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Making the Most of Travel Time

by **Lin Gensing-Pophal**

Maybe you love traveling for your business--or maybe you hate doing it. But, for most consultants, it's at least an occasional necessity. Regardless of your level of enthusiasm for travel, the time spent in the air, on rail or in the car can eat a lot of "billable hours." How can you make the most of this time to provide seamless coverage of your consulting service and to avoid downtime?

Planning Ahead

Planning can help you both lighten your load and increase productivity, says **Michael Fritsch**, a workplace and HR operations expert and CEO of Prometheus Performance Systems in Austin, Texas.

"To make the most of travel time often requires that you lug a portable office with you," says **Fritsch**. "You may have your laptop, phone, PDA, music player and maybe even a portable DVD player and camera. You might also have the power converter and extra batteries for each of those items."

To reduce the bulk associated with all of this equipment, try to consolidate devices, **Fritsch** suggests. "Universal chargers can help you leave multiple power converters at home, and most give you the option to plug into a car charger or airplane charger as well. If you are carrying a phone, PDA, music player and camera, consider replacing all of those with a smart camera phone. If you like to watch movies while you travel, use your laptop rather than a separate DVD player."

Andrea Michalek, a technology consultant who works with start-up organizations, agrees that lighter is better. She suggests considering a pocket PC instead of a laptop for business travel. "I found that lugging a laptop through the streets of New York City was just too much for me--especially since I was pregnant while doing a lot of this traveling. I was able to use a wi-fi-enabled pocket PC to access e-mail, keep electronic copies of spreadsheets and documents, and even drive PowerPoint presentations."

Travel time presents a good opportunity to catch up on reading for business or pleasure. To leverage your travel time, **Fritsch** suggests using services like www.audible.com that offer web-delivered audio programs--"you can listen to daily newspapers, business magazines or books from your smart phone, computer or portable music player," he says.

Michalek typically grabs two unread business magazines before leaving for a trip, and brings along a stack of notecards. As she comes across articles that might be of interest to a client or contact, she tears them out and writes a quick note to accompany the article. "In this day of digital communications, handwritten notes cut through the noise," she says.

Getting There

Getting there can be more than half the battle when traveling. The keys to success include being proactive and having a fine-tuned sense of impending delays.

"Invest in a GPS or print out maps from mapquest.com before the trip," says Joyce Gioia, president of The Herman Group, a consulting firm in Greensboro, N.C. That way you won't find yourself scrambling to find directions while at the airport or car rental desk.

"Have a sense of the airport karma regarding flights and flight delays," says Mike La Penna, a health care business development consultant with The La Penna Group Inc. in Grand Rapids, Mich. "Beginning to look for alternatives as

soon as the situation appears cloudy or confused" can help avoid delays and travel disasters.

Kathleen Ameche, author of *The Woman Road Warrior: A Woman's Guide to Business Travel* and a business traveler for the last 20-plus years, agrees: "When there starts to be a delay in a major hub, there's a trickle-down effect throughout the entire nation."

Ameche keeps her travel agent's cell phone number in her cell phone directory "because if there is the smallest glitch or suggestion that things are going awry, I get on the phone and make sure I have a plan B, C and D in place."

She recalls a flight to Puerto Rico where the pilot announced a 10-minute delay. "I immediately got on my phone to my travel agent and in her system it said the flight had been canceled. There was only one flight a day to Puerto Rico. She got me on the next flight immediately, while everybody else had to stand in line." Ameche notes that airline representatives and gate agents aren't out there to misinform travelers. "They're just not always up on the latest situation."

"Don't argue with the people at the gates," La Penna adds. "They have the ability--and the authority--to make your life miserable."

Having a travel agent can avoid a lot of headaches, says Ameche, and can provide insurance when flights and schedules go awry--as they inevitably will. "I'll do some research online for prices, but I'll always go to my travel agent to book, because when I'm on the road I want a one-stop shop and I don't want to be discouraged or delayed."

Landing and Lodging

If you've ever waited hopelessly at a luggage carousel that isn't moving while the minutes tick by--or you've ever lost your luggage en route to an important meeting--you'll appreciate La Penna's advice: "No checking of luggage, no way, never, no!"

Additional tips for speeding time from airport to hotel:

- "Get into a premium program for rental cars that bypasses the desk and registration process," says La Penna. And, he adds, "always get the GPS support for cars when in an unfamiliar city--or carry one with you."
- "Stay at airport-based hotels for ease of function and access," La Penna suggests. "Always ask for a business suite--it has a desk and usually connectivity."
- "If you're part of a frequent-stay program," says Ameche, "you can typically check in via phone on your way to the hotel, as opposed to having to wait at the counter." Ameche says she'll even order meals ahead of time, so they're waiting for her when she arrives.

Staying 'Wired'

To make the most of your travel time, you need to stay connected. "Few things are worse than returning from a business trip to a mountain of e-mails and voice mails," says **Fritsch**.

"Always take along a long Ethernet cable to plug your laptop into the Internet access port in your hotel room," advises Steven Rothberg, president and founder of CollegeRecruiter.com, a career site for current students and recent graduates. "Never assume that the hotel will provide a cable or that the cable will work."

Don't make assumptions when traveling, agrees Gioia. It pays to ask. "Always choose a hotel that has high-speed Internet access in the room," Gioia says. "If it's not an established chain and you have a VPN [virtual private network], make sure that the system allows for point-to-point tunneling."

"If possible," says Rothberg, "stay in a hotel with wireless Internet. It's more reliable because the ports are often broken in some of the rooms. If you're in one of those rooms and the hotel is full, you're out of luck."

Stay in touch with clients by forwarding your business line to your cell phone, Rothberg suggests. "If you do a lot of traveling, or are out of the office a lot, consider ditching your traditional land line and just going with a cell phone. I did that months ago, and it has been fantastic."

Finally, don't forget what they say about "all work and no play." Traveling to new cities--even old, familiar cities--can be pleasurable as well as productive. "I love to explore new cities," says Ameche, "especially if somebody else is sending me there!"

There's a term used by those in the travel industry, she says, that she learned from a flight attendant--"slam clicker." A slam clicker is the traveler who immediately heads to their hotel room, shuts the door and slams the lock (click) into place.

"You can either be a slam clicker or you can be somebody who gets out and enjoys the city," says Ameche.

Lin Gensing-Pophal, SPHR, is a Wisconsin-based business journalist with HR consulting experience in employee communication, training and management issues. She is the author of Human Resource Essentials: Your Guide to Starting and Running the HR Function (SHRM, 2002).

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Society for Human Resource Management

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