

Business people prefer working in their cars instead of noisy and cramped trains, planes and airports

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Noisy and cramped conditions in trains, planes and airports are discouraging many commuters and business people from working while travelling, new research shows.

Sociologist Dr Donald Hislop and psychologist Dr Carolyn Axtell found that the most popular place to work was in vehicles in the car park of a motorway service station.

In a paper in the journal *Work, employment and society* Dr Hislop, of Loughborough University, and Dr Axtell, of the University of Sheffield, say “significant variations” in noise and lack of space “inhibited people’s ability to work” on trains and planes.

They analysed 681 completed survey forms handed out on intercity trains in the East Midlands, an M1 motorway survey station in the Midlands and a regional airport in southern England. This was the first survey of how the working conditions of professionals travelling by car, plane and train affected their use of laptops, mobile phones and paper.

The researchers found that 42% of respondents worked ‘quite a lot’ or a ‘great deal’ in trains; 29% did so at the airport; 13% on the planes; 44% in a motorway service station car park; and 22% in a service station building.

Analysing the data they found:

- on the trains, 55% said they found lack of space as hindering them working, and 23% said noise hindered them.
- at the airport, 47% said that noise hindered them working, and 39% said it was lack of space.
- on board the planes, 71% said it was lack of space, and 16% noise.
- at the motorway service station building, 38% said it was noise, and 23% lack of space.

“An initial observation is that with the exception of time spent on board planes, where significant restrictions on technology use operate, business travellers worked extensively when travelling,” say the researchers.

However, “while business travellers have the potential to work while undertaking business trips, this does not mean that they either want to or are able to work.

“Overall, these data highlight significant variations between journey stages in terms of the extent to which the factors examined inhibited people’s ability to work. They highlight that the two journey stages during which business travellers were most likely to work extensively were when in train carriages and sitting in their cars in service station car parks.

“With respect to time spent on train carriages, constraints of space were a significantly greater barrier than constraints of noise, with over 50 per cent of respondents finding space constraints significantly inhibited their ability to work, compared to just over 20 per cent who said the same about noise constraints.

“In relation to time spent at departure airports, between 35 and 45 per cent of respondents reported constraints of noise, space and time as all having a reasonably negative impact on their ability to work. In contrast, in relation to time spent on board planes, constraints of space had by far the greatest negative impact on people’s ability to work with fully 70 per cent of survey respondents reporting this to be the case, whereas only about 15 per cent said the same about constraints of noise and time.”

The researchers said the findings were because their work “reinforces the argument that for many managerial and professional workers, spending time undertaking work-related journeys does represent an increasingly important domain of work.”

The researchers also looked at which technologies the most frequent travellers used: on the trains and planes they worked more often with pen and paper rather than a laptop. At the airport and service station, they worked more with mobile phones rather than laptops or pen and paper.

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Notes

1. The journal paper is entitled ‘The work-related affordances of business travel: a disaggregated analysis of journey stage and mode of transport’
DOI reference - 10.1177/0950017014559767.
2. Over 1100 survey questionnaires were distributed on inter-city trains in the Midlands, at a motorway services station on the M1 in the Midlands and a regional airport in southern England; 681 were completed. The average age of respondents was early 40s and most were men.

3. Loughborough University is one of the country's leading universities, with an international reputation for research that matters, excellence in teaching, strong links with industry, and unrivalled achievement in sport and its underpinning academic disciplines. It has been awarded five stars in the independent QS Stars university rating scheme, putting it among the best universities in the world, and was named Sports University of the Year 2013-14 by The Times and Sunday Times. Loughborough is consistently ranked in the top twenty of UK universities in the Times Higher Education's 'table of tables' and has been voted England's Best Student Experience for six years running in the Times Higher Education league. In recognition of its contribution to the sector, Loughborough has been awarded seven Queen's Anniversary Prizes. In 2015 the University will open an additional academic campus in London's new innovation quarter. Loughborough University in London, based on the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, will offer postgraduate and executive-level education, as well as research and enterprise opportunities.

4. The British Sociological Association's charitable aim is to promote sociology. The BSA is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales. Company Number: 3890729. Registered Charity Number 1080235 www.britsoc.co.uk