prevalence of business travel by air and car, especially in countries where rail travel isn't an option. Two,

compared to your average vacationer. For example, in 2019 one global software company racked up **146,000 metric tons** of CO2 emissions – akin to the amount produced by 17,500 US homes over the course of a year.

Have you read?

- **[Business travellers are ready to take off again - if certain conditions are met - says survey](#)**
 - **[Decarbonising aviation requires a transition to sustainable fuel. Here's how governments can help.](#)**
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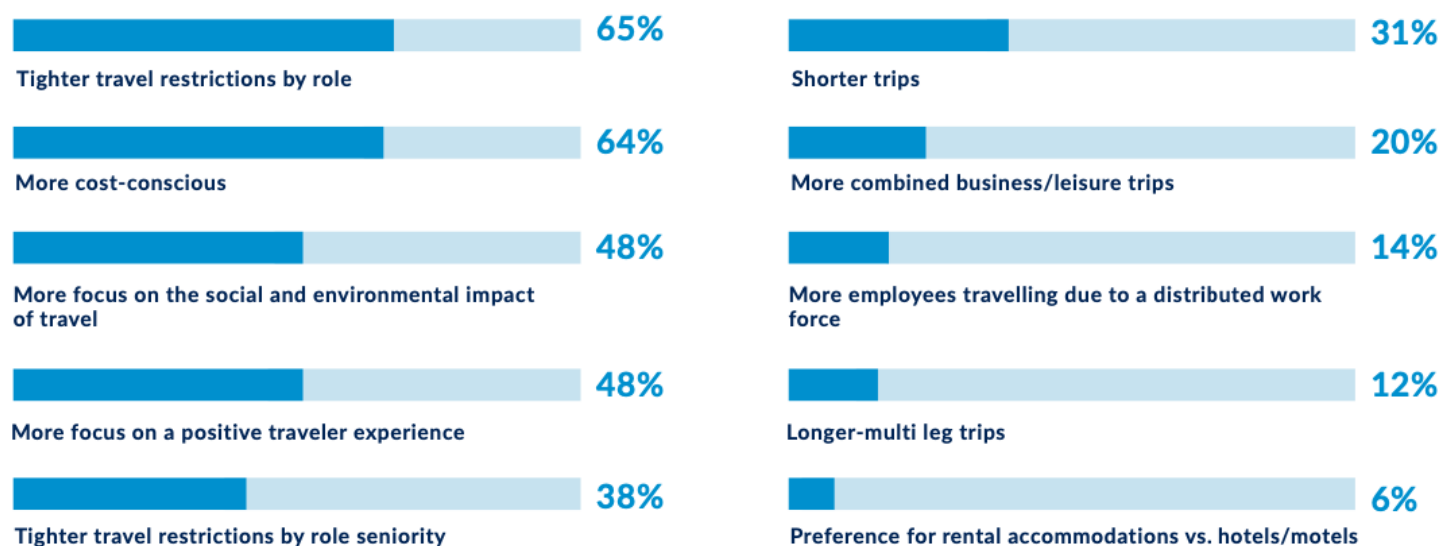
When the pandemic postponed commuting and travel, total global carbon emissions **dropped 7%**. Of course, it's easy to reduce your footprint when there's no reason to leave the home office. Now, with all the buzz around the reopening of travel corridors and return to the office, the question becomes: what sustainability lessons from the global shutdown will companies take with them?

A **report** conducted by the Global Business Travel Association (GBTA) found that companies say that they want to make their travel programmes more sustainable post-pandemic. Over the last year and a half, they've been under increasing pressure from **investors** to report on environmental, social and governance (ESG) metrics, and from **consumers** wanting to use more environmentally-friendly modes of transportation.

However, the report also shows that most companies aren't taking any real action to make their travel programmes any greener.

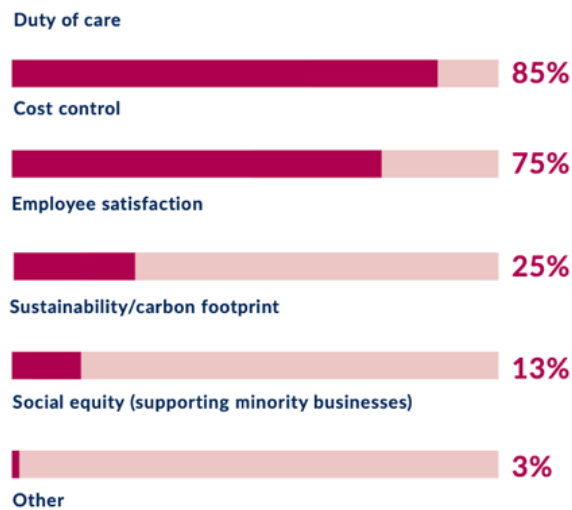
According to GBTA research on travel managers in the US and Canada, about half of companies expect to focus more on the social and environmental impact of their business travel programmes post-pandemic.

How will business travel most likely change post-pandemic?



Almost half of companies said there will be more focus on the social and environmental impact of their post-pandemic business travel programmes. Image: Emburse

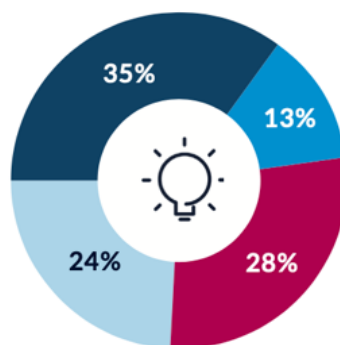
Even so, only one in four organizations consider their “carbon footprint” to be a top priority. It pales in comparison to other return-to-travel concerns, such as cost control and duty of care.



Only 25% of companies put social or environmental impact in their top 3 priorities. Image: Emburse

On top of – and perhaps because of – these competing priorities, companies struggle to implement meaningful sustainability initiatives. While six out of 10 companies have a sustainability policy, only three out of 10 have a policy that includes business travel.

Do companies have a business travel sustainability program?



- Do not know
- Our company does not have a formal sustainability program
- Our company has a formal sustainability program but it does not include business travel
- Our company has a formal sustainability program that includes business travel

Only a third of companies have a sustainability programme that includes business travel. Image: Emburse

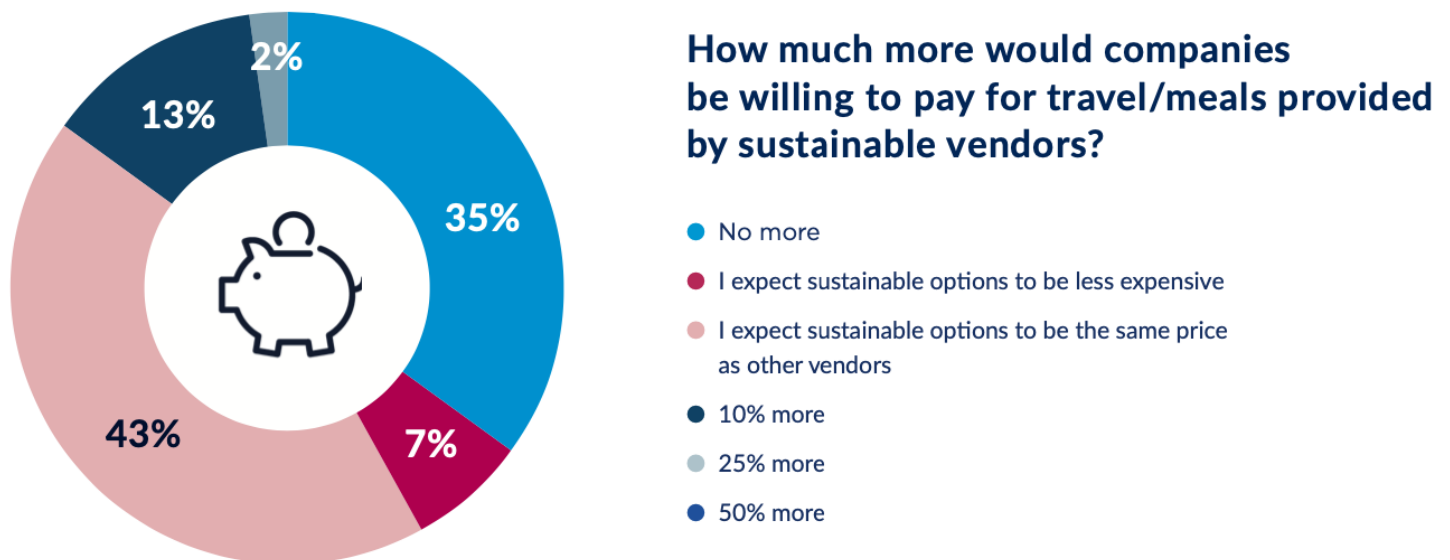
footprint of travel (the most popular effort, included in 58% of policies). Less than a quarter of companies have rolled out any other initiative, including behaviour-based change. For example, 19% mandate or encourage sustainable transportation or accommodation options, and a mere 7% incentivise employees to choose these options.

Are travel programs taking sustainability measures? by annual travel spend (pre-pandemic)

● Less than 10 million ● 10 million to 30 million ● 30+ million ● overall



Few companies (22%) take a vendor's sustainability posture into consideration when making purchase decisions. Even if they did, it would be unlikely to influence them. The vast majority of organizations – 85% – are unwilling to pay more to work with a sustainable vendor, and just 2% are willing to pay more than a 10% price premium for more sustainable travel options.



Companies are only willing to pay the same or less for sustainable vendors. Image: Emburse

Corporate programmes at a crossroads

One of the most striking takeaways from this research is the balance of antithetical priorities. Today's organizations want to reduce their environmental impact. Yet they're unwilling to invest in partnerships with greener travel providers. They have sustainability policies, but they don't focus on the kind of company-wide behavioural changes that would have a real impact. They're worried about cost control, yet seem to overlook the rising price of carbon, both in terms of oil prices and [carbon offsets](#).

a separate box they can tick once they've hit other corporate targets. The more sustainability is compartmentalised, the easier it is to push these efforts until next quarter... or indefinitely.

Perhaps the simplest conclusion I can draw is that for many companies, sustainability programmes just feel too hard to implement. Too expensive. Too involving. With too many competing factors.

Sustainability is a commitment, to be sure, but it's not as time or cost prohibitive as it used to be. Every organization, large and small, can introduce behavioural measures that make climate action a part of their culture. For instance, you can give your employees individual or team "carbon" budgets, pointing them to carbon-neutral transportation options once they've used up their allowance. You might set a rule that no one jumps on a plane for a single meeting – that kind of initiative costs zero dollars to implement, and will likely end up saving a lot of travel time and money. If you do have room in your budget, consider shifting a portion of your travel spend to green businesses and incentivising employees to patronise sustainable vendors.

DISCOVER

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Once you've successfully transformed sustainable behaviour into habit, then you can begin to evolve your programme into a formal policy with more advanced initiatives — such as using carbon analysis to make more strategic travel decisions.

and why we travel. Now is the perfect moment to reassess our travel programmes for environmental impact. When the economy reopens fully, many companies will want to underline their commitment to customers with face-to-face time, and employees will be hungry to see their favourite co-workers. There's no question that in-person meetings remain critical to company culture and the nature of good business. The question is whether we will decide to re-enter the world in a more responsible way.

On the road again

A single company deciding to launch a sustainable business travel programme won't solve climate change. Neither will the occasional executive who switches to flying economy. But both of these examples would mark progress.

For the corporate world, "doing our part" to combat climate change will require a culture shift. To truly begin mitigating our carbon footprint on the transportation sector, sustainable behaviour needs to be widely adopted among organizations and deeply integrated into the way we work and travel. At this moment in history, with business travel at a global reset point, we have a tremendous opportunity to pave the road ahead.



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