

Re-thinking



DRIVEN TO DESTRUCTION?

You might have expected that, in this networked and connected world, business travel would be reducing. Not so – and with some pretty serious consequences, as Sarah Joyce reveals.

Peter is an aspiring thirty-something, a regional sales manager for one of Britain's leading financial services companies. He regularly divides his time between his regional office in Bristol, the company head offices in London and Edinburgh, and the marketing team in Birmingham. He also has to visit intermediaries, other business contacts and company branches throughout the south-west of England, and attend frequent "networking" events.

Despite his normal hectic schedule, this week is different. It is quarter-end, which always means some late evenings finalizing the reports, and – on top of everything else – Peter's boss has asked him to deliver a presentation at a prestigious annual industry conference in Harrogate. This is potentially a huge opportunity to showcase his talents in front of the industry top-brass – and his chief executive to boot. But it is also a tremendous additional pressure over and above his daily work schedule.

Late on Thursday evening, Peter slaves over the presentation with his usual fastidious attention to detail. He has decided to drive – he might have taken the train had the meeting been in London, but travelling by rail to Harrogate would have required three changes. Loath to be away from his young family overnight, he decides to leave his Shepton Mallet home at 5am on Friday morning for the 250-mile drive. This will get him there in plenty of time for the 10am start ... road conditions permitting.

The conference goes well, and Peter's 3pm presentation is a success. Elated, he stays late to chat with his chief executive, and so it is 5pm before Peter sets off home. It's a dreadful journey – drizzling rain, slow Friday-evening traffic, and the motorway is packed. Then, it's all over ... dozing for a split second, Peter's car crashes and he's killed ...

MEETING WITHOUT MOVING

The next time you are called to a meeting at another location, or call others to a meeting, or plan a business trip, reflect for a moment:

- Is the meeting *really* necessary?
- Do so many people really have to go?
- Could the same outcome be achieved by telephone or video-conference, or with an intranet chat-room?
- If physical attendance is essential, could the meeting be deferred and combined with other necessary travel?
- Remember the strong statistical correlation between bad business decisions and executives tired out by travel.

And if after this reflection the travel still goes ahead, make sure that you allow sufficient time to recover. It is better – or, if you want to be cold-hearted, more profitable – to travel safely but slowly than not to arrive at all.

Whilst this is a fictitious story, the desperately sad reality is that it happens all too often in Britain.

We all share that human tendency to assume that road accidents happen to someone else, and that our business environment is not that pressured. Yes, we recognize the story but: “*I manage my work-load effectively*”; “*this can’t happen to me*”; “*my driving is better*”; “*I don’t drive when I’m tired*”; “*my boss wouldn’t do this to me*” – and so on.

But the hard facts simply don’t support these misplaced beliefs.

According to a government-commissioned report,¹ there are about 20 deaths and 270 serious injuries *each and every week* in Britain caused by “at work” business travel. This is not the commute to and from the office or factory, but travel that is demanded by the rigours and the routine of the job. To put this in perspective, in the last twelve months more people have died on Britain’s roads in the course of “at work” travel than American soldiers have been killed in action in Iraq.

New pressures

Today’s business is typified by the mantra of do more, faster, and better, with less. And it is frequently this mantra that exposes employees to the risks revealed by these horrendous statistics.² In the last thirty years, we’ve all witnessed the demise of the “job for life”. We have come to accept that business life is increasingly pressured, and that our bosses are always seeking more and more commitment from each of us. Business today is witnessing increasing peaks and troughs in the demand for product and services. This only serves to add pressure on our daily work régime. And every

personal performance review only reminds us of our vulnerability and – whether this is the reality or just phantom pressure – the review can feel as though it is questioning our very commitment to the job.

It is in this hot-house of business and personal pressures that the Meeting Without Moving Foundation (MWMF) has been formed. It is a not-for-profit organization that is conducting a sustained and high-profile campaign aimed wholly at reducing accidents

There are about 20 deaths and 270 serious injuries each and every week in Britain caused by “at work” business travel.

and saving lives across all British business sectors. Put succinctly, its aims are to promote a culture in which unnecessary business travel is recognized as irresponsible, undesirable and anti-social – and also counter-productive.

To secure its aims, MWMF is campaigning across all relevant government departments for changes in legislation. The foundation provides a range of aids and tools to companies large and small to help promote its aims in their organizations. Many campaign and industry groups, including RoSPA, the Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, Transport 2000 and the Institute of Directors, have already pledged their support for the foundation.³

It is beyond question that the ownership of *responsible* business travel belongs to all of us – in equal measures to employers, employees, and national and local government bodies.

So the next time you are due to travel across Britain for yet-another meeting, take a moment to ask yourself whether this roll of the dice is really necessary. At-work travel is a risky business. □

Sarah Joyce is Communications Director at the Meeting Without Moving Foundation.

¹ The 2001 report by the Work-Related Road Safety Task Group, chaired by Sir Richard Dykes, available on the ROSPA website – www.rospace.org.uk/morr/information/so_far.htm.

² Nowhere has this been demonstrated more publicly and tragically than at NASA. In the mid-1990s, with its future threatened by budget cuts, it had been proud of its informal reworking – faster, better, cheaper – of the Olympic motto. But the Congressional inquiry into the Columbia disaster concluded that the root cause was the funding constraints that required the agency to try to achieve its lofty goals with ever-reducing resources. When dedicated staff try to get round budget cuts by working longer and longer hours, for example, catastrophe usually lies in wait. Ed

³ For further information, contact Sarah on 0207 605 1335.