

Corporate road warriors

By Stuart Crainer

The characteristic that most distinguishes today's executives is not their technological sophistication but the amount of time they spend on the move. To observe the real impact of globalisation, you only have to walk around an international airport. Among the crowds of tourists, an army of road warriors and corporate executives march red-eyed across the world's time zones. Global markets mean constant global travel.

Management consultants are among the most frenetic frequent fliers. They routinely cross continents for a face-to-face meeting and then return home. They point to the importance of a personal contact. For a profession built on rational analysis, it seems illogical. Face-to-face meetings when one of the parties is exhausted and jet-lagged seem unlikely to benefit anyone. But most consultants act as if e-mail and satellite links had never been invented. For the masters of logic, only the face-to-face experience will do.

The question is why all the technological gadgetry has failed to make a dent in the amount of business travel? The answer seems to lie with a simple statistic. More than 90 percent of human communication is nonverbal (some studies put it as high as 93 percent). Facial expressions, body language, eye contact - these are all key conduits. Without them you can't get past first phase. It's tough to bond over the Internet. 'Most of us still want face-to-face contact,' says Cary Cooper, professor of organisational psychology and health at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST). 'A lot of people rely on their personalities to persuade others,' he says. 'That doesn't come out in e-mails, and video conferencing is limiting. They may also want to influence people outside of the meeting. A lot of lobbying goes out before and after meetings. That's why eyeball-to-eyeball is so important. We still don't fully trust the technology even though it's been around for a while. We prefer to talk behind closed doors.'

We also read body language to pick up the atmosphere, he says. 'We walk into a meeting and pick up the feel of what the other people are thinking. We watch how Y reacts to what X is saying. You can't do that by videoconference. Most of us don't have the self-confidence to believe we can build the sorts of relationships we need with clients and suppliers down the wire. Business travel won't decrease for that reason. It's a shame because at the moment we're burning out an awful lot of people.'

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