

SPECIAL FEATURE:

Service or scale? The false choice facing business travel buyers

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For many organisations, travel is about enabling business to function effectively, often under pressure, across multiple locations and time zones. That reality is reshaping what clients expect from travel management companies (TMCs) and prompting a rethink of how travel programmes are structured and supported.

In recent years, much of the focus in the industry has been on global consolidation. Larger organisations, particularly those with international footprints, are increasingly seeking a single TMC partner to deliver visibility of spend, policy compliance, traveller tracking and a consistent service experience across markets. Scale brings clear advantages in terms of reporting, control and efficiency.

But global reach on its own is not enough.

For small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the requirements are often more immediate and more personal. Many do not have a dedicated travel manager. In these cases, the TMC effectively becomes an extension of the business, the travel manager in all but name. That means being accessible, responsive and operating in the same time zone. It also means understanding the specific pressures of the client's sector and behaving like part of their team, not a distant service provider.

In professional services firms, for example, travel is frequently driven by client demands and often arranged at short notice. These last-minute bookings introduce both cost pressures and operational stress, yet they are largely unavoidable. A TMC that understands this dynamic can respond, manage changes efficiently and help mitigate cost impacts.

The challenge is different however in the mining and energy sector. Travel is often decentralised, arranged independently across departments without a single accountable owner. A TMC that understands this environment can bring structure and coherence, consolidating travel data and providing clear insight into overall patterns, spend and administrative tasks.

In both cases, sector knowledge and local presence are what turn service into value.

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When clients say they want a “local” provider, they are not simply referring to geography. They are looking for a partner they can trust, one that answers the phone, responds quickly and takes ownership of issues. This is where many large multinational TMCs struggle to deliver consistently. Highly standardised processes and centralised service models may drive efficiency at scale, but they can leave SME clients feeling overlooked or constrained by inflexible systems.

At the other end of the spectrum, smaller local agencies often excel in responsiveness and personal service. They understand the local market and build close client relationships. However, they may lack the international infrastructure required as their clients grow, particularly when travel extends across borders, involves multiple offices or requires consistent reporting and financial controls.

This is where the balance between global capability and local expertise becomes critical.

Even organisations that are not large in headcount, such as engineering or legal consultancies, often operate internationally, with clients, teams and offices spread across different regions. Consistency matters to them in service delivery, traveller experience and financial management. A TMC must be able to support that complexity while still delivering a personalised, locally grounded service.

The ability to combine these strengths is what differentiates a modern TMC.

A globally integrated operating model, supported by consistent systems and processes, enables unified data, streamlined reporting and alignment with client policies worldwide. At the same time, a strong local presence ensures responsiveness, cultural understanding and the ability to act quickly when plans change.
Technology plays a key role in enabling this balance. Integrated platforms provide the visibility and control that clients need, while still allowing flexibility to incorporate preferred tools and adapt to local requirements. However, technology alone is not enough. It must be supported by people who understand the client’s business and can apply that technology in a meaningful way.

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As businesses grow and their travel needs become more complex, the limitations of choosing only one side of that equation become clear. A purely global model can feel impersonal and rigid. A purely local one can struggle to scale.

The future of travel management lies in bridging that gap: delivering global capability with genuine local depth.

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