



Rail first for business

Accelerating the reduction of corporate travel emissions by shifting to rail

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Executive summary

Air travel represents an increasing share of global emissions. While other sectors are reducing their emissions, the climate impact of aviation is increasing. This year, the 6th of July was the busiest day for commercial aviation in history. In a single day 134,386 commercial flights were tracked. Current forecasts show the number of passengers is set to double by 2050. While some sustainable aviation fuels (SAF) can be a solution to decarbonise transport, they will not be scaled up in time to meet the urgency to mitigate climate change and respect the Paris Agreement to limit the increase of temperature to well below 2 degrees Celsius, and to aim for 1.5°C.

To reduce aviation's climate impact and lower their travel emissions, companies need to shift to rail. Emissions reduction on certain common business routes can go up to -97% (see table 1). Yet too few companies are embracing rail travel in their business travel policies. The Travel Smart Campaign surveyed 322 companies to gather information on their travel policy practices and found only 28 that have established policies to shift business flying to rail.

The easiest way to drive such a shift is to set strong internal policies incentivising employees to choose rail for their business travels. We recommend companies to set a [“Rail first for business”](#) rule including the following internal policies:

1. Set a travel climate budget for the company and per department, and a target to convert a share of flights to rail
2. Use train by default instead of plane for trips below 8 hours
3. Allocate to your employees a bigger budget and offer the possibility of booking first class tickets when feasible, to encourage travelling by rail
4. Allow your employees to telework from the train during personal travels
5. Consider additional leave to employees if they use rail or low-carbon transport for personal reasons

1. Context

1.1. Travel Smart: Fly less, achieve more

Travel Smart is a global campaign aiming to reduce corporate air travel emissions by 50% or more from 2019 levels, by 2025 or sooner.

The campaign comes at a crucial time for the direction of business flying, as air travel has reopened post-pandemic. For the critical decade until 2030, the best way to reduce aviation emissions is to fly less, as the timing for scale-up of sustainable fuels and zero-emission aircraft is currently post-2030, and offsetting has shown to be ineffective.

We believe that companies have a unique opportunity to lead this change. Business travellers make up some 12% of passengers, but up to 75% of revenues on certain flights, so their choices have important leverage on the aviation industry. It is time for corporate leaders and employees to innovate their practices, adapting internal policies to the new paradigm of flying less and achieving more. Governments also have a role in this trend that is here to stay.

The way forward to reduce flying falls under the new culture of purposeful travel, which is twofold:

- **Benefiting from online collaboration.** Learning from new habits acquired during the pandemic, the campaign invites companies and their employees to assess the worthiness of corporate flying, reconsidering the meaning and the value of business trips, especially when use of virtual tools and meetings are possible;
- **Prioritising train over plane.** When travel is needed, instead of flying, businesses can opt for more sustainable transport modes, like the train.

In this document we focus on the second option. Building on the Travel Smart Ranking, which assesses 322 companies on their commitments to reduce and report corporate air travel emissions, we have looked at their internal travel policies aiming to shift corporate travel from air to rail.

This briefing presents the results of this analysis, formulates recommendations to companies and aims to mobilise stakeholders for an improved rail network, accelerating the shift to rail.

1.2. Rail first for business

We recommend companies to set a “**rail first for business**” policy as rail can help significantly to reduce emissions while also improving the comfort of corporate travel. Several companies already commit to travel in a more sustainable way. At the national level, groups such as [Anders Reizen](#) in the Netherlands or the [Business Travel Pioneers](#) in Belgium are leading the way on companies' engagement to reduce their travel climate impact.

Companies such as MAPFRE or ENGIE have introduced policies to accelerate the shift from air to rail. The Spanish company set a target to convert a share of its air travel to rail and the French energy group

forbids flying if the journey can be realised in under four hours by rail. Several other companies, such as Siemens, have set internal climate budgets for travel to monitor and reduce their climate emissions.

Several best practices can also be found in the public sector. In [Switzerland](#), the officials and members of Parliament must travel by train as long as the total travel journey is under six hours.

1.2.1. Rail allows to drastically reduce GHG emissions

Aviation emissions are considerably higher compared to rail. Thus, using rail for business travel can have a positive impact on companies' sustainability efforts towards reducing their carbon footprint. For example, travelling by train between Amsterdam and London will reduce emissions by 93% compared with flying.

Table 1 - Emissions savings by switching from plane to train on some of the busiest air routes (single passenger in economy class)¹

City pairs	Emissions of CO2eq by plane per passenger (in kg)	Emissions of CO2eq by rail per passenger (in kg)	Emissions reduction shift from air to rail
Amsterdam-London	180	3.90	-93%
Madrid-London	390	15.45	-88%
Paris-Rome	356	16.26	-86%
Berlin-Zurich	256	22.04	-74%
Paris-Nice	260	2.52	-97%
Madrid-Barcelona	116	9.56	-75%
Frankfurt-Berlin	197	13.99	-79%
New York - Washington	173	4.73	-92%

¹ Emissions for rail were calculated using national rail emissions factors. For countries without national rail emissions factors we used the EEA European average (0.033 kg CO2eq/km.pax). Emissions for aviation were calculated with EEA emissions factors modified to use a non-CO2 factor of three.

For all connections mentioned above, there are existing direct train trips making the shift not only feasible but desirable. There is only the exception of Madrid-London (changes in Barcelona and Paris) and Paris-Rome (change in Milan).

1.2.2. Increase in comfort and productivity compensating the higher price

Travelling by rail is often more expensive than flying. The report “[Ticket Prices of Trains vs Planes - A Europe wide Analysis](#)” from Greenpeace examines air and rail fares on 113 Europe routes and shows that for 71% of the city pairs rail was more expensive than flying. On average rail trips were twice as expensive as flying.

This increased cost can be a barrier to many companies to shift to rail. Nevertheless, increased comfort while travelling by rail reduces employees' stress and increases productivity. The Travel Smart Campaign's artistic project “[Let the Birds Have The Skies](#)” shows that many travellers enjoy the comfort of the train better than the plane, and say it is easier to work on a train than on a plane. As a result, the high price of train tickets is offset by better use of time. By flying less, you can actually achieve more.

2. Analysis

2.1. Our research methodology

We focused our research on the 322 companies included in the [Travel Smart Ranking](#), representing major businesses in Europe (including the United Kingdom (U.K.), and Switzerland), the United States (U.S.) and India.

The research was conducted through two main means:

- A [survey](#) was sent to each of the 322 companies to gather information on their travel policy practices. (The survey is still running, companies are invited to submit their answers for us to assess their travel policy);
- Desk research was carried out to collect companies' practices in shifting to rail. We examined internal reports and news articles specifically addressing this subject.

2.2. Criteria selected for the evaluation

In the survey, we asked companies about seven policies to shift to rail. Each policy carried a value of one point, with companies having the potential to get a maximum score of seven points.

The criteria are the following:

- **Set a travel climate budget per company or department**

Monitoring the climate emissions of travel is now a legal requirement. The next step is to set a climate travel budget that will incentivise employees to limit their use of flights. This climate travel budget should be revised every year to progressively reduce emissions from travels.

- **Set a target to convert a share of the air journeys to rail**

To shift from air to rail, an efficient measure is to fix a target to convert a share of the air journeys to rail. This target should be regularly revised to increase ambition.

- **Use train by default instead of plane for trips below a certain amount of hours or kilometres**

Restricting short-haul flights is a very effective measure to shift to rail. In France, the government has banned flight trips that can be reached under 2h30 by rail. Companies can set their own bans on flying and aim for journeys longer than 2h30. We have also awarded points to companies who use trains by default for trips below a certain amount of kilometres and between certain city pairs.

- **Allocate to your employees a bigger budget to encourage travelling by rail**

Taking a train is often more expensive than flying. Companies should dedicate a higher budget for the journey if this is a rail journey. This financial cost can be compensated by a reduction in business flying thanks to the use of virtual collaboration tools.

- **Offer the possibility of booking first class tickets when feasible**

Giving the possibility to the employees to travel first class in trains is an important policy to incentivise them to choose rail over aviation. It will allow them to increase their comfort while travelling and as a result increase their productivity.

- **Allow your employees to telework from the train during personal travels**

Travelling by rail over long distances can often take up to one day. Companies should allow their employees to work in the train to further incentivise them to avoid flying.

- **Consider additional leave to employees if they use rail or low-carbon transport for personal reasons (e.g. [Climate Perks](#)).**

Companies can also incentivise their employees to shift from air to rail for personal purposes. Giving extra holidays for travel with a low carbon transport mode is a solution to both further reduce emissions and offer a non-financial benefit to employees.

On top of the evaluation of internal policies to shift to rail, we have also asked corporations to report on the distance (km) travelled by rail and air in 2019 and 2022 to assess if there has been a shift from air to rail.

2.3. The results of our research

2.3.1. Internal travel policies to shift from air to rail

We gathered data from 41 companies, of which 28 have established policies to shift to rail. Those scoring four points or more were recognised as **frontrunners**, with the highest achieved score being five out of seven by three companies. The other 21 companies are labelled as **contenders**. Notably, 294 companies either lack policies or have not been identified as having specific policies to shift from air to rail.

Table 2 - Overview of points received per company travel policy to shift to rail

Company	Country	Sector	Number of points
Mapfre	ES	Finance	5
Publicis	FR	Services	5
Swissre	CH	Finance	5
Anteagroup	NL	Consulting	4
ABN Amro	NL	Finance	4
Simon Kucher	DE	Consulting	4
Steelcase	US	Retail	4
Ernst & Young Global	UK	Consulting	3
Roche	CH	Pharmaceuticals and Biotechnology	3
SPIE	FR	Consulting	3
Telefonica	ES	Telecom	3
Caixabank	ES	Finance	3
KPMG	UK	Consulting	3
Arcadis	NL	Consulting	2
Shell	UK	Oil and Gas	2
Siemens	DE	Manufacturing	2
Accenture	IE	Consulting	1
Amundi	FR	Finance	1
AXA	FR	Insurance	1
Capgemini	FR	Consulting	1
Credit Agricole	FR	Finance	1
Engie	FR	Utilities	1
Forvia	FR	Manufacturing	1
Lush	UK	Retail	1
PWC	UK	Consulting	1
Saint-Gobain	FR	Construction and Engineering	1
Salesforce	US	Technology	1
Wipro	IN	Technology	1

The identified frontrunners with travel policies to shift corporate travel from air to rail:



Swiss Re



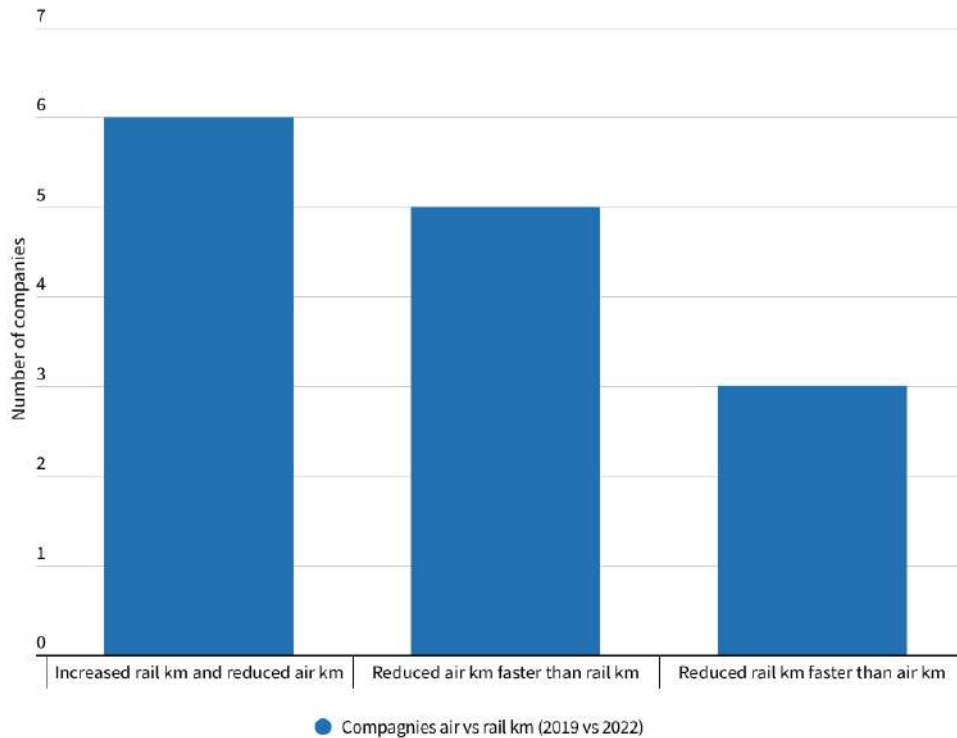
Steelcase

2.3.2. Comparison of kilometres travelled by rail and air between 2019 and 2022

We collected precise data on the kilometres travelled by air and rail in 2019 and 2022 from 14 companies. Every company in the sample has reduced the kilometres travelled by air. Among these companies, six out of 14 companies have increased the distance by rail and reduced it by air, indicating a modal shift. Five additional companies have reduced kilometres by rail, but not as much as by air. This also points to a modal shift to rail. The last four companies have reduced kilometres travelled by rail more than those travelled by air. For these four companies there is not a modal shift from air to rail.

Figure 1 - Comparison of companies kilometres travelled by air vs rail (2019 vs 2022)

11 out of 14 companies have started a shift from air to rail travel



2.4. Best practices library

Table 3 - Detailed list of internal travel policies to shift to rail implemented by companies

List of criteria	Companies having those internal travel policies
Set a travel climate budget per company or department	ABN Amro, Antea Group, Caixabank, EY Global, Forvia, MAPFRE, Publicis, Simon Kucher, Shell, Steelcase, Swiss Re
Set a target to convert a share of the air journeys to rail	MAPFRE
Use train by default instead of plane for trips below a certain amount of hours or kilometres	ABN Amro, Accenture, Amundi, Antea Group, Arcadis, AXA, Capgemini, Crédit Agricole, Engie, EY Global, KPMG UK, Lush, Publicis, PWC, Saint-Gobain, Salesforce, Simon Kucher, SPIE, Wipro

Allocate to your employees a bigger budget to encourage travelling by rail	Antea Group, Caixabank, EY Global, MAPFRE, Publicis, Roche, Siemens, Simon Kucher, SPIE, Steelcase, Swiss Re, Telefonica
Offer the possibility of booking first class tickets when feasible	ABN Amro, Arcadis, Caixabank, KPMG UK, MAPFRE, Publicis, Roche, Shell, Siemens, Simon Kucher, SPIE, Steelcase, Swiss Re, Telefonica
Allow your employees to telework from the train for personal travels	ABN Amro, Antea Group, KPMG, MAPFRE, Publicis, Roche, Telefonica, Shell, Steelcase, Swiss Re
Consider additional leave to employees if they use rail or low-carbon transport for personal reasons (e.g. Climate Perks).	Swiss Re

3. Conclusions

3.1. Rail first for business

We recommend companies follow the below checklist to develop an ideal travel policy incentivising the shift from air to rail:

1. Set a travel climate budget for the company and per department, and a target to convert a share of flights to rail
2. Use train by default instead of plane for trips below 8 hours
3. Allocate to your employees a bigger budget and offer the possibility of booking first class tickets when feasible, to encourage travelling by rail
4. Allow your employees to telework from the train for personal travels
5. Consider additional leave to employees if they use rail or low-carbon transport for personal reasons

3.2. Join the #railshiffters movement!

At Travel Smart, we strongly believe companies and their employees can be driving forces in the larger political debate to make rail the most attractive option, allowing travellers to reduce flying and travel in an easier way.

Thus, we are inviting both companies and employees to join the #railshiffters movement by pledging their support for the shift from air to rail for corporate travel and for a better rail system. The pledges and ways to join the movement can be found on the [Travel Smart](#) website. We are also inviting any companies to send us their best practices when it comes to internal practices to shift from air to rail through this [survey](#).

Further information

[Travel Smart Campaign](#)

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