

Mobile travel apps keep suits on track

Chris Tolhurst

The rise of mobile communications devices is revolutionising the way companies organise business travel and monitor the effectiveness of mobile workers, a study has found.

The report, on the use of mobile technology by executives, also provides evidence that many Australian employers are using their employees' smartphones and notebooks to keep closer tabs on them and rein in travel expenses.

The business traveller insights study, commissioned by global travel management company Carlson Wagonlit Travel (CWT) and based on interviews conducted with 1000 Australian corporate travellers in March and April, found smartphones were carried by 61 per cent and 83 per cent did not leave the office without a laptop or notebook computer.

CWT director of products and online services, Matt Carracher, said mobile devices were playing a big role in enabling businesses to enforce company travel policies.

He said online tools were being used to send messages to travellers concerning their destinations and whether they were booking strictly within policy.

Automated emails could be sent from head office to an individual traveller while they were on the road highlighting alternative and cheaper flights than those requested, he said.

General manager of global travel management company HRG Australia, Darryl Laverty, said large companies were keen to introduce online booking systems.

These systems allow organisations to nominate preferred suppliers in online systems, resulting in substantial savings by prompting users to buy cheaper options in flights or hotel rooms.

The rise of mobile connectivity has come in the nick of time for many

organisations because arranging business travel is becoming more complex and multi-layered.

It's rare these days for a large company to have a cover-all travel policy. Most offer different travel privileges to different executives.

A road warrior or frequent-travelling executive may have the right to fly in business class on international flights set down in their contract.

But a back-office executive who travels infrequently may be required to fly in the premium economy cabin and stay in a four-star, not a five-star hotel.

Online booking systems and in-house travel intranets linked to mobile devices can cope with these nuances and class differences.

With more executives carrying portable computing hardware, there has also been a spike in the variety and range of travel-specific data services on offer.

For some companies, however, there's a downside to the mobile boom.

Mr Carracher said CWT was seeing an emerging trend for frequent business travellers to book travel on mobile devices without consulting first with head office.

"Company travel managers are concerned about people booking outside policy through mobile applications," he said.

CWT, whose clients include Woodside Petroleum and the NSW government, was responding by developing "approved mobile applications" that could be configured according to a policy.

Mr Carracher said the company had developed a system that would send a travel itinerary directly to a smartphone.

"We also want to give the traveller the ability to change itineraries on a mobile device," he says.

"Business travellers want to do everything on their smartphone."