



BTNGROUP
RESEARCH

Overhauling travel & expense policies: New corporate priorities and traveler expectations

WHITE PAPER

APRIL 2024



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Introduction

Travel and expense (T&E) policies are having a heyday as travel managers update their policies to better align with business objectives. The updates have two main impetuses: a resurgence of business travel, as reported in a Mastercard [trends](#) article from 2023,¹ and predictions of higher spending through 2025, according to a Mastercard survey of business travel managers in 2023.²

[Predicted](#) price increases,³ new traveler expectations and a growing need for sustainable travel are forcing companies to rethink how they manage travel, communicate policies and control costs. Companies and employees are bringing a new understanding of the value of face-to-face meetings and business travel to this uncharted environment.

How are company leaders balancing the need to control costs against traveler demands for flexibility? How are they balancing calls for productivity against the return on investment of face-to-face interactions?

Mastercard worked with the BTN Group to survey two cohorts: travel decision-makers at large companies, and business travelers who take six or more business trips a year. About half of the surveyed decision-makers manage travel globally; the rest operate regionally.

In this white paper, we discuss:

- What is new in T&E policies
- The drive for compliance and cost savings
- The importance of sustainability and "duty of care"
- What business travelers want in T&E policies
- Key booking policies for air and ground transportation, meals and lodging, and payments and expense management



What is new in T&E policies

How are companies adapting policies to balance the needs of cost controls against the increasing demands of workers?

Nearly half (47%) of the surveyed travel decision-makers described their last policy change as a tightening to simplify employee choices and better control costs. Slightly fewer (44%) said they simplified and shortened their policies. Updates include adding examples and specificity or clarification on what is allowed. The 26% who loosened policies eliminated some pre-trip approvals and allowed more managers to decide who can fly premium-economy and business class.

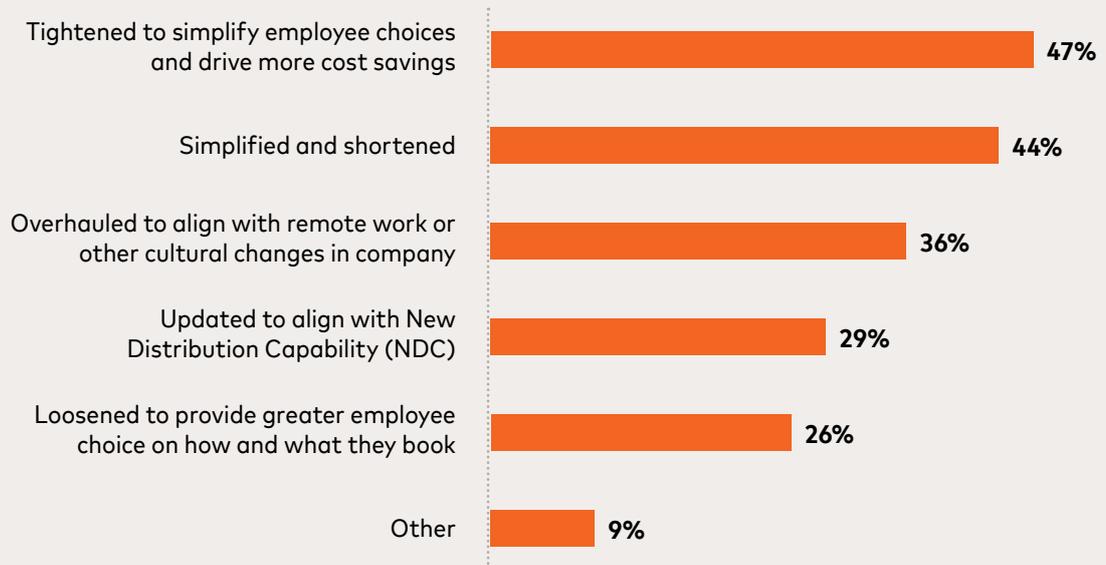
47%

tightened policy to simplify employee choices and drive cost savings

Among the biggest spenders – with annual T&E of \$500 million or more – 62% described their last policy changes as an overhaul to align with remote work or other cultural changes within the company, while 57% simplified and shortened policies.

Reflecting the new realities of remote and hybrid work, many policy additions now define "bleisure" travel – a combination of business and leisure – and any associated reimbursement. Some policies also define companion travel and the booking of vacation rentals instead of hotels.

Chart 1: Travel decision-makers - How did your policy change most recently?



When it comes to frequency of policy updates, more than half (54%) of companies update their policies on an “as needed” basis. Meanwhile, 41% update their policies annually, 22% update their policies quarterly, and 9% have not updated their policies in more than two years.

Communicating policy

To communicate T&E policies to employees, 8 in 10 travel decision-makers use designated company intranet sites or enterprise communications tools. More than 6 in 10 embed T&E policies and processes into online booking or expense tools to flag choices as falling within or outside policy. Of the biggest spenders or those with global travel responsibilities, 9 in 10 communicate policy via these designated sites.

84%

communicate T&E policy via designated company intranet sites or enterprise communications tools

Across all respondents, half email a travel policy document to employees, and nearly half require new employees to view or attend travel and expense policy training. Such training is required by 57% of the biggest spenders and by 55% of those with annual travel spend of \$50 million to \$499.9 million.

An emerging trend involves online or in-person training — and even testing — on travel and payment policies. Some companies require travelers to view a video presentation, pass a test or acknowledge understanding of policies before they receive a corporate credit card. Increasingly, companies are seeing the need to train new employees — often with varying levels of business travel experience — and even retrain existing employees who have not traveled for the past couple of years. Whatever the status of individual travelers, proactive and continuous communications can ensure the cultivation of desirable behaviors companywide.



The drive for compliance and cost savings

58%

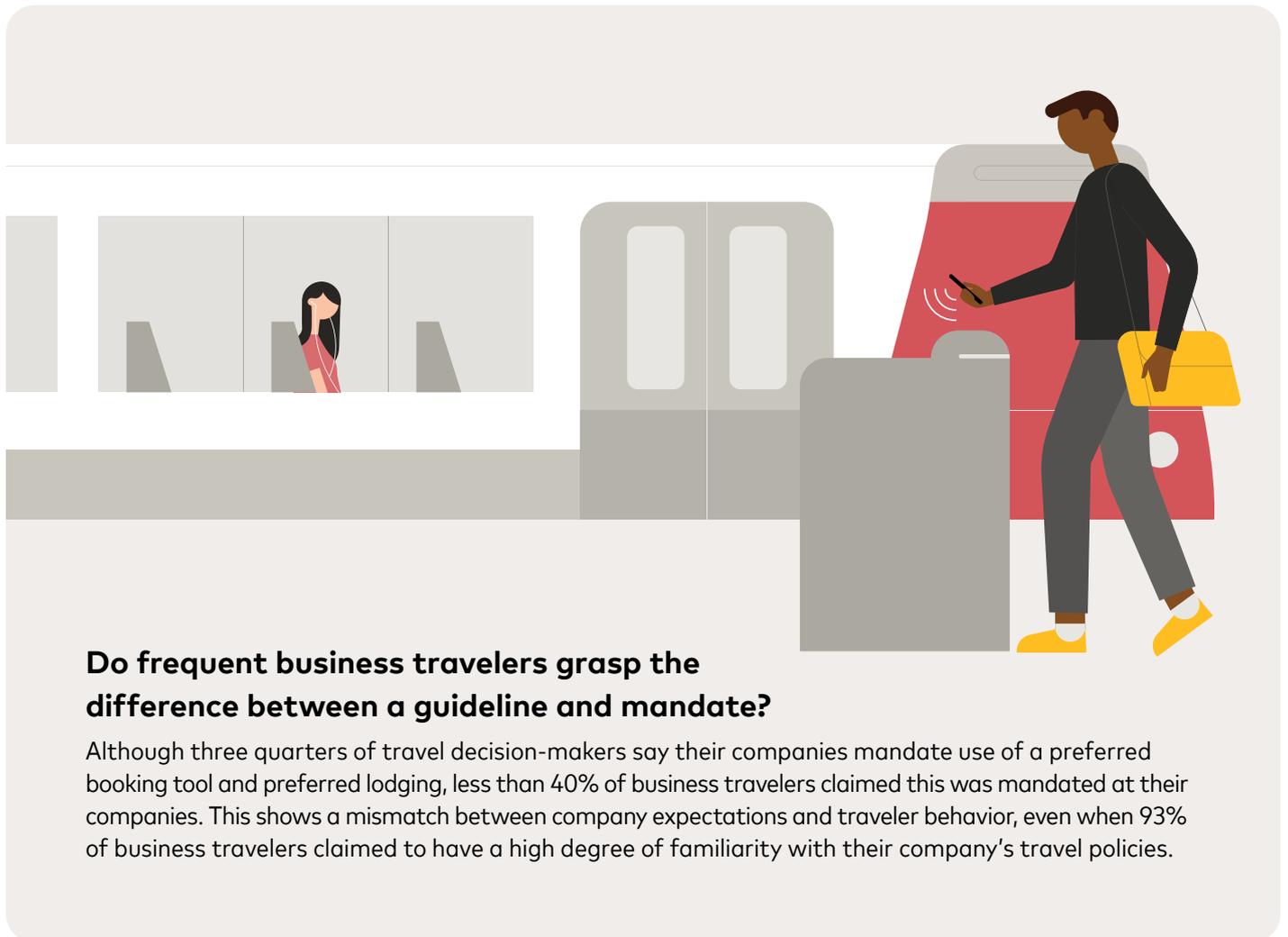
of companies mandate that travelers follow policies or risk consequences

Mandates or guidelines?

What level of decision-making and flexibility do large corporations allow travelers or managers today?

Three fifths (58%) of travel decision-makers mandate that travelers follow policies or risk consequences. About half (48%) entrust travelers to exercise discretion on appropriate business expenses. About half also allow managers to grant exceptions on allowable business travel expenses, while 29% only allow senior management to grant exceptions.

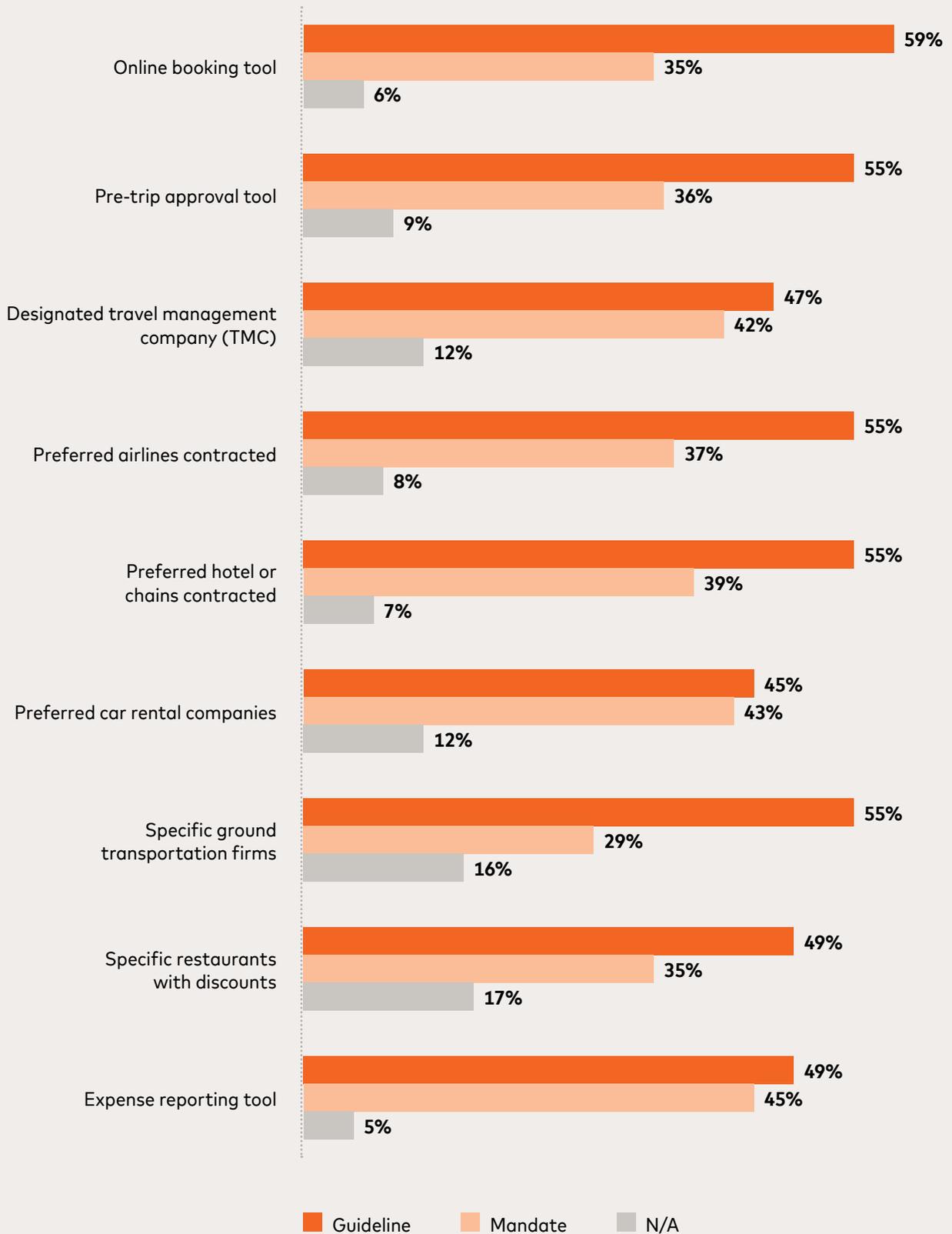
However, at the biggest spenders — companies with annual travel spend of \$500 million or more — 76% mandate that their travelers must follow the policy or risk consequences.



Do frequent business travelers grasp the difference between a guideline and mandate?

Although three quarters of travel decision-makers say their companies mandate use of a preferred booking tool and preferred lodging, less than 40% of business travelers claimed this was mandated at their companies. This shows a mismatch between company expectations and traveler behavior, even when 93% of business travelers claimed to have a high degree of familiarity with their company's travel policies.

Chart 2: Business travelers – does your company's T&E policy guide or mandate the following?



65%

of companies require pre-trip approvals

Pre-trip approvals

Travel decision-makers and business travelers appear to be more aligned when it comes to pre-trip approvals. More than 6 in 10 decision-makers (65%) say their companies require pre-trip approval of all travel bookings, and most use email, an in-house tool, or an enterprise communication tool. Among business travelers, 82% say their companies require managers to approve all travel bookings.

A trend cited by some travel decision-makers is the removal of some pre-trip approval requirements, especially second-level approvals, since survey responses indicated that "98% of trips were approved." A handful of respondents mentioned the elimination of pre-trip approvals and lowest logical fares in preparation for New Distribution Capability (NDC) airfares. NDC fares must be booked immediately, which rules out pre-trip approvals.

City lodging and meal caps

More companies are providing travelers with city or destination-specific costs for lodging, meals and transportation. Over 7 in 10 travel decision-makers say their companies use city caps that establish maximum reimbursement or guidelines for lodging, 65% use city meal caps, and less than half use transportation caps. City caps appear to resonate with the business travelers as 7 in 10 say their companies use them for lodging, meals and transportation — slightly higher percentages than travel decision-makers.

73%

of companies use lodging city caps

For cost estimates by city, some companies rely on data from travel management companies, consultants, and the BTN [Corporate Travel Index and Calculator](#). Others create their own city lodging or meal caps or city per diems based on their own expense data or input from local employees. Companies using custom travel apps may share costs with travelers as part of local insights into a city or destination.

65%

of companies use meal city caps

Meal costs are one of the fastest-growing travel expense categories for companies. The [US January 2024 Consumer Price Index](#)⁴ shows a 5.1% inflation rate for food away from home versus 1.2% at grocery stores. It also shows the inflation rate for food away from home rising from 2% in July 2023 to 5% in January 2024. Several decision-makers noted efforts to reduce meal costs. Some are being more prescriptive about allowable meal expenditures, using caps and reminding travelers about allowable alcohol reimbursements. Others have simply imposed meal limits.

About 45% of respondents reimburse for actual meal costs submitted, while 43% limit reimbursements to daily city caps. One third use daily per diems based on statutory requirements, while 31% use a daily per diem specific to the employee. Just 11% instruct employees to spend a "reasonable" amount.

Many respondents are increasing meal allowances or per diems because of increasing costs. Some exclude the most expensive cities from their caps while providing guidance for most other destinations.

But the city caps — whether guidelines or mandated reimbursements — are but one example of the specificity that travel buyers have added to travel policy. Instead of "reasonable" as a general guideline, many travel policies now define acceptable spending ranges, often by city and travel category.

Chart 3: Travel decision-makers - Does your company use city caps that establish maximum reimbursements or guidance for lodging, meals or transportation?

	All	Global	US/Can.	LatAm	Eur.	Asia Pac.	Mid. East and Africa
Lodging	73%	70%	72%	75%	81%	81%	81%
Meals	65%	63%	65%	67%	72%	69%	73%
Transportation	49%	34%	56%	54%	63%	62%	62%
Daily per diem	46%	39%	54%	49%	60%	58%	50%

Shorter, simpler policies with less jargon

A trend not lost on 44% of respondents is shorter, simpler policies. Companies have tried to shrink travel policies from 30 pages to fewer than 10 or even down to two or three pages. Others are removing industry jargon or terms unfamiliar to younger generations or international employees. Processes often included in T&E policies are often embedded in online booking or expense tools to automatically flag violations as employees enter data.

44%

of companies have simpler, shorter T&E policies

Remote work and other cultural changes within a company mean more than one third (36%) of travel decision-makers have "overhauled" their policies. Such overhauls may involve a new travel management company or other suppliers, or they may include entirely new policies for remote and hybrid work that define reimbursable travel or quantify how many internal meetings can be reimbursed each year as employees travel to meet coworkers. More than a quarter (26%) have loosened their policies to provide greater employee choice on how and what they book.

The importance of sustainability and "duty of care"

61%

of companies encourage travelers to book sustainable travel

Younger travelers are demanding that employer policies reflect issues such as sustainability. "Sustainable travel is the buzzword for 2024; it's a must-do," said one respondent. In some regions, new government regulations demand reports on the carbon output of business travel.

More than 6 in 10 decision-makers encourage travelers to book sustainable options. Just over half say booking tools identify the carbon impact of flight and hotel options, while slightly fewer (47%) say the travel department is compiling and reporting travel sustainability metrics. Just one quarter of respondents charge travelers or departments an internal "sustainability tax" on booking options.

Sustainability initiatives include carbon pricing, taxes on trips, and eliminating day-trips by air. Others encourage trains over flights on designated routes and the choice of smaller, hybrid or electric vehicles.

Some are reviewing trips to determine if some can be shifted to video calls, encouraging travelers to share ground transportation, and ensuring that all necessary air travel is booked in economy and eliminates stopovers. Others are working on guidelines around acceptable price increases for greener options.

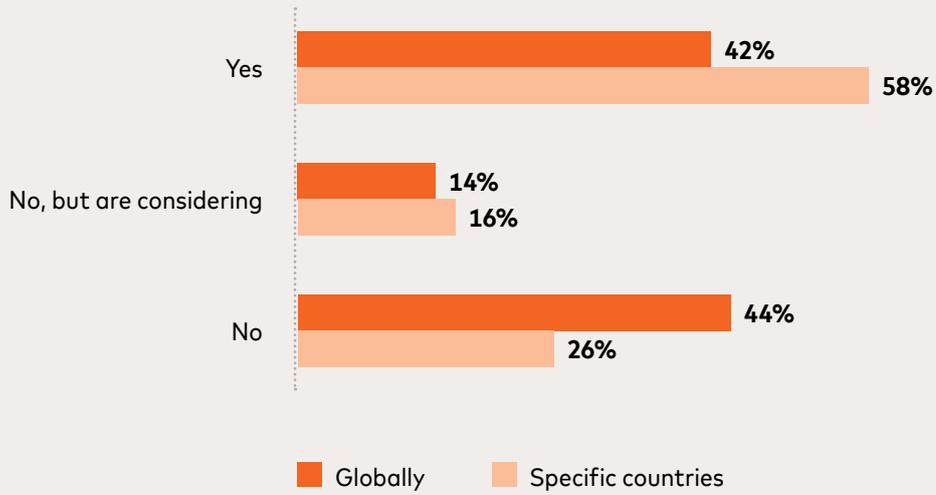


Rail over air for sustainability of cost saving?

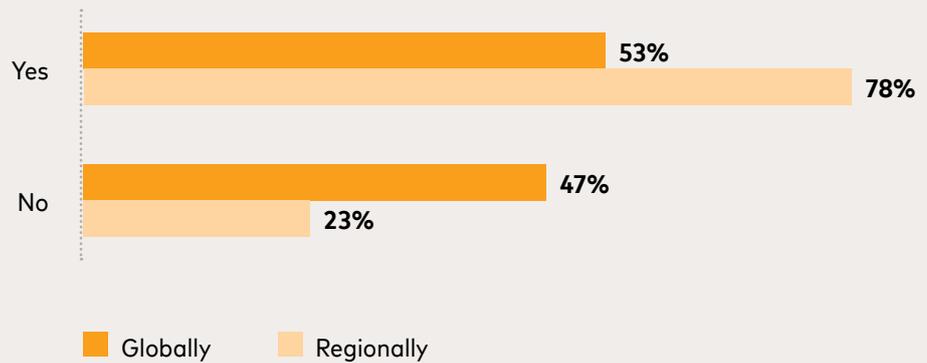
About three quarters (74%) of companies have either implemented or considered regional or country policies to encourage rail over air for sustainability or cost saving. Implementation is lower on the global level.

Chart 4: Does your company encourage or require travel by rail instead of air when available as a more sustainable or lower-cost option?

Travel decision-makers:



Business travelers:

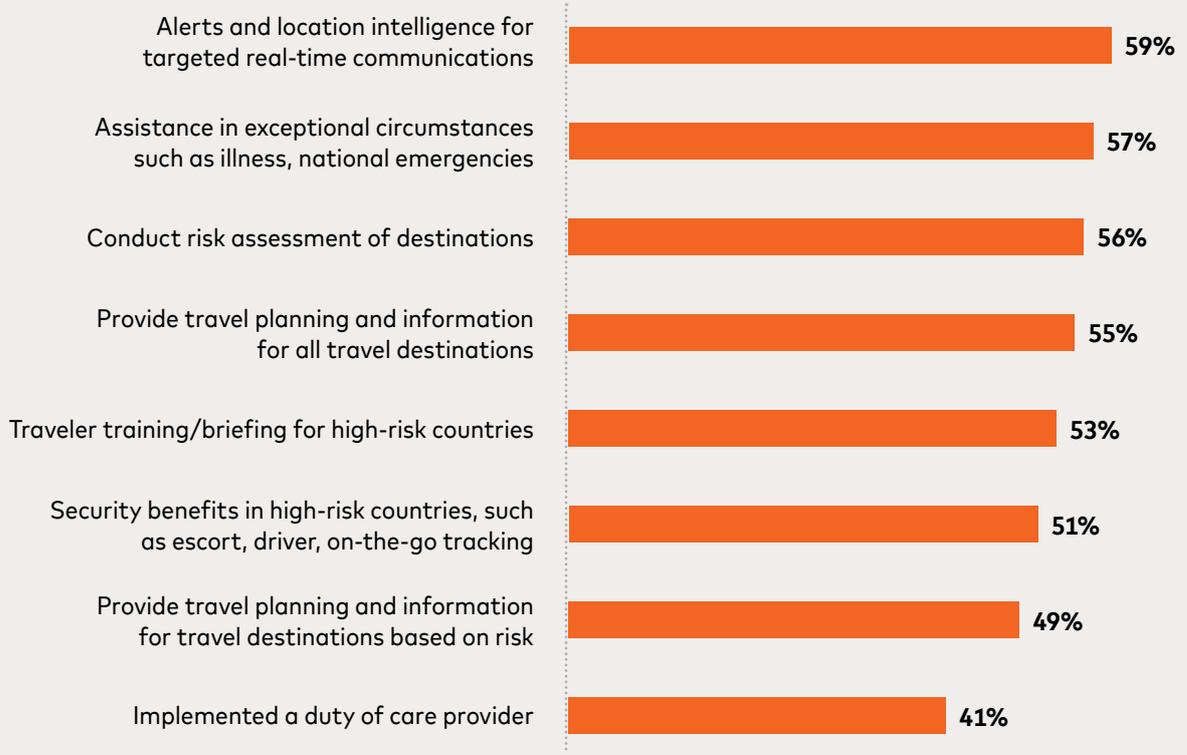


Duty of care

Duty of care is not new to travel policies. However, companies are emphasizing their commitment and stressing the need for travelers to book travel within designated channels. When travelers use nonpreferred channels, the company may not be able to provide benefits.

More than half of business travelers say duty of care includes security benefits in high-risk countries, such as a personal escort, driver and tracking. Nearly half say their organizations provide travel planning and destination information plus assistance in exceptional circumstances.

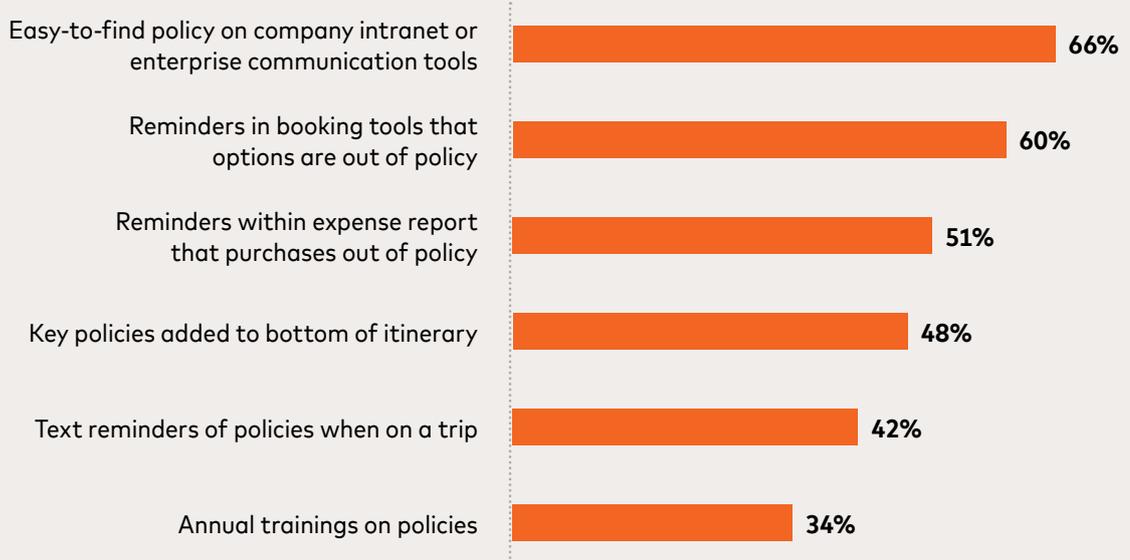
Chart 5: Travel decision-makers - Concerning duty of care, which of the following does your company provide?



What business travelers want in T&E policies

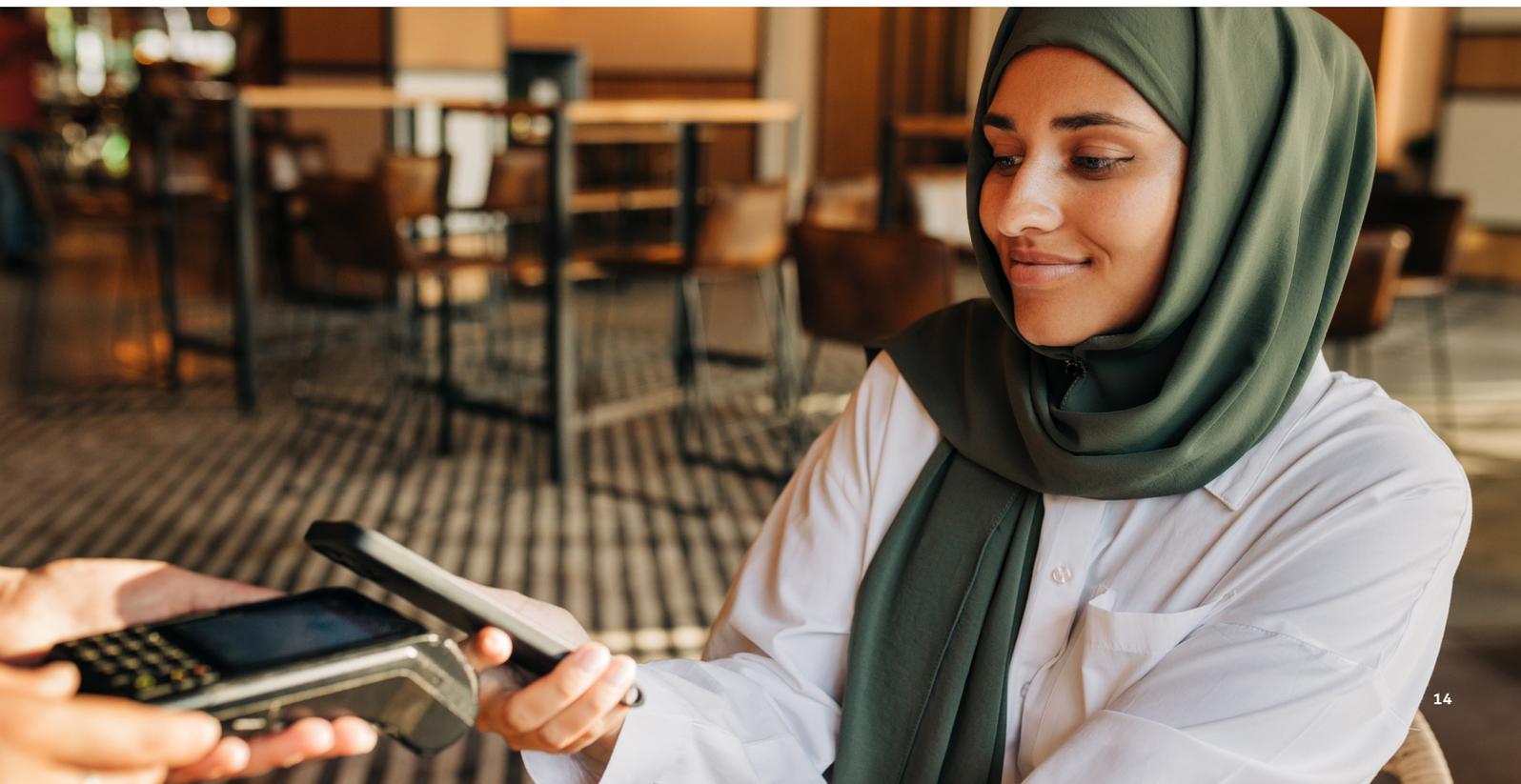
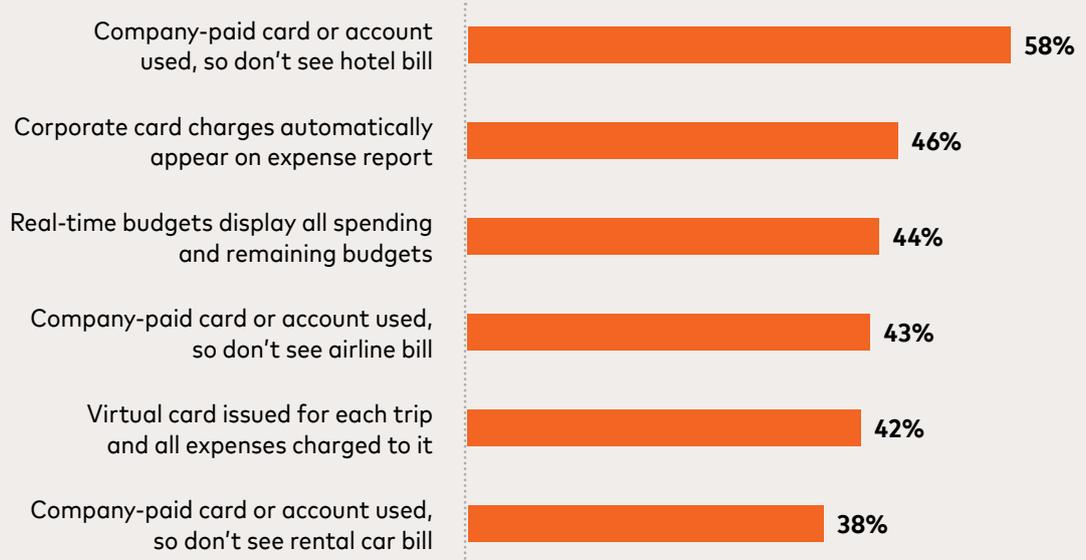
More than half of business travelers want easy-to-find policies on a company intranet or enterprise communication tools as a top-3 consideration for policy adherence. Many also desire automated reminders in booking and expense tools when choices are out of policy.

Chart 6: Business travelers - Which of the following would make it easier for you to adhere to your company's T&E policies? (top 3 preferences)



More than half (53%) of business travelers said system integration makes it easier to book, pay for and seek reimbursement of business expenditures. And, between 40% and 60% of business travelers say charges for hotels, flights or car rentals are charged to company-paid cards or accounts.

Chart 7: Business travelers - Which of the following aspects of travel processes are integrated in your company's T&E system to make it easier to book, pay for and submit expense reports?

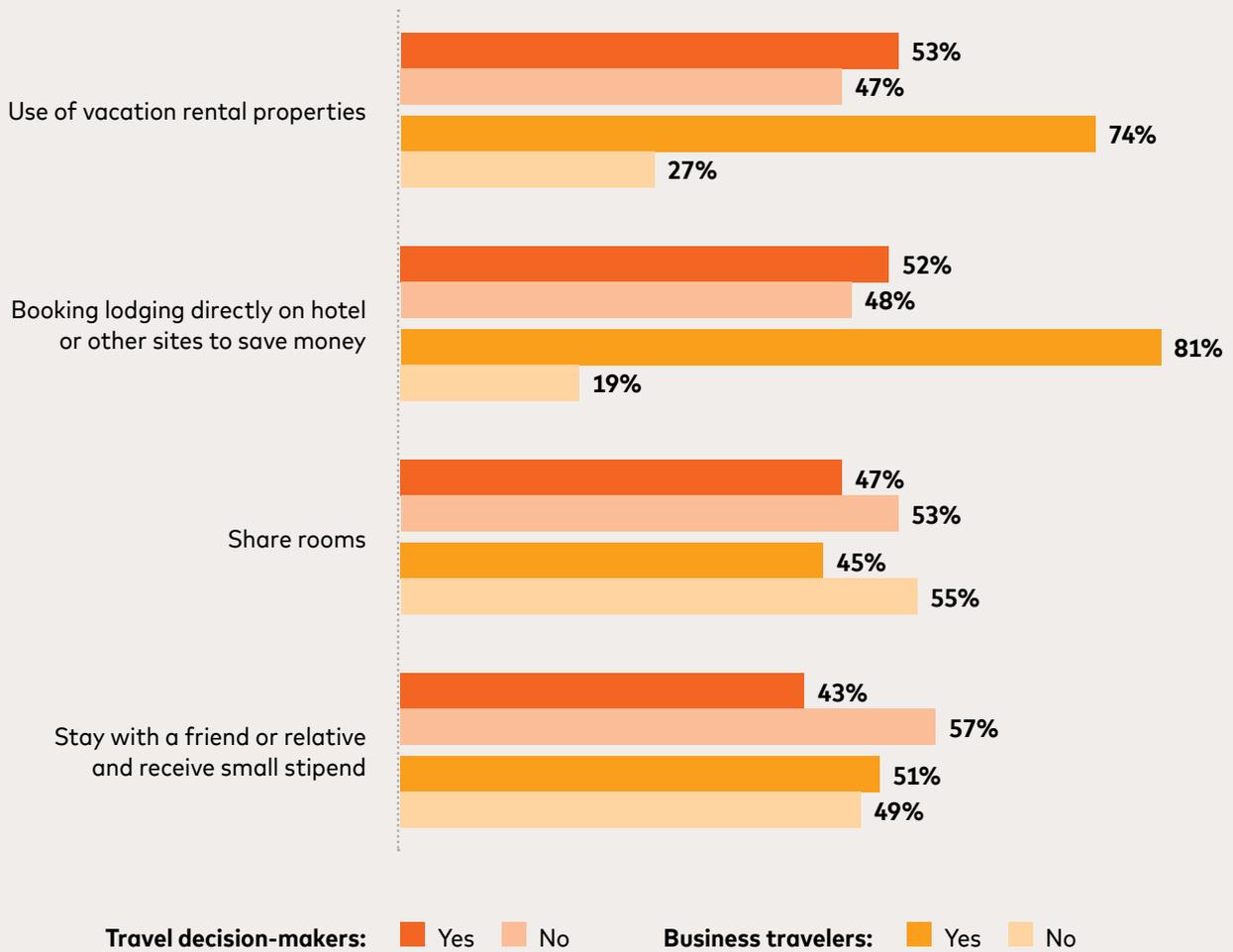


Key trends

More than half of companies allow travelers to book lodging through vacation rental sites or directly on a hotel or other site to save money. Some companies prohibit the use of vacation rentals for business travel because of duty-of-care concerns.

Business travelers sometimes appear to have different understandings of these policies. Nearly three quarters of business travelers said use of vacation rental sites is allowed, and over 8 in 10 said booking directly on hotel sites is permitted.

Chart 8: Does your company allow any of the following for business use?



Key booking policies for air and ground transportation, meals and lodging, and payments and expense management

of companies have a global travel policy

Global travel policies

Nine in 10 companies have a global travel policy: 61% rely on regional or local addendums to meet unique needs; 28% use just one global policy. The remaining 11% rely on country or regional policies defined in multiple offices around the world.

Consolidation of travel programs and policies is a decades-old trend. It began with the largest companies, and 95% of employees at companies that spend \$500 million or more on travel annually say they have a global policy. Consolidation allows companies to combine spending and contracts across global suppliers, such as travel management companies, online booking or expense providers, global distribution systems, payment companies, airlines, hotel chains and car rental firms.

Global travel management and policies also make it easier for companies that frequently transfer employees from one region to another. And a consolidated, global view of travel expenditures provides finance and senior leadership teams with a broad, consistent view of spending.

Corporate structure often dictates the need for regional or local addendums. Some companies allow regional offices to use more restrictive policies than a global policy or to accommodate local needs within a policy. When companies have multiple regional or country policies, it becomes more complex — and sometimes more costly — to negotiate with suppliers and implement services. Companies may also need to normalize reporting to produce a single view of travel expenditures across multiple policies and practices.

Booking tools

Three quarters of travel decision-makers say their companies mandate use of a preferred booking tool. The share rises to 82% among those responsible for global travel programs.

As for business travelers, 59% describe their company's online booking tool as a guideline, while 35% say they are made to use it.

Preferred airline suppliers

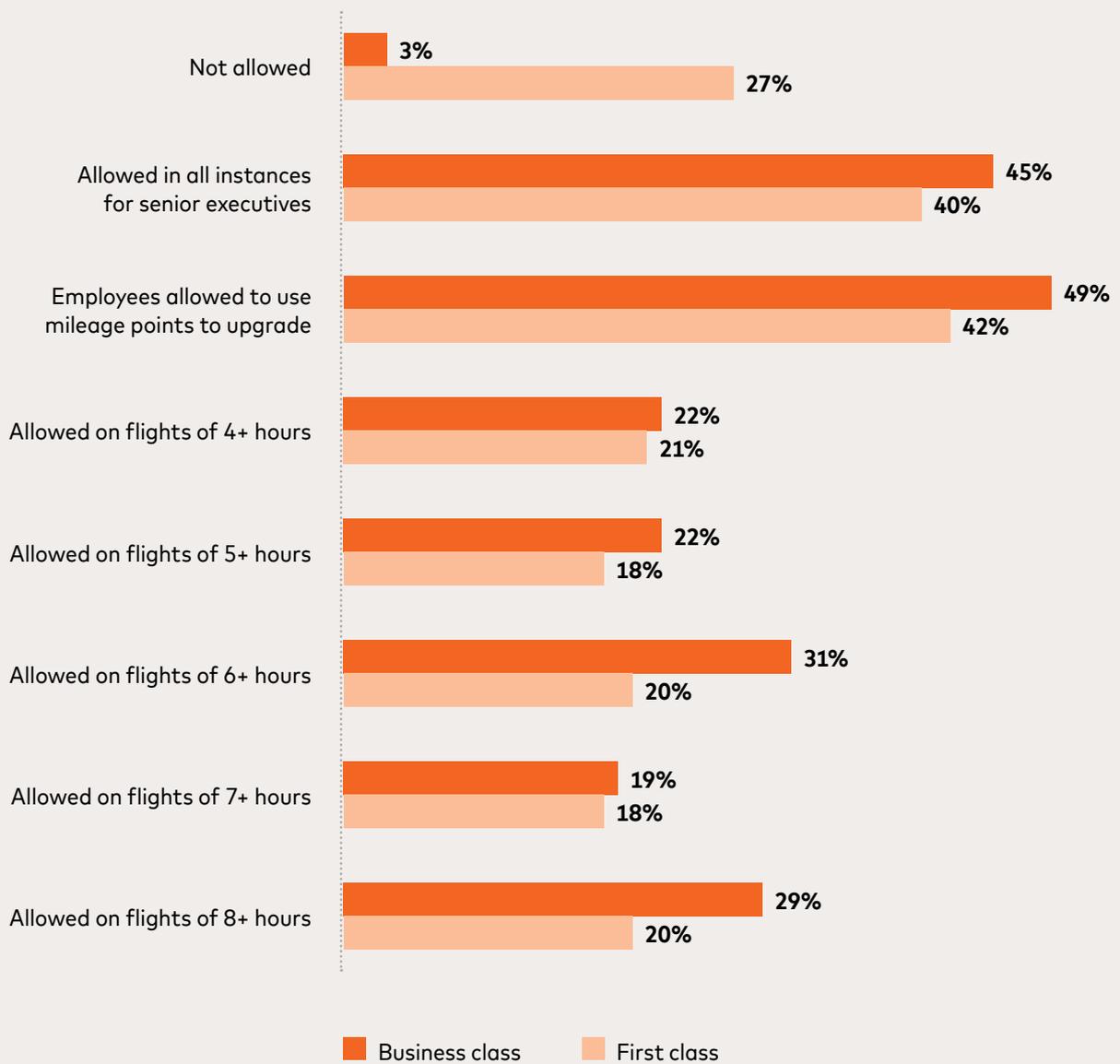
Three quarters of companies contract globally or regionally with preferred airlines, while 69% contract with preferred air carriers on a country-specific basis, according to travel decision-makers. Among companies with annual travel spend of \$50 million or more, more than 8 in 10 contract globally or regionally. Across those who manage global travel programs, 82% contract globally with preferred airlines.

Booking policies on flight classes

More than 4 in 10 companies allow employees to use mileage points to upgrade to first class and permit senior executives to book first class. However, 27% of respondents do not allow first-class travel. Other employees may be eligible to book first class when flight duration exceeds a set threshold, typically 4 to 10 hours.

About half of companies allow employees to use mileage points to upgrade to business class, and 45% allow business class for senior executives. Other employees are eligible for business class when the flight duration exceeds a set threshold ranging from 4 to 10 hours. About 3% of respondents say business class is not allowed.

Chart 9: Travel decision-makers - What is your policy concerning use of business and first class?



Business traveler responses about use of business-class and first-class travel closely align with policies noted by travel decision-makers.

About 7% of business travelers say business-class travel is not allowed at their companies, 44% say it is allowed for senior executives, and 42% say employees can use mileage points to upgrade. Between 26% to 36% identified one of the hourly thresholds listed in chart 9.

For first class, 8% say it is not allowed, 43% say it is allowed for senior executives, and 42% say employees can use points to upgrade.

According to travel decision-makers, 15% of their organizations prohibit basic economy class, while 24% allow it in some instances. More than half allow premium economy in select instances, but only 17% allow it in all instances.

Some travel decision-makers have analyzed the costs of business-class and first-class travel on international flights in the context of traveler productivity, business objectives and wellbeing. A few have opted to move travelers to business class on outbound flights to better meet business objectives, while others offer business class on return flights to ensure that travelers are not too tired to work upon return.

From both cost-control and traveler-wellbeing perspectives, flight class continues to be an area for tinkering so policies can meet employee and management needs.

Preferred lodging suppliers and booking policies

The global average daily rate for hotels bookings rose 29.8% year over year in 2022, 4.3% in 2023, and is expected to increase 3.6% in 2024, according to the [2024 Global Business Travel Forecast](#).⁵ In the top 25 markets, travel decision-makers often find double-digit price increases due to the strong demand for meetings and events.

In addition to contracting with preferred suppliers and trying to consolidate spending with fewer suppliers to secure more favorable rates, buyers often rely on rates negotiated by travel management companies or other intermediaries. Others use hotel rate caps to better guide travelers. One survey respondent said their company was “trialing hotel rate caps in their top 10 destinations” this year.

Three quarters of companies contract with preferred hotel properties or chains for specific regional and global rates, while slightly fewer (73%) contract on a country-specific basis.

When contracted rates are available, 76% of corporations require travelers to book them. Among respondents who manage all global travel, 81% require travelers to book preferred rates.

52%

of companies sometimes allow premium economy

76%

of companies require travelers to book negotiated hotel rates when available

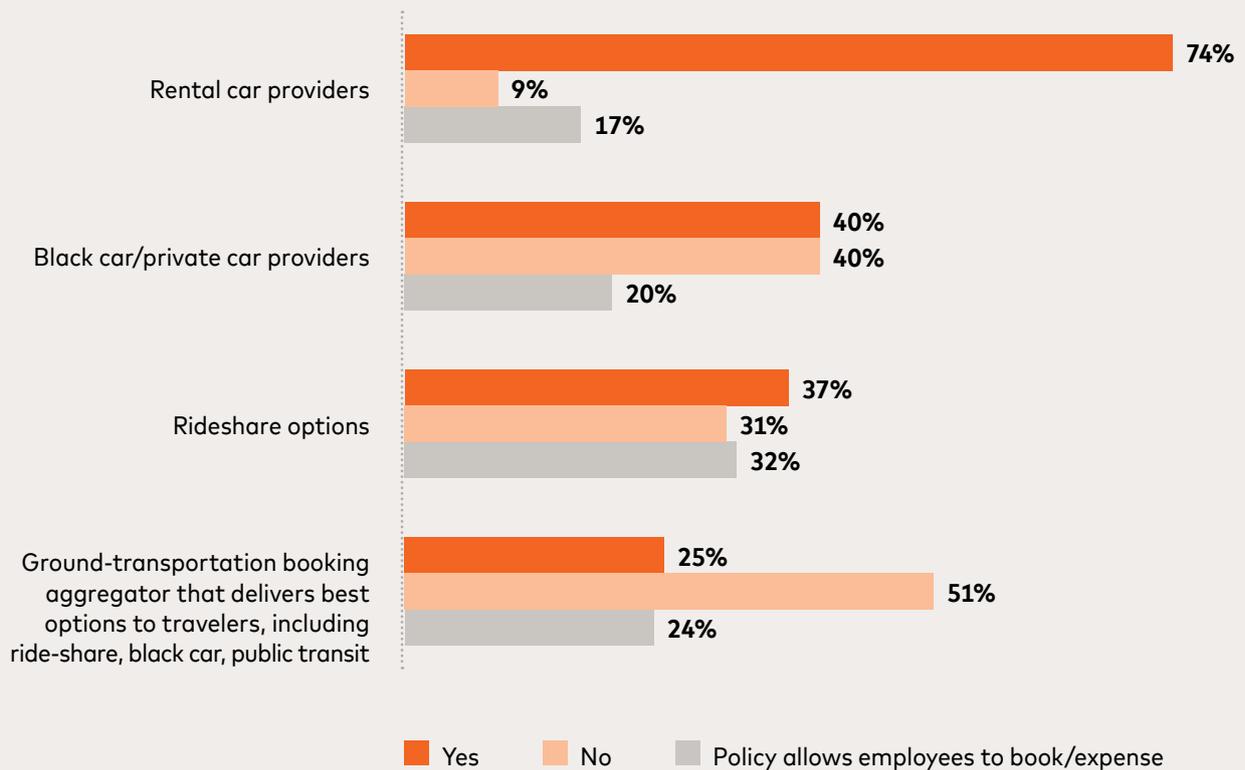
Preferred ground transportation suppliers and booking policies

While three quarters of companies have preferred car rental contracts, far fewer have contracts with black car services, rideshare providers, or ground transport booking aggregators. App-based aggregators provide companies or travelers with a range of pricing and service options, and they can provide discounted rates along with spend reports.

One company noted "tightened car rental bookings to reduce liability" as a recent policy change.

In Europe, several companies have new policies that mandate train instead of air travel on certain city pairs or regions. One company has banned air travel for all trips of less than 500km, while another has banned air in favor of rail for all trips of less than 3.5 hours.

Chart 10: Travel decision-makers - Does your company have contracts in place with any of the following types of ground transportation providers? Does policy allow employees to book directly and expense any categories?



54%

of business travelers prioritize travel payment and expense integration

Integrated booking, payments and expenses

More than half (54%) of business travelers prioritize the integration of travel, payment and expenses for automated expense reporting, and nearly half (47%) would like the ability to book wherever or however they want. A quarter would like the company booking tool to identify the best options based on prior travel or preferences, and a third would like the elimination of some pre-trip approvals. A further third would like the use of virtual cards and mobile wallets or centralized travel accounts to charge air, hotel or other expense categories so they do not have to see the bills themselves.

Payments and expense management

Corporate card programs are the norm for 95% of companies with more than 50,000 employees and for 86% of travel decision-makers overall. The remaining 14% of travel decision-makers stated they do not have a corporate card program. About half of travel decision-makers say their companies have individual bills with company-paid cards, 41% say they have company bills with company-paid cards, and 11% say they have individual bills and individual-paid cards.

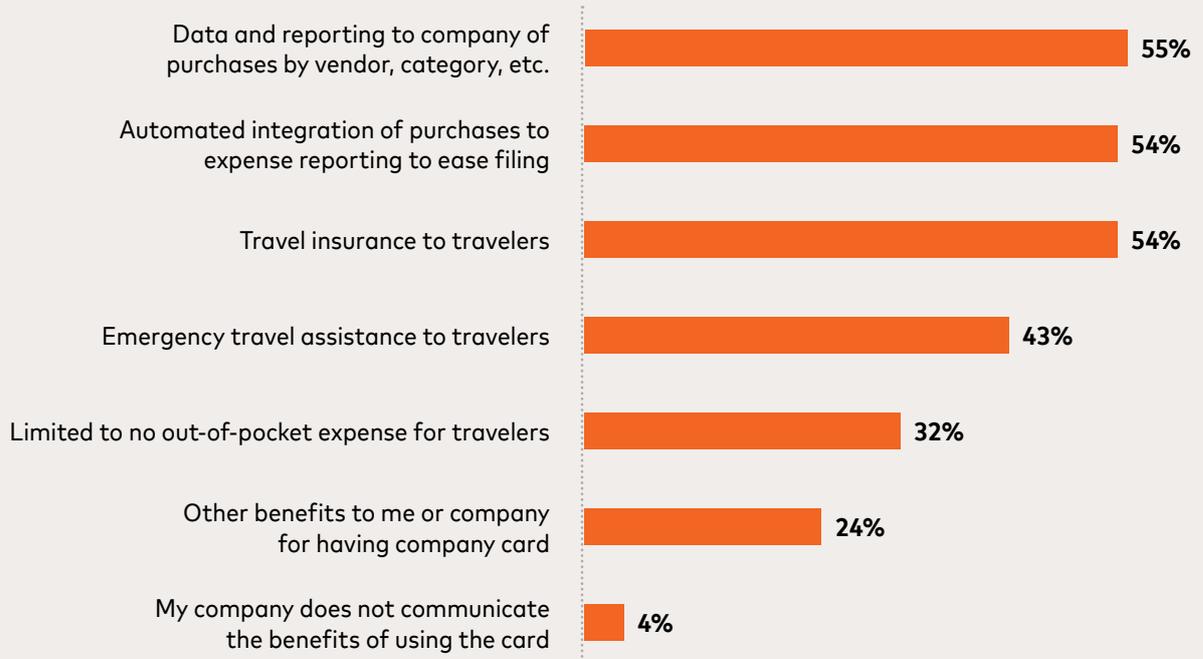
However, not all business travelers have corporate cards: 40% of travel decision-makers issue corporate cards to all employees, 28% issue them to all frequent travelers, and about a quarter only issue cards to travelers at management levels and above.

Chart 11: Travel decision-makers - What is your company's primary means of payment for travel cost categories?

	Air	Lodging	Ground transportation	Meals and incidentals
Corporate card	64%	69%	68%	68%
Centrally billed account	32%	23%	20%	15%
Virtual card	20%	21%	13%	15%
TMC-invoiced account	17%	15%	15%	11%
Personal card	12%	22%	27%	34%
Mobile, single-use virtual card	8%	10%	11%	14%
Other	1%	1%	2%	2%

Nearly 8 in 10 business travelers are required to use a corporate card for business travel expenses. However, 3 in 10 also prefer to use their own personal credit cards to collect points or build their credit.

Chart 12: Business travelers - Does your company communicate the benefits of using the corporate credit card for business travel purchases? Which of the following have been communicated to you?



Conclusion

As business travel evolves, travel decision-makers can proactively manage policies and travel to rein in spending, help travelers make better choices at the point of sale, educate travelers and managers, deploy technologies including AI to audit expenses, and assist travelers with booking and expenses.

Travel decision-makers and business travelers point to [benefits that business travel provides](#) to companies and individuals.⁶ In our survey of business travelers, nearly half agree that business travel is critical to drive their organization's growth, and 4 in 10 agree that business travel is critical to their professional growth and career advancement. Just over 42% agree that travel policies and systems in use by their company must be enhanced to support more business travel.

Companies may provide a level of decision-making flexibility to travelers in the form of policy guidelines. However, nearly 6 in 10 companies now require travelers to comply with certain minimums: use of a booking tool, travel management company, payment card, or all three. These minimums allow companies to provide duty of care to travelers and control costs.

Integrated tools, which span booking to payment to expenses, can streamline the workflow for travelers and managers. They can also provide travelers and budget owners with real-time reporting to prevent overspending. Companies that invest in proactive, continuous business travel policy education and calls-to-action for their employees, will yield the desired impact.

Policies should also reflect a company's current strategies and priorities. As they change, travel leaders can work closely with senior leadership, human resources, travelers and other groups to update policies and procedures.



Research methodology

Mastercard partnered with the BTN Group to conduct an online survey from December 19, 2023 to January 22, 2024 of 265 corporate travel decision-makers responsible for global travel in North America, Europe, Asia Pacific, Latin America & the Caribbean, and the Middle East & Africa. A separate but similar online survey was conducted January 16–22, 2024 with 151 business travelers in North America, Europe and Asia-Pacific who travel six or more times a year on domestic or international business trips. To qualify for the survey, respondents had to work at companies with 500 or more employees. Among travel decision-maker respondents, 46% work for companies with 5,000 to 49,999 employees, and 22% work for companies with 50,000 or more employees. Among business travelers, 86% work for companies with a travel policy.

265 qualified responses from people who work for organizations with 500+ employees and are responsible for T&E policies.

Company headcounts

500 to 4,999	32%
5,000 to 49,999	46%
50,000 or more	22%

Company revenues

\$100B or more	6%
\$50B to \$99.9B	11%
\$1B to \$49.9B	37%
\$500M to \$999.9M	20%
\$250M to \$499.9M	11%
\$100M to \$249M	13%
\$99M or less	2%

T&E management responsibilities

All Global Travel	47%
US/Canada	57%
Europe	51%
LATAM/Caribbean	29%
Middle East / Africa	28%
Asia Pacific	38%

Annual travel spending

\$2B+	2%
\$1B to \$1.999B	1%
\$500M to \$999.9M	5%
\$100M to \$499.9M	19%
\$50M to \$99.9M	21%
\$25M to \$49.9M	26%
\$24.9M or less	26%

151 qualified business travelers from the U.S., Canada, Europe and Asia-Pacific who take 6+ domestic or international business trips a year and work for companies with 500 or more employees.

Company size, by employee count		Trips per year	Domestic	International
500 to 4,999 employees	40%	0 to 5	5%	43%
5,000 to 50,000 employees	43%	6 to 9	46%	27%
50,000 or more employees	17%	10 to 19	29%	21%
		20 to 49	14%	7%
		50+	5%	3%

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