

3 New Trends that Should be on Every Corporate Travel Manager's Radar

As the return of business travel picks up steam, brands must adapt and innovate to meet the speed of evolution. Given the rise of blended work and leisure trips, hotels are uniquely positioned to meet the demands of companies and their employees through collaboration, creativity, and diversification to shape the industry's future.

A new chapter of business travel is emerging as employees return to the road, companies tap into current flexible working preferences, employees desire to reconnect with each other, and companies focus on building authentic company cultures.

Hilton has evolved with its customers' new wants and needs, reimagining areas like extended blended stays, communal spaces, loyalty rewards, contactless technologies, and beyond. And as companies continue to assess changing internal needs and goals, Hilton is consistently pursuing new ways to best align with business travel and meet the changing demands of travel buyers, corporate travel managers, and travelers themselves.

SkiftX spoke with Hilton sales leaders to explore the emerging trends that are top of mind for business travelers and how they will carry into the year ahead.

BUSINESS TRAVEL IS CENTRAL TO BUILDING COMPANY CULTURE

As business travel regains momentum, companies are reminded of the importance of in-person engagement – whether with clients or among employees – and how that can improve the health and wellness of an organization.

“As people have moved to remote work and corporate locations have shifted, there is significant demand to bring people together. It is core to company culture, employee engagement, and retention,” said Christiane Cabot Bini, Hilton’s Executive Director, Business Travel Sales, Hilton Worldwide Sales.

With this rising demand to bring people together, corporate travelers are creating travel itineraries that include longer stays so they can accomplish more per trip and blended business and leisure activities that can be customized and expanded. “Business travelers are seeking more balance and seamless, stress-free experiences. They want to stay with purposeful brands that resonate with their values. Hilton has done a lot of work to address these needs, from innovations around wellness and partnerships – such as our new program with Peloton® – to technology and the environment,” added Cabot Bini.

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This need to connect has impacted not only business travel but small meetings as well. The variety in meeting styles, size, and source have evolved as hotels cater to business organizations' changing needs. "Companies are realizing that they need to bring their team members together to drive engagement beyond digital means, as it does not create the same ethos of community as human connection does. We're seeing an increase in requests for a mix of business and downtime options to make sure that there is enough networking time," said Marcus Jansa, Senior Director, Hilton Worldwide Sales, Europe. "We're thinking more creatively about congregating areas. There is a demand for more relaxed spaces with a more informal feel, and expanded options for smaller groups of people, so we have to approach how we procure the right design and atmosphere in both meeting and common spaces differently."

"We are also seeing a rise in local-based and nonresidential team meeting requests," he added. "For example, companies utilize our hotels as their primary meeting space to reduce corporate office real estate costs in key locations like London, Amsterdam, Paris, Madrid, and primary cities across the Middle East."

Hilton's diverse brand category options have become an important differentiator in this regard. The breadth of its lifestyle offerings presents best-suited experiences that can be adapted to what travel buyers and corporate travel managers want from their hotel partners today.

Hilton collaborates with its business travel clients to create innovative, unique stays that meet their budget and value goals. "Many teams are coming together for the first time post-pandemic, so the hotel experience must be seamless. They

are looking for supplier partners to be an extension of their team and help guide them to solutions that fit their unfolding travel needs," said Shawn Parker, Hilton's Executive Director, Strategic Accounts and Corporate Group Sales, Hilton Worldwide Sales.

He continued, "There has also been increased exploration of more brand categories, including Canopy by Hilton, Motto by Hilton, and Curio by Hilton, which have a 'neighborhood feel' or more of a boutique experience, which can appeal to travelers and groups adding on pre- or post-leisure travel."

LOYALTY IS CONVERGING WITH CORPORATE TRAVEL PROGRAMS

Hotel loyalty programs have evolved from previously prioritized corporate programs to collaborative, value-add experiences for companies and employees. Beyond classic point systems, programs like Hilton Honors have taken the merging of business and leisure into account, becoming more flexible with multiple earning and redemption opportunities.

"In some ways, there is a paradigm shift for travel managers across the entire ecosystem to think differently about loyalty programs and all of the ways in which they can benefit from them," said Parker. "Companies can drive greater loyalty penetration for travelers, additional currency through earned points, and compliance and cost avoidance by including Hilton in a preferred partner program."

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“Those who are embracing the value of Hilton’s loyalty offers – from upgrades and digital keys to redeeming Hilton Honors Points for once-in-a-lifetime experiences – are seeing the overall experience and convenience benefits these perks offer. The ability to earn and use business travel points for one’s personal family and leisure time in the future can also be seen as an added incentive,” he said.

By integrating perks into multiple consumer touchpoints and enhancing personalization in the process, corporate travel rewards have led to elevated experiences, increased traveler satisfaction, and even the potential for additional benefits in recruitment and retention efforts. A hotel loyalty program can successfully work in tandem with corporate plans, boosting overall advantages and optimizing travel time, such as offering exclusive features extended only to Hilton Honors members.

“Loyalty programs can also support policy and travel managers’ broader objectives, including the rising focus around sustainability,” added Cabot Bini. “The Hilton Honors app Digital Key has already diverted approximately 125 tons of plastic from landfills. As we extend the app’s capabilities, our connected room technology helps create a personalized environment that is tremendously valuable in making people feel more comfortable, relaxed, and prepared for the business day ahead.”

BUSINESS TRAVELERS ARE STAYING LONGER

Travelers are now booking longer stays to make time away more constructive and multifaceted, which often involves both bundling more meetings and adding days for personal leisure. This shift not only provides an opportunity to think about lifestyle options and hotel spaces differently, but its impact on brand selection and balance of experiences must become more flexible and customizable.

“With the ‘bleisure’ trend, business is the priority, but people are adding an extra day or a weekend for themselves. We’re seeing longer lengths of stay – almost a day and a half longer on average,” said Cabot Bini. “These experiences allow employees to thrive, reinvent, and reinvigorate themselves. It is critically important, and companies are recognizing that.”

Travelers are also extending stays to cut back on the need for multiple business trips, which helps companies achieve environmental and carbon emission goals. As this increasingly becomes a focus for brands and employees alike, Hilton and its partners are working together to expand upon best practices and streamline overall services for efficiency.

“Sustainability has become a priority. We’re seeing businesses increasingly more concerned and forward-thinking in reducing their company’s carbon footprint, especially across Europe, the Middle East, and Africa,” said Jansa. “It is a key factor for Hilton and individuals, as well as for travel managers who are thinking about their programs’ carbon footprint and how they can track their company’s efforts to further drive business travel consciousness.”

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This content was created collaboratively by Hilton and Skift’s branded content studio, SkiftX.