# EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES IN CORPORATE TRAVEL:
## PROSPECTS AND PROMISES

Technologies such as Generative AI, blockchain, self-sovereign identity (SSI), and others are "coming like a freight train," but what are the implications for corporate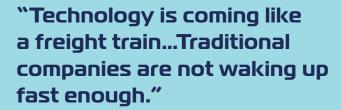 travel, now and in the coming years? Considering all the hype and future use cases, how can travel managers sort through their various applications and impact on the organization?

After all, these innovations must be in sync with the corporation and its managed travel program, including preferred suppliers and travel management company. Considering budgets, resources, and priorities, it can be daunting for travel managers to consider how various technologies work together to benefit both the corporation and the traveler. But it can be done, if all partners have a shared vision and invest in the future, as several advancements promise to remake nearly every aspect of the travel experience.

> **"Technology is coming like a freight train...Traditional companies are not waking up fast enough."**
>
> - Karen Hutchings, founder of Cobb & Hutch Consulting, and former EY Global Head of Travel, Meetings & Events

## GENERATIVE AI

**Can generative AI be the answer to a seamless travel experience, from search to service? It's certainly a start.**

**DEFINITION:**
**"Generative AI refers to deep-learning models that can generate high-quality text, images, and other content based on the data they were trained on."**
*Source: IBM*

That is just one of many acclamations from interviews with corporate travel managers, buyers and experts interviewed by the BTN Group in May 2024 for this white paper. There are numerous possibilities to elevate a travel program, depending on each company's goals. Each technology discussed in this paper — Generative AI, profiles/SSI, blockchain, cloud computing, augmented reality, and Internet of Things (IoT) — is designed to control costs, improve service and security, and provide efficiencies and frictionless travel experiences. But before anything can be implemented, there must be a basic understanding of the impact each technology could have on a travel program and how each technology often interconnects and relies on one another to operate successfully. Aligned with outside research, this paper, sponsored by CWT, outlines the prospects and promises of each emerging technology in the corporate travel arena over the next two to five years.

Timing is a crucial question regarding innovation. All the technologies in this paper are available today (and some such as cloud computing have been around for decades), demonstrating how long it takes for new tools to be affordable, accessible, and implemented in organizations' workflows. As computer speeds and power advance, and companies like OpenAI, creator of ChatGPT, innovate, more and more technologies are seeping into our lives — and our travel businesses. In time, there will be a better way to measure the success of incorporating technologies such as GenAI, blockchain and SSI, but in these early days, it's mostly promises rather than hard results.

Generative AI, such as ChatGPT, Perplexity, Anthropic's Claude and Google's Genesis, has already seeped into the workflow, whether it's to research facts, generate ideas or create content. While its applications are widespread, it is particularly suitable for travel, where data and inventory often reside in silos. AI promises to pull it all together — traveler preferences, trip patterns and corporate guidelines along with air, hotel, or car rental descriptions or reservations, directions and maps — the list goes on.

For most corporations, GenAI's impact on travel is more of a dream scenario than reality at this early stage. Each corporation has its own vision for incorporating AI depending on its program strategy and pain points. Though use cases may vary, they usually come down to enhancing three big processes: booking, spend and service. The booking process can be streamlined and personalized. Expense reports can be analyzed and acted upon. Prices can be benchmarked and audited. And customers can be serviced throughout the process with cost-saving bots.

"AI is a game-changer, but I would argue that the game changing hasn't started yet," CWT's Jack Staehler, chief technology officer for counselor and traveler technology, told BTN's Tech Talk in Chicago in May. "Right now, there's so much expectation but we can only go so far. The goal is to be ready for it."

Many TMCs are currently experimenting with GenAI to streamline functions. For example, they may be using the large learning models (LLMs), a subset of GenAI that uses natural language processing (NLP),

# RISKS AND REGULATIONS

For all of the potential of GenAI there are multiple risks to relying on technology that is not fully understood. Hallucinations, discrimination, bias, deepfakes, data privacy and lack of regulations are often cited as risks.

**Bias: Early adopters of GenAI must mitigate the risks of "algorithmic bias in AI-powered decision-making," advised CWT chief architect Matthew Newton in an opinion piece in The Company Dime. "The consequences of ignoring the potential for bias are vast, creating disparities in budget allocation and reducing employee satisfaction, resulting in some employees feeling undervalued and marginalized."**

**Regulations: "Currently, there is no comprehensive federal legislation or regulations in the U.S. that regulate the development of AI or specifically prohibits or restrict their use, according to White & Case LLP. Nor is there a single definition of AI. Some expect 2024 to become the year of AI regulations and policy wonks point to the May release of the Senate report on AI regulation, several proposed federal bills, as well as the White House Executive Order on AI. More than 40 states introduced bills on AI in 2023, the lawyers noted, including approval of California laws on deepfakes and Illinois laws on biometrics use. In Europe, the "EU recently adopted the AI Act, ushering in new restrictions on AI use cases and mandating transparency from companies, including OpenAI, regarding data use," according to Foley & Lardner LLP. Its lawyers noted, "AI is a technology still in its early stages of development. There is much we do not understand about how AI works,**

**so attempts to regulate AI could easily prove counterproductive, stifling innovation and slowing process in this rapidly developing field."**

GenAI is developing so fast that more than 350 executives, researchers and engineers advancing it warned last year that it "might one day pose an existential threat to humanity and should be considered as a societal risk on a par with pandemics and nuclear wars," the New York Times reported. They signed a one-sentence warning from the nonprofit Center for AI Safety that read: "Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks."

Some companies have developed ethics policies or committees to create rules of engagement for their use of GenAI and questions to ask suppliers to ensure that any use of company data aligns. Some today dissuade employees from using such technology for now.

Yet, for all the risks and regulations, investments in GenAI and the exploration of its potential are surging. Even if companies haven't yet adopted policies or deployed licensed tools, workers are using them. QuantumBlack AI by McKinsey in its "The State of AI in 2023: Generative AI's Breakout Year," noted that "79% of all respondents say they've had at least some exposure to GenAI, either for work or outside of work, and 22% say they are regularly using it in their own work. The McKinsey report stated: "One-third of all respondents say their organizations are already regularly using generative AI in at least one function—meaning that 60% of organizations with reported AI adoption are using GenAI."

to understand and generate text-based human-responses. "Most large TMCS are consuming text and responding, using artificial intelligence for augmenting humans and providing efficiencies," Staehler said. Human agents are verifying results. "We cannot give a wrong answer. The wrong answer to the wrong person could cost you the account," he said of the challenges of using technology known to inexplicably make up data or "hallucinate."

### SHOPPING/BOOKING:
Booking tools can be smarter with AI, recognizing previous activity and booking flights without much input. Some of this is already happening for "high transaction/low value" flights that are repeated often, said Karoline Mayr, director of global travel for Brink's Inc. To advance to more sophisticated uses, corporations first must "build the foundation…before we build the house." There are still too many manual processes that need to be automated, including unused tickets and access to direct connect fares (think AA). Agents shouldn't have to go backwards to automate these processes, Mayr said.

> "AI disrupted the status quo that existed for decades. I don't see that as a problem."
> — Andy Menkes, CEO, Partnership Travel Consulting

As travelers' book, especially new employees or those traveling to a new city, AI can serve up recommendations from other like travelers. Here's where they stay, how they get around, and what you should know. "It's just so crazy to me that the data lake exists, but we aren't getting into it," said Rita Visser, director of global travel sourcing and GPO for Oracle.

According to Deloitte's Facing Travel's Future report, "a new breed of travel intermediary will likely emerge: The GenAI agent, which turns wish lists into bookable itineraries — and then books them

via the best channel for the traveler, optimizing for pricing, loyalty memberships, cancellation policies, and any additional conditions and perks." In the future, autonomous AI agents can do the work of humans, freeing them up for more complicated tasks. "Everything may be transferred to a chat conversation, or we may soon be speaking with a virtual avatar, much like we would with a human agent," Norm Rose, president Travel Tech Consulting, wrote in a January 2024 Phocuswright article, *Autonomous Agents in Travel are Coming*.

One of the most sought-after applications for AI is not just booking but rebooking. AI agents can determine a missed flight, and, with knowledge of a traveler's past experiences, preferences, and itinerary, automatically rebook a new flight and alert the hotel on the fly. And when on the road, AI agents can connect to the traveler directly and serve up local and personalized retailing and travel experiences throughout the journey.

"There is the need for process efficiency and enhancing the traveler experience through interactive itineraries and personalized recommendations," said Hutchings. She shared examples of how robotic process automation (RPA) has saved millions of dollars in average ticket prices by encouraging early flight booking among event attendees.

And why can't corporate travel booking be more targeted like the Amazon experience? One-click to buy, recognizing past purchases, making recommendations — AI can be used to facilitate these buyer friendly tasks. "Travel needs to get to that space," said Visser. "Booking tools and distribution generally needs to get to that space."

### SPEND:
Buyers and experts also cite the impact AI can have on spend, from auditing fares and rates to analyzing expense reports. "Predominantly it's about how it [AI] can drive greater efficiency with servicing, additional context and insight with large volumes and sources of data to determine better ways to manage the travel program spend," said Ian Spearing, founder of Travel Evolution Consulting, who formerly led EY's travel global innovation and technology.

For example, AI can be used in benchmarking travel policies by noticing differences in airfares and hotel rates. Corporations can do an audit of each airline website of city pairs by dates to search for better deals. "You can keep track and hold your partners and vendors really accountable for what they put on paper," explained Stephen Gheerow, a senior manager of a global travel program. As for budget, AI can aggregate expense reports to highlight anomalies, eliminating the need to audit each submission separately.

## SERVICE:

Customer service is what differentiates one TMC from another, and the human touch remains paramount. But AI can reduce labor costs by having agents focus on service instead of menial tasks. "AI is not going to replace personalized service; it will enable it," said Andy Menkes, travel industry veteran and founder and CEO of Partnership Travel Consulting. For example, AI will know I prefer a certain hotel in a certain city, perhaps even a certain room far from the elevator. The hotel can use AI to recall my past experiences and try to rebook the same room or location based on my preferences and loyalty.

Beyond TMCs, airlines, car rental suppliers, hotels and other companies are also trialing GenAI, starting with chatbots, machine learning to learn patterns and process requests, virtual assistants, integrations to power apps and more advanced applications. Hotels are using it for smart room customization tailored to their preferences, voice assistants, facial recognition to expedite checkin or lounge access, and enhanced security, according to Loews Hotels CIO Dan Kornick. Avis Budget Group (ABG) is testing AI's ability to detect vehicle damage. At five locations, 10 cameras capture a 360-degree view of a vehicle as it departs and returns to a rental lot. ABG uploads the videos to the cloud. "AI looks at the vehicle, inspects and annotates" the video to mark damage, Jeff Kaelin, vice president of technology strategy and performance, told Tech Talk. It's helping Avis "drive down customer complaints" over damage claims. The process currently takes five hours, but the vision is to reduce that to 90 seconds to allow agents to immediately inform a renter of damage. "We're doing rigorous testing; this has to be right. I can't send a damage complaint that's erroneous to a business partner," Kaelin said. Testing will continue through yearend when ABG expects to have about 600,000 examples to ensure that the technology is right before it deploys to more locations.

Within business travel, Kaelin said that "AI's predictive analytics is revolutionizing the travel industry by optimizing pricing and demand forecasting. By harnessing the power of AI, travel companies can make data-driven decisions that allow us to optimize our costs and enhance the overall customer experience."

### PROFILES/SSI
**Digital profiles and SSI promise to be the keys that unlock true and secure personalization. Is it too good to be true?**

### DEFINITION:
**"The foundation of self-sovereign identity (SSI) are impactful technologies that enable consumers to manage their personal information behind a verified digital ID and distribute trusted information to trusted sellers who equally participate in and benefit from the new digital identity capabilities."**
*Source: Self-Sovereign Identify: Unlocking Seamless Travel, Nick Price, Phocuswright article*

> **"A portable profile will allow companies and travelers to have more control over the service experience and data flows between providers. When both the company and traveler have control over sharing of data elements, that's where I see this starting to evolve."**
> – Kim Hamer, partner at Results Plus Consulting

True personalization cannot happen without data, but the corporation only knows so much about each employee. When a business traveler makes a booking, there is much more than meets the eye, such as personal preferences when traveling alone for business versus with family or friends. With the prevalence of combining business and leisure travel, it's imperative to understand where the business trip blurs into the leisure experience. That full 360-degree view of the customer requires a complete profile, including that promised by SSI.

Self-sovereign identify (SSI) enables consumers to manage their personal information behind a verified digital ID and distribute trusted information to the sellers of their choice, Rose wrote in "Who Owns the Customer? How about the Customer Themselves?" The technology, which first emerged in 2015, has been gaining limited acceptance in the travel industry over the last few years, but there is still a long way to go.

In corporate travel, SSI allows both the company and the traveler to control the input of each profile, including preferences, past experiences, and loyalty. There is also visibility to the TMC. Company fields may include department codes, policies, employee IDs, and past trips. In adition, the traveler controls their own input, which could be additional memberships, interests in entertainment or activities, and other personal favorites. This information can be turned on or off depending on the type of trip and travelers' needs. An example given is a traveler restricted by policy to economy who opts to use their own miles/money to pay for an upgrade. But it takes all elements of a profile, including the travel itinerary, to enable automatic reissuing of tickets, alerts to a car rental firm about a missed connection, and other changes to happen in real-time.

AI can use the personal profile for the booking process. Menkes provides this example: "Below the line is my persona — when I travel east, I want to sit on the left side of the plane, bulkhead or aisle, but not row 13." It's the same for an often-visited hotel (concierge level or floor #), car rental, ground transportation, and other trip segments. "SSI and AI puts it together," he added. This is true personalization.

Hamer believes that portable profiles and SSI are going to become more relevant as companies move to a multi-channel environment. Considering a world of direct connects and different APIs connecting to suppliers, GDS, NDC and other content, "It is going to be critically important for corporations in enabling and maintaining a positive employee experience." Hamer added, "The content play is becoming so vast and fragmented that having a portable profile really allows the traveler to decide where they want that data to be housed, used and shared."

CWT's Staehler said SSI could allow a traveler to not only pick their own service providers but also use their profile for business or leisure travel or use it with another employer. Some may view it as a threat, but "the whole arc with SSI is most exciting. We're too busy worrying about 'the today' to see the value of tomorrow with this technology."

Digital profiles and digital passports (that secure details of a person's identity) are also key to streamlining the airport experience including check-in and border patrol. Biometrics, for example, are increasingly being paired with digital profiles to physically verify identity, primarily in the form of facial recognition.

Travelers can maintain control of their personal data on their own devices and selectively share it at multiple touchpoints, such as identify verification at the airport or check-in at the hotel, enabling data sharing among key players for each transaction.

## OTHER TECHNOLOGIES
**Many other technologies are needed to pull together AI and SSI, such as blockchain, cloud computing and Internet of Things (IoT).**

### BLOCKCHAIN
**Blockchain is the pathway to securely storing, sharing, and validating traveler data. Goodbye middleman?**

**DEFINITION:**
**"A digital database containing information (such as records of financial transactions) that can be simultaneously used and shared within a large decentralized, publicly accessible network."**
*Source: Merriam-Webster*

Developed in 2009 as the foundation for cryptocurrency Bitcoin, blockchain over the past decade has emerged as the enabling linchpin of smart contracts, payments, data management and more. Blockchain is "a decentralized, distributed ledger, designed to record transactions permanently without third-party authentication. This makes it useful for any exchanges that could benefit from increased transparency, speed and decentralization," according to a history from Trade Finance Global. The technology prevents fraud, and identity theft, and enables secure SSI applications (e.g., payments) and identity management (e.g., loyalty, perks, preferences).

The Data Exchange began using blockchain technology three years ago to certify, verify and de-identify data that can be shared with verified subscribers to an individual blockchain, founder and CEO Susan Hopley told Business Travel News.

Blockchain is also the technology that consulting firm PwC piloted in 2019 as it tested direct booking and payment settlement facilitated by Blockskye's blockchain-ledger, the initial phase of a much larger plan to rebuild "corporate travel in a more digital, more intuitive experience for its traveling employees."

BTN last year named PwC's Danielle Cavnor and Eric Gray as travel managers of the year for the bold vision.

Blockchain is already playing a role in secure payments, especially as more transactions migrate away from physical cards to digital solutions and wallets. Smart contracts and payments using cryptocurrencies or stablecoins can expedite cross-border transactions, as they bypass traditional middlemen such as banks and payment processors.

"Having the ability to see one record of truth across multiple suppliers means it can remove any outdated or incorrect data," said Spearing. Payments and reconciliation are areas of adoption within travel programs where blockchain will be used more widely in the next year or two, he added.

Reducing the middleman in these transactions should also lead to cost savings. "Blockchain will revolutionize payments and replace the corporate card with a cloud-based paying fee that eliminates the merchant fee," said Menkes. "We're seeing use of blockchain in payment, in data and data integration, and in data collaboration," said Visser. "So, I think blockchain is here to stay."

### CLOUD COMPUTING
**Storage, networking, hardware maintenance, scalability, disaster recovery...Cloud computing takes the worry away.**

**DEFINITION:**
**"A way of using computers in which data and software are stored or managed on a network of servers (= computers that control or supply information to other computers), to which users have access over the internet."**
*Source: Oxford Learner's Dictionary*

Cloud computing is the practice of using a network of remote servers hosted on the internet to store, manage, and process data, rather than a local

server or a personal computer. Gartner predicts that more than half of companies will use industry cloud platforms by 2028 to accelerate their business initiatives. While the use of cloud computing is widespread in many organizations, "only a few have unlocked its full potential in supporting business transformation," explains Marcus Law in Cloud adoption: How cloud will become a business necessity. "As a result, organizations are using the cloud to launch a new wave of disruption driven by AI, enabling them to unlock business value at scale."

Cloud platforms such as Amazon Web Services (AWS), Google Cloud, and Microsoft Azure offer cloud-based technologies that help companies build scalable travel platforms. Travel companies especially rely on the cloud to "collect, store, manage, and instantly access vast amounts of data and applications powering search engines, reservation systems, online payment tools, and support services from any location on any device," according to an Intellias article. The cloud enables check-in kiosks, mobile boarding passes and virtual hotel keys. One specific example is Delta's use of AWS technology to modernize its contact center, match calls with reservations, and prioritize calls based on loyalty, travel dates and other criteria.

"Airlines and other players in the travel industry — hotels, airports and car rental services — are starting to lean more on cloud computing to improve operational efficiencies and customer service, the two focus areas where the cloud can provide the greatest benefit," according to a July 2023 Fortune article. Travel industry insiders told Fortune that the travel sector lags behind other segments in cloud-adoption, partly due to low margins and decades-old systems. Accenture in 2022 found that only 30% of more than 300 hospitality and travel companies had implemented cloud at scale with another 35% in the process of doing so.

"There is a lot of legacy technology that needs to be taken care of," Massimo Morin, head of worldwide business development, travel and hospitality solutions at Amazon Web Services, told Fortune. "This is an industry that thrives in complexity." Air Canada, Delta, Southwest Airlines and United Airlines have migrated to AWS. United in April said it migrated between 70% and 90% of workloads to the cloud, but had yet to recognize all savings potential of the strategy as it continued to run mainframes for the remaining work. British Airways in March said it was migrating 700 IT systems to the cloud, as part of a $9 billion modernization.

AWS' Morin said modernization must occur for airlines because the people who developed the original systems are long gone—either retired or dead. "You have to empower your organization. You have to give them the right tools, and you have to give them the right culture of taking advantage of the tools and not being afraid of failing."

### AMADEUS/MICROSOFT
Amadeus and Microsoft partnered in 2021 to "enable faster delivery of new cloud-based solutions, leading to more seamless travel experiences." In the *Delivering Travel Value* report co-published in 2023, the two companies explored how the industry can deliver a more fulfilling traveler experience through understanding context, and concludes that the industry will not be able to move forward without more effective usage of data and AI.

For the corporation, cloud computing supports the movement toward digital travel programs — where everything is online such as policy, bookings, approvals, payments, expense, and reconciliation. "The travel industry is now in a position to knit information together across open, cloud-based platforms, creating an end-to-end view of the entire trip," according to the report. "This insight can then be shared, understood and actioned in order to present options to the traveler as and when they are useful."

## AUGMENTED REALITY
**Is recreating reality with holograms the next best thing to being there? For some instances, it's worth considering.**

**DEFINITION:**
**"An enhanced, interactive version of a real-world environment achieved through digital visual elements, sounds, and other sensory stimuli via holographic technology."**
*Source: Microsoft*

Perhaps one of the least understood, or adopted, technologies in the corporate travel space is augmented reality (AR). While its applications for leisure travel, such as exploring destinations, cruise ship layouts, and engaging in activities are growing in popularity, there are fewer known applications in corporate travel.

Virtual meeting technologies such as Zoom and Teams are pervasive but how might AR benefit corporate travel? For the open minded, AR applications could help a meeting planner or business owner avoid a site visit yet envision an event coming to life in a meeting or convention space. This could include augmenting the space with décor, tables and chairs, a stage, attendees and even speakers. Prismm (formerly Allseated) provides a dynamic "digital twin" (e.g., digital representation) so clients can tour meeting spaces using immersive 3D technology and event software.

AR could also help suppliers with air cabin or hotel design. For instance, Lufthansa has used AR to gather feedback from travel managers on reconfiguring its business class cabin, noted one manager. In AR, buyers can explore a virtual reality world of a cabin, seat and experience. The airline also experimented with the technology on passengers to encourage upgrades. Before boarding, passengers were given the chance to virtually experience Lufthansa's new travel class in 3D.

Head of travel Jon Bolger sees the potential to use virtual or AR applications to educate travelers of the experience of an unfamiliar airline. If the goal is to shift market share, a virtual tour of the experience may help, he said. Such technology also could be used to help train inexperienced or perhaps even neurodiverse travelers how to navigate an airport, city or entire trip.

Another example of augmented reality is the application of beacons, which operate through Bluetooth, that hotels use to allow customers to unlock hotel rooms with their mobile phones. Hotels can also use beacon technology to trigger augmented reality overlays that send personalized information and experiences to guests based on their location. Marriott recently experimented with Moxy Universe, Play Beyond at its Moxy Hotels in Asia Pacific. In one application, guests scan QR codes to explore the hotel using their smartphone cameras, play games for prizes, and create avatars that hang out at the bar or gym.

While some corporations may be experimenting with virtual or AR in research and development or product design, travel managers said real-life, face-to-face interactions remain the preferred interaction in their worlds.

For most corporate travel specialists, holograms can't replace the real thing. "Virtual reality is an interesting concept, not something that has really resonated yet in large scale deployments," said Spearing, adding "I think this is still very much an exploratory place within the travel industry at this stage."

"Really, you think a customer is going to be fine with a fake me in the room trying to help them through a scenario?" mused Visser.

> **Virtual or augmented reality may help travel managers educate travelers of the experience to expect with an unfamiliar airline or supplier as part of a campaign to shift market share. Suppliers are using AR to gather feedback on possible service or product changes.**

## INTERNET OF THINGS
**A seamless travel experience relies on connected devices and shared data brought about by the Internet of Things.**

### DEFINITION:
**"The network of devices that contain the hardware, software, firmware, and actuators which allow the devices to connect, interact, and freely exchange data and information."**
*Source: National Institute of Standards and Technology - U.S. Department of Commerce*

Collecting data and sending alerts through multiple touchpoints relies on the Internet of Things (IoT). According to the European Union's (EU) DigiTOUR project, IoT "can bridge the gap between the digital and physical worlds." IoT relies on sensors to transmit data via multiple connective technologies such as Bluetooth, Wi-Fi, cellular and RFD tags. Once it's connected, it uses AI and machine learning technology to gather information and alert the traveler via SMS, email or web to their smartphones and tablets. "IoT-connected devices have evolved from being an emerging technology to becoming a mainstream technology," stressed a recent Medium article entitled *IoT in Travel and Tourism Industry: Why It is a Game Changer?*.

In the corporate space, IoT is especially important for duty of care. IoT devices and location-based services can be used to track employees and alert them about any potential threats in the area. To assist in a smooth journey, travelers can also use IoT devices to locate luggage at the airport, automatically check-in their hotel rooms, control room temperature, and access other amenities and concierge-like services.

### Question: who owns the customer? It's up for grabs.

In any discussion of these technologies — especially AI, profiles, and blockchain — the louder question is: Who Owns the Customer?

"There is significant concern about where data is being stored and how it is being used, and that is something large corporations" are grappling with now, said Spearing. "Allowing sensitive corporate data, or individual data in open-source platforms is something to consider carefully." To add to the complexity, Spearing gives this example: "I own my trip details." But the agency, suppliers and company also own trip details. "The traveler owns the profile. But the company owns the Passenger Name Record (PNR)," he added.

"There are some questions still around what the corporation would own versus what the employee would own," said Hamer, giving the example of cost center titles, or employee IDs that the corporation would want to maintain. But when looking at data that employees own and provide, such as loyalty, they should have the ability to share this at their convenience. This freedom of choice is especially meaningful as airlines beef up efforts to appeal directly to the traveler, providing personal offers that may not be in line with policy. The traveler can then say, "hey, my company doesn't allow me to upgrade my flight but I'm willing to pay on my own." As more business trips blur into leisure trips, the ability to separate or merge data can untangle the trip process.

The Microsoft-Amadeus *Delivering Travel Value* report puts it all in perspective. "Relaxing the concept of 'owning' the traveler is key. Under current conditions, an airline takes responsibility for flying a passenger to their destination, a mobility provider for getting them to the door of their hotel, and then the property for their stay. These discreet processes can work well, but they are not a single journey. To evolve, the industry will need to join the dots between the various stages to create a unified whole. Stakeholders will have to know where the traveler is at all times, what they are seeking to achieve, and offer them the tools to do so."

Ideally, if digital profiles and SSI become widespread, the customer will own the data. Until then, it's a free-for-all as consumers jump from site to site, interacting with multiple suppliers, organizations, and intermediaries, causing our personal information to remain fragmented and, in some cases, unprotected.

## WHERE ARE WE HEADED?

Spurred by the cloud and blockchain, technological advancements in travel are accelerating at an unprecedented pace. GenAI and chatbots have already permeated the trip process, and soon autonomous agents will be the norm. OpenAI in May 2024 released the latest version of ChatGPT GPT-4o (the 'o' standing for omni), that is faster, better across text, voice and vision, available in 50 languages, and free. Microsoft plans to integrate this latest version into its Copilot.

The vision of digital profiles and SSI to allow for a seamless, secure travel experience has been much slower to evolve, but the advantages are numerous. And whether virtual reality makes its mark in corporate travel is still up for debate.

Whether related to cost or time savings, security and privacy, personalization or preferences, there is a long way to go before some of the dream scenarios presented in this paper come into play. But recognizing the potential applications for your future arsenal can bring them closer to reality as corporations, suppliers and TMCs strategize for the future. It might be here sooner than you think.

Bolger envisions an easier way for travelers to book and expense all aspects of business travel and mobility. It would mirror the simplicity of Spotify that allows users to listen to any song without having to buy an entire album. The new travel solution would bring together various internal systems, approvals and booking tools a traveler may use for a trip through application programming interfaces. Bolger began outlining and researching the solution about a year ago and expects it to be sufficient to be scaled within 18 months. The way he will measure success is "by asking three questions: Does it reduce costs? Does it reduce $CO_2$? Does it, as a minimum, maintain, if not improve, the user experience?" An improved user experience is critical, so travelers use the tool and automatically improve compliance, data collection and hopefully, savings.

The vision is to guide travelers from any pre-trip approval process to air and hotel booking, dinner reservations, internal meeting space bookings, catering, entertainment, fitness classes and more. Along the way, the system would advise travelers when to book for the best rates, where to stay or go to dinner, both based on data from other firm travelers. "This will be the complete end-to-end...wherever you start, the system will guide you through to the next step," Bolger said.

## WHAT TO DO NEXT?

Ask your suppliers what emerging technologies they are using and trialing today. Ask them to paint a picture of the future they see in two years, and the technologies that will enable their visions.

Wharton professor and author Ethan Mollick encourages everyone to experiment with one of the advanced GenAI models for 10 hours. Most will grasp the power of the technology and begin to understand its potential, said Mollick, author of a book on AI and the Substack column One Useful Thing. Not even the developers know where GenAI may take us. ∎

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## CWT

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