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How some corporate travelers are telecommuting

BY TOM ANDERSON



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There was a time when air travel was the cat's meow for business and professional connection. Envision flying commercially to the board of directors meeting in New York City to assess Alaska profits or sealing the deal in Seattle via private jet over a glass of pinot noir and filet in a company acquisition. There's the job interview in Fairbanks to meet with a prospective boss and the quick flight to the Kenai Peninsula for a sales pitch.

Well things have changed. Enter a new kind of business meeting and a different breed of cat.

"What you're seeing is a renaissance in meeting and interactive technology," says Scott McMurren, the author of the popular Alaska Travelgram eNewsletter and an Alaska corporate travel consultant for over three decades.

"The tools entrepreneurs and business professionals have at their fingertips for meetings today, as simple as Apple's FaceTime and smartphone apps and as complex as multi-million dollar meeting-management technology, have certainly made the world flat," adds McMurren.

McMurren delineates that "corporate" travel varies, and now—so does the less expensive manner of online and telephonic communication.

The most obvious kind of travel in the business world appropriately relates to sales, marketing, and executive responsibilities such as contract and accounting functions. However, in Alaska, it's not just about face-to-face negotiations and contract memorializing. The size and geographic constraints of the state, while often forcing an email or phone conference to suffice for communication, don't always trump physicality.

"There's still absolutely no substitute for in-person connections and interaction that can only be achieved by air, water, and road when it comes to travel in Alaska," McMurren adds.

Take for example low to high-end repair service in the resource development industry from the North Slope to the Aleutians. Air and marine travel are literally the lifelines to performance. McMurren references replacements, renovations, repairs, and upgrades.

Health examinations and medical procedures also fit in the need-to-be-there category, aside from radiologic imaging assessments and diagnoses based on emailed images. Physicians and medical practitioners are hesitant, both legally and ethically, to examine patients and make medical conclusions from written or purely visual observations on a computer screen. To avoid liability, medical providers often have to fly to rural parts of Alaska and remote locations to extract a tooth, capture an X-ray image, or perform a physical exam. "Pregnant mothers in Dutch Harbor have to fly to a medical center, likely in Anchorage, for comprehensive obstetric services," says McMurren.

As McMurren alludes, "Nothing beats being there, in-person, and engaged in your business." He highlights the sales and marketing industry where the initial bond of interaction, whether in pharmaceuticals, equipment, telephony, or other commercial products handled by representatives, is imparted eye to eye. "But telecommunications have definitely changed the landscape for Alaskan commerce," he adds.

Travel or Telecommunicate

"A telephone or video conference is no substitute for a face-to-face business meeting," admits David Morris, vice president of Corporate Communications with GCI. "Video conferencing augments the consistency of communications for Alaska businesses and nonprofit organizations, but it doesn't substitute for traveling to a location to meet with clients and customers," adds Morris.

GCI offers telephone and conferencing options statewide to help offset the cost of travel and transportation for businesses. Morris explains that national telephony providers haven't entered the video conferencing market in rural Alaska, while for GCI it's a niche service.

Education, healthcare, and public safety are all government-related services that require partnership with the private sector in rural parts of the state. GCI has connected more than one hundred rural schools to instructors through video conferencing to the benefit of students and faculty. Similarly in telemedicine, for college and academic purposes in the Pacific Northwest, GCI connects Alaska villages to providers and professors. This level of access online enhances the information stream but reduces travel and airline usage.

GCI also offers high-end video conferencing via desktop and laptop computers for worldwide connectivity. Morris recalls a GCI meeting with twelve different boardrooms and offices connected across the nation and in Alaska that were centralized into one teleconference. Exchange of budget and spreadsheet information, presentations, and data was achieved by email. The event saved in travel costs, which ultimately trickles down to savings for customers and the company's bottom line.

"Particularly in rural locations in Alaska, you simply can't drive, so double and triple hops by plane, weather-dependent, could crimp plans. Often telecommunications is a lot more reliable in this scenario," says Morris.

In terms of social media and what seems a weekly launch at the national level of new smartphone and electronic tablet apps, connectivity between businesses and clients is growing while actual travel time and costs may be reducing. GCI facilitates all data streams within its customer base so revenue is generated. Telecommunication services are steadily expanding throughout Alaska and that's good for the company. Nonetheless, echoing McMurren's sentiment of in-person contact being critical to business dealings, Morris admits that GCI still uses commercial and private jet service as

needed.

“With increased bandwidth and app development in the communications industry, the cost unit continues to go down,” adds Morris. “Will this equate to less travel? That’s difficult to quantify. Particularly with small and mid-sized companies, eliminating physical travel and meetings likely wouldn’t be as successful in client and customer relations, and ultimately that’s what business is about.”

All Those Apps and Not Enough Time

The digital world of meetings in Alaska is unquestionably having an effect on companies’ bottom lines, even if by simply reducing travel expenses so allocations can be re-directed to other line items in a budget. The math is fairly straightforward: Subtract the cost of transportation, be it by plane, vehicle, or marine highway, and replace with much less expensive online and telephonic communications, and a sizable savings appears.

The amount of app and web-based meeting programs, scheduling and calendaring systems, and online access portals is staggering in 2015. An app may not even be necessary. Most Apple iPhones typically allow for up to five phones to be merged into a conference call. One can actually talk privately to another of the conference callers during the meeting or open another app while still “attending” the meeting to review documents, all on a smartphone.

In terms of apps that facilitate a conference call via cell phone, tablet, or desktop computer, most are free (beyond cellular service fees). Schedule reminders are available through apps, as well as programs to digitally record a meeting. From reminder of the start time to an automated call-in to the meeting, to agenda transfer on screen, to meeting close and audio recording, suddenly the in-person conference or interaction is less necessary in a state where air travel alone could reach over \$750 per person within Alaska.

Video conferencing is also a growing market. Microsoft’s Project HoloLens and Facebook’s Oculus Rift, both game-related applications, may morph into 3D hologram meeting capabilities. Wear the headset and sign into the meeting and it can feel like attendees are actually there in the board room. Suddenly planes, trains, and automobiles become secondary for meetings and corporate connection. The virtual office and optic cognition nearly compares to the real thing.

Capital Access—To Fly or Not To Fly (To Juneau)

Commercial airlines and the state’s Marine Highway system may not appreciate the upgrades undergone by the Alaska State Legislature’s Legislative Affairs Agency (LAA) over the last decade, but businesses and industries trying to reduce travel costs are celebrating the modernization.

LAA oversees all state legislative committee hearings and manages the rooms in which these daily meetings are held during the annual January to April ninety-day session. There are twenty-three Legislative Information Offices dispersed throughout the state in targeted urban and rural centers, most accommodating to public access. Within these Legislative Information Offices are conference rooms and telephone centers that afford communication between people testifying and policymakers.

Sue Cotter is the manager of the Legislative Information and Teleconference Network. “When it comes to connectivity and access to Alaska’s legislative process, LAA’s technological infrastructure has leveled the business playing field for smaller businesses and entrepreneurs to give input and opinions,” says Cotter. “Now corporate executives and management can just as easily monitor and participate in a committee meeting via a teleconference or streaming on the Internet as flying to Juneau.”

For commerce in Alaska, no different than in any other state, regulatory and legislative deliberations can make or break a business. Taxes, burdensome regulations, cuts, and crimps can adversely affect a company's product and process. Testifying, providing documentation and written materials, and conveying sentiment and feelings are all integral means to change laws and benefit commerce. To those ends, it's becoming much easier via state-of-the-art telephonic and conferencing equipment to alleviate the need for travel to a city that regularly suffers airline delays because of Southeast Alaska's temperamental weather.

Tim Powers, media services specialist for the Alaska Legislature, highlighted the upgraded teleconference system in the State Capitol. The current setup has all nine committee rooms equipped with audio teleconference technology using Cisco MeetingPlace technology. The committee room sound systems that are used to create the official recordings of the proceeding are also capable of taking testimony via teleconference and for the video streaming which was installed for the 2011 legislative session.

"Our streams are available at akleg.gov, and this year we launched a new website that is mobile responsive and allows people with tablets or smartphones to stream the videos straight from our website," notes Powers. "We also offer iPhone and Android apps for access to our streams and two-way video conferencing from Juneau, Fairbanks, and Anchorage, utilizing specialty equipment that's permanently located in non-committee rooms."

Balance Remains

As McMurren and Morris remind, when it comes to business interaction and corporate dealings—nothing trumps the intimacy and trust-building of meeting in person. Talking, gestures, and emotions are part and parcel to the art of negotiation and customer service.

However money matters too, particularly in a for-profit organization that seeks efficiencies over excess.

Technology's advancements providing access to online and telephonic meetings shouldn't be taken for granted. These mediums of communications can certainly lessen travel within Alaska and across the globe, thereby reducing the associated costs of tickets and hotels.

As for monitoring bureaucracy and legislative deliberations, getting one's message to the right policymakers seems more imperative than actual presence at a hearing. In fiscal year 2014, the LAA teleconferenced more than one thousand committee meetings. That meant less travel and more engagement in the process of rules and regulations for business owners and managers.

Will airline travel for business purposes become a thing of the past? Doubtful. Will the growth and low cost of holding meetings over a phone or computer be a welcomed alternative for businesses trying to cut expenses in 2015 and years to come? Guaranteed.

FREELANCER TOM ANDERSON WRITES FROM ACROSS ALASKA.

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