

Covid-19 vaccine - will it signal a return to 'normality' for business travel?

The International Air Transport Association (IATA), an airline trade association representing 290 airlines worldwide, recently said that it was in the final stages of developing a digital health passport for travellers. The idea behind this passport is that those who are not vaccinated may have to undergo Covid testing or face quarantine when they travel internationally, while those who are vaccinated have fewer barriers to entry.



Image Supplied.

The IATA Travel Pass will let travellers share their vaccination status and Covid-19 test results with airlines and border authorities via a contactless passport app.

"As the vaccine becomes more available worldwide, there are positive signs that corporate travel could return to some semblance of 'normality', says Oz Desai, Corporate Traveller general manager.

Once the vaccine becomes accessible to everyone worldwide, a digital health passport could bring much-needed reassurance and freedom for business and leisure travellers alike, explains Desai. It holds the potential to solve the confusion around different travel requirements for different countries. However, this will not necessarily mean that corporate travel will be 'the same' as before, and we can expect several significant changes.

Contactless technology

'Touchless travel' is likely to become the standard, according to Desai. He says: "Many traveller suppliers have already embraced contactless technology to help flatten the curve, but this technology's advancement will continue. Travel suppliers will partner with tech companies to create bespoke solutions as they look to provide their customers with maximum peace of mind.

"This will see the implementation of touch-free experiences, gadgets, and devices across the corporate travel experience. If experts are to be believed, soon enough, it won't even be necessary to touch a door handle to use the bathroom on a plane

or flip a light switch inside your hotel room. The vast majority of these daily 'touch tasks' will evolve into effortless, sensor-controlled actions."

Alleviating travel concerns

Health and safety requirements will continue to be a top priority across the travel and tourism industry for everyone, Desai adds. "South Africa's travel industry has gone above and beyond implementing the recommended safety protocols as per the World Health Organisation. This has helped to alleviate concerns and travel anxiety over the past few months as business travellers started to resume their travels. We can expect that these new and stringent health protocols will remain in place in the future."

Flight schedules will look different in 2021 – and beyond. Airlines will likely take a good, hard look at their air routes to establish which routes ensure ongoing viability in the future. This may result in reduced choices for corporate travellers, less frequent connection and possibly longer journeys. As pricing is based on supply and demand, reduced airline capacity could also lead to higher airline tickets for the foreseeable future.

Everyone has an opinion on the return of business travel, explains Desai. Bill Gates claims 50% of business travel will disappear - even after the pandemic is over. Others say it will take decades for business travel to bounce back. What is certain is that the way in which we do business will become a lot more flexible. Face-to-face meetings are no longer a non-negotiable, but that doesn't mean they will disappear altogether.

Desai says: "We've already seen the emergence of a hybrid model where virtual and face-to-face meetings collide. This trend is likely to continue well into the future, as it is in our nature to need to connect on a non-virtual, more 'human' level with other people. When was the last time you heard someone say they created a meaningful connection at a virtual conference?"

He adds that although we have all gotten used to working remotely, the simple truth is that people still value human interaction and connectedness. "We have also all experienced the challenges of running workshops or strategy sessions virtually. The future workplace will be a blended workplace where remote work, collaboration days, and face-to-face meetings all have a place, which will provide increased flexibility."

So, will business travel return to normal with the Covid vaccine? Desai concludes: "It won't be the same 'normal' as pre-pandemic days, but business travel will come back as the vaccine is rolled out across the world – better, stronger and more agile than before."