

# **Corporate Ecologies of Business Travel in Professional Service Firms: Working Towards a Research Agenda**

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# **Corporate Ecologies of Business Travel in Professional Service Firms: Working Towards a Research Agenda**

## **Abstract**

International business travel has always been an important labour process in the accumulation of capital for the firm. It is surprising, therefore, that relatively little time has been devoted to the study of business travel, both as a facet of contemporary mobility and as an economic practice. In this paper we review how existing literatures provide insights that can be used to understand the role of business travel as international labour mobility in the contemporary professional service economy. In doing so, we reach the conclusion that there seems to be at least two significant voids preventing a more sophisticated understanding from emerging. First, we suggest that international business travel needs to be studied not in isolation but instead as one component in a wider ecology of mobility that 'produces' the global firm. Second, we argue that it is important to know more about the time-space dynamics of international business travel in terms of how spatial relations are produced and reproduced by different forms and geographies of travel. We make these arguments and explore their implications using data collected through interviews in advertising, architecture and legal professional service firms. We conclude by identifying a research agenda designed to allow a better understanding of business travel to emerge in corporate and mobility discourses.

## **Key words**

business travel; mobility; professional services; Europe

## **Introduction**

International business travel has always been an important labour process in the accumulation of capital for the firm, facilitating the enactment of business through face-to-face meetings with clients and subcontractors and, in international firms, also allowing collaboration between employees in cross-border projects and management control of overseas subsidiaries. However, spurred on by processes of globalization, de-regulation in the airline industry and the opening of new markets in regions such as the former-Soviet Union, central Europe and China, international business travel within, from and to Europe has become an even more important practice of global work in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century (Davidson and Cope, 2003; Jones, 2007, 2008). Partly acting as a substitute for secondments and expatriation on cost grounds, and partly providing a new means to increase levels and the speed of cross-border business (Beaverstock, 2007; Millar and Salt, 2008), growth in international business travel has been charted in official statistics. For example, the number of United Kingdom (U.K.) residents leaving the country for business purpose visits reached 8.56 million in 2005, a 40 percent increase from ten years earlier, with Europe (EU15) accounting for an average of 72% of overseas business visits by UK citizens between 1993 and 2005 (Office for National Statistics, 2006; 1996).

Further evidence of the proliferation of business travel journeys is provided by the rapid expansion of an industry which exists entirely to service the everyday requirements of the business traveller. From airline lounges to

business class only airlines, hotels with business centres and an array of intelligence services offering real time information for the business traveller (e.g. Business Travel Solutions [www.biztrip.co.uk](http://www.biztrip.co.uk)), the international traveller's needs are now comprehensively catered for.

What is not in doubt, then, is that business travel is being produced on a global scale by 'obligations of proximity' and 'face-to-face' (f2f) contact with clients, suppliers or corporate colleagues (Beaverstock, 2007; Faulconbridge 2006; Jones, 2007) as the need for 'meetingness' remains (Urry, 2003). It is surprising, therefore, that relatively little time has been devoted specifically to the study of business travel, both as an economic practice and facet of contemporary mobility. As of December 2008, we discover only 740 published outputs on 'business travel' identified by the Thomson ISI Web of Knowledge Social Science database. This compares poorly with other forms of mobility such as 'temporary migration' (1,469 papers) and pilgrimage (2,136).

Despite this apparent paucity of academic research, existing literatures do still provide some important insights that can be used to understand the role of business travel as labour mobility in the contemporary service economy. In this paper we analyse a number of these literatures, use them to explain the importance of business travel in the contemporary global economy and, by coupling them to empirical analysis, highlight important future avenues for research. Indeed, we suggest that our empirical material provides insights into at least two significant sets of research questions that are currently

unanswered, thus preventing the emergence of a more sophisticated understanding of the role of business travel in the global economy.

First, we suggest that business travel should not be studied in isolation, but instead should be seen as one of many forms of mobility that 'produce' the global firm (see Jones, 2005). In this guise business travel is one part of an ecology of mobility in which spatially dispersed organizations are brought to life by the movement of people, but also objects, ideas, texts and images (Urry, 2000; 2007). The recent 'mobilities turn' in the social sciences (Sheller and Urry, 2006) is associated with a proliferation of studies of different forms of business mobility from train travel (Holley, Jain and Lyons, 2008), to airline networks (Derudder et al., 2008) and the car (Laurier, 2004). We, therefore, use insights from such studies to highlight the way business travel in international professional service firms (PSFs) operates as part of an ecology of mobility in which the interdependent use of different forms of mobility allow the completion of business and the management of spatially distributed subsidiaries. We use PSFs as a case study to illustrate our arguments because travel, face-to-face meetings and the social cues embodied encounters allow have been shown in the existing literature to be even more important in professional services work than in other sectors of the economy. As most business services are knowledge-rich, bespoke and often hard to assess, meetings allow relationships based on trust to be developed between service providers and clients (Daniels, 1993; Løwendahl, 2001). Meanwhile, the increasing use of project teams that encompass individuals from several national and international offices has been shown to require meetings both to

create bonds between team members, but also engage in brainstorming and innovation which requires the development of reciprocity in relationships (Beaverstock, 2004; Faulconbridge, 2006; Grabher, 2001, 2004 Jones, 2005, 2007). This means our analysis of ecologies of mobility in PSFs reveals a number of significant questions about the effects and futures of business travel that cannot be understood through existing work. This forms the basis for a research agenda developed towards the end of the paper.

Second, and related, we use the analytical tools of work on transnational corporations (TNCs) (Dicken, 2007), their relational forms (Yeung, 2005), production networks (Dicken et al., 2001; Coe, Dicken and Hess, 2008) and the resultant spatial divisions of labour (Massey, 1994, 2004) to explore the time-space dynamics of business travel and the geographical implications of connection and disconnection produced by mobile workers. In particular we analyse our empirical material by developing recent work on global PSFs (Beaverstock, 2006; Faulconbridge 2007a; Jones, 2007) which provides insights into how spatial relations are produced and reproduced differently by travel depending on travel's function, place of origin and destination. As we show, this again raises a number of important questions about business travel, this time in terms of its impacts and its relationship to power relations within firms.

Accordingly, the rest of this paper is organised into three main parts. First, we draw on existing literature that helps us theorise business travel and identify pressing research questions. Second, we use our empirical material to

explore these research questions with particular focus on the role of business travel in ecologies of corporate mobility and the time-space dimensions of international business travel. We finish the paper by positing several conclusions and agendas which re-emphasises our argument that international business travel is now so significant as a form of mobility that it deserves more sustained academic scrutiny.

### **Conceptualising international business travel**

The study of international business travel as a mode of cross-border mobility has, until recently, been treated as an incidental process of knowledge transfer that is much the same as skilled international migration and inter-company personnel transfers (see for example see Ewers, 2007; Koser and Salt, 1997; Williams, 2006). Bucking this theoretical and empirical focus has been the recent work of Millar and Salt (2008) on portfolios of mobility systems in transnational corporations in which they use aerospace and extractive industries as examples of different uses of business travel. Millar and Salt (2008) show that long-term assignments (over a year) tend to be used for the development of an individual's career or to locate a skilled employee where their expertise is needed. Meanwhile short-term assignments (up to a year) are used to fulfil a particular business need, such as to provide a labour force for a particular job. Business travel, which Millar and Salt (2008) define as travel where presence in another office is for less than 30 days, was found in their study to be used for project meetings or when an individual is

required to train someone in another office or use their expertise to solve a particular problem in a project. Throughout, though,, the common denominator which necessitated travel was the requirement of a *physical presence* in an international location.

In the guise of the mobilities paradigm, such questions about the compulsions of physical co-presence have received increasing scrutiny over the past decade. The seminal work of Urry (see 2000, 2007; Sheller and Urry, 2006), has perhaps been most important, developing a sophisticated argument about how mobility defines contemporary social life. This is not the place to unpack the emergent mobilities paradigm in detail; others have done that elsewhere (Cresswell, 2001; Urry, 2007). Instead, we consider the main learnings from this work that can help us interpret the role of ecologies of business travel in PSFs. In particular we develop two of the main debates in recent literature: the role of face-to-face (f2f) contact and the emergence of ecologies of mobility in organizations.

### *Face-to-face contact, PSFs and ecologies of mobility*

As recent work on mobility in investment banking noted:

“the key process by which professional services interact with clients ... is through face-to-face contact, with clients, competitors, suppliers and colleagues ... Face-to-face relationships are reciprocal processes which not only share and disseminate tailor-

made, non-routine and often 'one-off' solutions to clients, but also as the medium for interaction with teams of actors where deal-making often requires specialist input from a range of professional services ... International mobility, therefore, is a key factor of production in the professional service firm" (Beaverstock, 2006, 54-55)

Such debates about face-to-face contact have a long history. Back to the work of Goffman (1967) on the interaction order there has been fascination with the rituals of embodied encounter and the value-added gained from the sensory richness of physical co-presence. In the context of firms, Boden and Molotoch (1994) developed a convincing account of the role of f2f talk in business and emphasised how:

"[m]odernity is made possible not by the substitution of new technologies of copresence, but by a *tensely adjusted distribution of copresence*" (Boden and Molotoch, 1994, p. 258, original emphasis).

Such debates have continued in the Twenty-First century, in particular in relation to innovation in the contemporary 'knowledge economy'. The importance of 'being there' in the city has been emphasised (Storper and Venables, 2002) whilst occasional co-presence with colleagues in globally distributed offices of TNCs has been shown to lead to the emergence of transnational communities of practice (see Amin and Cohendet, 2004). This involves developing relational spaces of learning (Faulconbridge, 2007a-b), teamwork within projects (Grabher 2001, 2004) and collaboration and cooperation (Bathelt and Glücker, 2005), all of which rely on occasional f2f

contact for the development of trust, reciprocity and mutual understanding. Indeed, Jones (2007, p.229-230, original emphasis) summarises insights in existing work and suggests f2f interactions, “constitute many of the key practices and events that shape the development of *corporate globality*”. In globalizing law firms, as in other PSFs, Jones suggests f2f encounter has five functions:

1. The operation of the firm – face-to-face meetings allow the securing of new business (when meeting clients) and the completion of projects with colleagues in spatially distributed offices.
2. The control of the firm – face-to-face meetings between employees of the same firm allow management to convince workers in different offices to implement strategic plans (see also Faulconbridge, 2008).
3. Knowledge practices – face-to-face meeting allow the production, sharing and deployment of the knowledge employees in PSFs need to be effective.
4. Innovation – face-to-face meetings allow new ways of working and new types of service to be developed.
5. Coherence – face-to-face meetings allow the creation of a shared organisational culture as interactions between employees allow understanding to be developed of how their behaviour differs from that of the firm’s role-model employees.

Existing studies suggests that f2f contact is vital in such situations because ICTs are unable to deliver the type of interaction needed. The ‘social cues’ gained from embodied encounter are said to be vital but missing in the narrow

social 'bandwidth' environment of virtual communication technologies (see Lassen, 2006; Hildrum, 2007; Orlikowski, 2002).

Important as such work is, it does, however, fail to consider mobility systems in their entirety and fails to position business travel and f2f encounter as cooperating and reliant on the existence of other mobility practices (see Urry, 2007). Perhaps one of the main insights that can be taken from recent work completed as part of the mobilities turn is the importance of recognising travel as one component of a wider ecology of mobility made-up of "the movement of people, objects, capital and information across the world" (Hannam, Sheller and Urry, 2006, p.1). Indeed, as Jones (2007, p.232) goes on to argue in his discussion of f2f contact,

“...it is dangerous to demarcate face-to-face interaction as ontologically distinct from other forms of interaction. Whilst apparently purely social interaction, face-to-face is better conceptualized through an actor-network informed approach that traces the distant and non-human associations that shape it as an event”.

In most existing studies of business travel (e.g. Lassen, 2006; Millar and Salt, 2008) we either hear about the use of technology, or the use of travel and f2f contact, but not the cooperation between the two. As “virtual travel has to be understood in relationship with corporeal travel” (Urry, 2000, p.75), it would seem that the emphasis of research should not, therefore, be on just how decision making might be influenced by f2f encounter *and/or* the mobility of

ideas and documents, but how an increasing preponderance to the use of telephone, email and videoconferencing to convey words, images and documents is related to the production of ecologies of mobility in which the *cooperation and interdependence* of different forms of mobility is related to the need for and use of travel itself. This means looking at how virtual communication might create a need for as well as prevent travel, how different forms of travel in the mobility portfolios Millar and Salt (2008) identify are interdependent, and how firms manage business travel not as an isolated business practice but as one tool in their communications toolkit. We develop this argument about the importance of studying entire ecologies of mobility below. In doing this we also consider how an explicit focus on business travel's role in ecologies of mobility might help us understand the creation and reproduction of spatial relations and politics in organizations, something that can yield important insights for geographical debates about mobility.

### *Ecologies of mobility and geometries of power*

Work on relation economic geography (Yeung, 2005) and global production networks (Dicken et al., 2001; Coe, Dicken and Hess, 2008) has revealed that there are important 'power geometries' that underlie the creation of, and that are caused by, the activities of TNCs. Both in relation to firm-supplier relations but also place-place relations, the forms of transnational connection that are manufactured by TNCs can influence both the flow of goods and services but also the forms of dominance, reliance or subordination that exist between different individuals, groups, countries or regions.

Through the concept of 'geometries of power', Massey (1994) was one of the first to highlight the importance of recognising the power and political effects of processes of time-space compression. Indeed, the mobilities paradigm has also taken a cue from Massey's work to develop a number of concepts that recognise the importance of inclusion in, and the significance of exclusion from, contemporary mobile worlds. Urry (2007, p.197) uses the concept of 'network capital' to signify, "the capacity to engender and sustain social relations with those people who are not necessarily proximate and which generates emotional, financial and practical benefit". Developing Putnam's (2000) work on social capital, Urry shows how certain social groups benefit disproportionately from mobility and are better equipped to realize its potential for developing social relations that stretch beyond the physically proximate. Kaufmann, Bergman and Joye (2004, p.750) make a similar point with the concept of motility. For them, "Motility can be defined as the capacity of entities (e.g. goods, information or persons) to be mobile in social and geographical space, or as the way in which entities access and appropriate the capacity for socio-spatial mobility according to their circumstances". Access, competence and appropriation define an individual or group's motility capacity and, according to Kaufmann and colleagues, it is therefore necessary to study in more detail the factors influencing *potential* mobility and the benefits it might bring.

From a geographical perspective exploring selectivity in the enactment of business travel -who travels and whether it occurs – and where people travel

from and to and the implications of such geographies is important if we are to better understand the impacts of mobility capital on individuals and the consequences for places and spatial relations. For example, Faulconbridge (2007a) shows how in global legal PSFs who gets to travel is defined both by the identity of employees (seniority, gender etc.) but also by the strategic role of a subsidiary, with those senior (often male) employees in the most powerful offices of global firms often travelling more frequently as part of the 'management control' and 'cultural coherence' strategies Jones (2007) describes. This reproduces the power and control of certain subsidiaries. In the next section we, therefore, also consider questions about the way business travel, as part of a broader ecology of mobility, is involved in the production of organizational politics and power relations and the implications of this. Using extensive studies of advertising, architecture and law firms, we show that if we consider business travel explicitly and its geographies and relationships to other forms of mobility, we develop rich, process-led understandings of the role of f2f encounters and their geographical implications that have relevance to debates about TNCs and the globalization of PSFs, as well as much wider questions about spatial divisions of labour, power relations in the global economy and sustainability.

The empirical material analysed below was collected from 120 interviews with professionals in three types of global professional services: advertising (quotations marked A); architecture (AR); and law (L). Our aim here is not to highlight industry specificities, but to use data collected to develop an empirical and theoretical framework for analysing business travel's role in

corporate ecologies of mobility. Interviews were all with practitioners in firms with multiple international offices. Interviewees were selected to represent the range of specialisms within each industry (e.g. in law mergers and acquisitions, litigation etc.) and held positions ranging from the most senior in an office (e.g. office managing partner) to the most junior (trainee or new recruit). Interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded and analysed using the logics of grounded theory. Interviewees were asked to respond to questions about a range of issues including processes of knowledge management and learning, management control in global PSFs, teamwork involving individuals in spatially distributed offices and the development of global corporate cultures. As a result, business travel was not the explicit focus on interviews. However, it quickly became clear that travel had a role, alongside other forms of mobility, in all of these facets of work in PSFs. In the discussion below the identity of interviewees and their firms have been removed to ensure anonymity is maintained.

### **Ecologies of business travel mobility in global professional service firms**

An advertising executive captures succinctly the benefits of business travel for producing the glue that holds the firm together:

“... at our conferences, so say for example the recent European conference, the chatting, exchanging ideas over coffee, lunch etc is more important than the actual speakers. Getting to know these

people socially, having a drink with them is really important. Then you've got someone to call in the future" (A4).

Yet this description of the moment of f2f encounter tells only part of the story. Partly travel occurs out of necessity in global PSFs. But as one lawyer commented,

"...in the ideal world it would always be nice to meet face-to-face and to be able to work together...but the reality is that it costs money because someone's going to have to get on a plane...That's the ideal scenario but in reality people are often going to try and avoid doing that so you'll use the other most effective ways so inevitably you will talk to each other on the phone" (L3).

Consequently, business travel has to be managed and used as part of a broader socio-technical system designed to allow both the completion of business (providing advice to a client; working with a colleague to brainstorm and develop a solution to a particular project problem) but also the manufacturing of social relationships between colleagues, clients and, in some cases, competitors when travel is to trade fairs or conferences (see Maskell, Bathelt and Malmberg, 2006).<sup>1</sup> As a result, the many forms of

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to recognise that not all business travel is intra-firm (i.e. between offices of the same firm). Travel to meet clients at their offices, suppliers or sub-contractors and travel to conferences and trade shows are all relevant forms of business travel (see Davidson and Cope, 2003). Here, however, we solely focus upon intra-firm travel because, according to our research, it is the most frequent and critical form of travel for the production of professional services.

technical device that allow what Urry (2007) calls 'virtual mobility' are frequently used alongside and during business travel in all of the sectors studied. For example, architects rely on corporate intranets for the management of "who's who" lists, for providing colleagues with updates on a project or for gaining insights into a past project through "lessons learned" reports. Video-conferencing and instant messaging technologies also facilitate forms of daily social interaction between colleagues in spatially separated offices. Alongside these technologies, *carefully managed* business travel is used. From the outset, though, strategies seek to minimise the frequency at which f2f contact is needed and maximise the value of virtual mobilities. In particular, the global conference, where key (sometimes all) members of the firm are invited to attend an annual get-together and networking event, is a common way of allowing the benefits of f2f contact to be maximised with minimum (both in terms of frequency but also duration) levels of travel. As an interviewee described:

"There are formal comings together, there's a global conference coming next month where literally representatives from all the worldwide offices will be there. There's presentations about the business but there is a social side to that so that we are gelling as a network rather than just being pins in the map" (AD5).

Such structured events don't prevent corporeal mobility becoming important at other times. But the 'network gelling' process the interviewee described whereby individuals get to know their colleagues in other offices does lead to the opportunity to establish, consolidate and re-confirm relationships that

minimise the future need for travel (see also Faulconbridge 2007a-b). Indeed, it was common for interviewees to express their concerns about their hyper-mobility (in terms of financial, personal and environmental cost) and suggests that thinking carefully about when to travel was vital. Consequently, an intangible, hard to define, instinctive decision about whether to travel has to be made on a regular basis. As one architect described the dilemma he faced in his managerial role:

“My day starts with a call to Ohio, I go to Utah on Friday, we were in Seattle last week, so yes email, video conferencing. The really interesting thing that I have noticed is that 2 or 3 years ago everybody wanted to travel, they wanted to work in far flung areas, now people who came out of school in last 5 years aren't so bothered about doing a job in South Korea and being away for a week in 4, like I do, so there is an interesting generation thing going in now, so I'm not sure if we will have to rely more on video conferencing and not go, personally I think that will be a downfall for me nothing beats making eye contact with that other person, you cant get that over a video conference and that to me will be an interesting cultural development over the coming years. I think communication will be interesting, I get text messages from people 3 desks away, those coming out of college now think in a different way, so my mind is on what we are doing now but I'm also looking at the future and thinking how can we as a firm get to grips with communicating in way that the next generation does” (AR 34).

Whilst there are many interesting issues highlighted by this quote in relation to generational shifts in communication, most significant for our argument is the way the discussion places the question of *when* to travel at the forefront of considerations. This suggests that the study of business travel has to be couched alongside studies of other forms of mobilities that are part of corporate ecologies and which may well influence when travel, rather than virtual mobility, is used to allow interaction with a colleague or client. Indeed, following Millar and Salt (2008), it also seems important to consider how options in terms of the duration of travel also play a role in developing corporate ecologies of mobility, with a mix of virtual interactions, short, medium and longer term travel all cooperating to allow global PSFs to operate. We return to the significance of this in the discussion section of the paper. First though, it is important to recognise other factors that determine whether travel occurs and the outcome of business travel.

#### *Time and space in ecologies of business travel mobility*

Putting time and space at the centre of discussions of business travel reveals, firstly, that metric forms of space - i.e. distance in kilometres between places – continues to influence the activities of globalizing firms. In the case of business travel, metric space determines if and how often business travel occurs. At its simplest, as Sheppard (2002) reminds us, this is because time doesn't completely trump space and metric distance continues to determine the degrees of connectivity between places. Most fundamentally, long duration journeys are often impractical because of their expense financially

and in terms of time (see also Nowica, 2006). Indeed, Millar and Salt (2008) report that business managers often seek to reduce the amount of long-haul travel employees complete because of the physical and mental toll it takes on the body. Consequently, places both metrically and temporally distant from the Western European (London in particular) homes of many globalizing PSFs are often more isolated in global organizational networks. As one lawyer suggested,

“...our Asia offices, because they are a long way away, have a higher degree of autonomy. Notwithstanding the developments in information technology and communications, they are a long way away” (L2).

Secondly, and complicating this ideas, as Zook and Brun (2006) note, the way the airline industry organises itself means certain places are ‘closer together’ than others. As a result, it is not just metric distance that matters. Relational, topological spaces also determines if and how often travel occurs. Distant direct city-pairs (cities such as London and Moscow with direct connecting flights) are often closer in travel time that more proximate city pairs without a direct connecting flight (e.g. Manchester and Seville). Consequently, the occurrence and frequency of business travel is often associated with a combination of metric distance but also flight time with the two not necessarily related. Firms, therefore, often give significant amounts of autonomy to local managers in offices that are ‘distant’ (temporally and/or spatially) from headquarters or ‘lead’ offices. As a result, such offices operate more like outposts that serve clients ‘local’ needs, being significantly less integrated into

the firms global production network that other parts of the organization. As the same lawyer quoted above went onto say:

“It’s the 80/20 rule. Given that you can’t do everything you choose where you’re going to put your money and your efforts into building relationships. That doesn’t mean we’ve abandoned say Bangkok but you can’t give equal weight to every place we’ve got. If Thai lawyers are primarily doing Thai law, for example, they’re not really doing cross border work, the need for them to communicate is much less” (L2).

The reduced levels of business travel and ultimately organizational integration caused by such ‘peripherality’ raises a number of important questions. Do those working in ‘distant’ outposts suffer from a lack of network capital and motility and with what consequences? Does reduced mobility bring benefits or costs in terms of the effective operation of such offices, the career development of individuals and the production of organizational globality? Does it mean there are very different types of power relation between distant offices compared to those in the organizational core of Western Europe and North America where more regular inter-office travel might occur?

To answer these questions recognition is needed that it is not only the occurrence of travel that is significant in terms of connectivity, dis-connectivity and power relation in global PSFs (and the global economy more widely). When travel does occur, who gets to travel, from where and for what purpose is also highly significant.

### *Power and politics in ecologies of business travel mobility*

The nature of intra-firms spatial relationships and the politics of those relationships can have a significant influence on the nature of business travel in PSFs. Three different uses of business travel exemplify this and show how the traveller and her/his purpose affects the outcomes of mobility.

First, and at one extreme, business travel can be used as part of command and control tactics. In advertising the work of global mega-agencies like Ogilvy and Mather often involves certain offices being given the task of fulfilling low-level, often deskilled roles in the advertising production process with strategic activities concentrated in the centre – often leading world cities like London, Frankfurt or Paris. This is most obviously the case when so-called ‘post-box’ offices have responsibility for implementing an advert in their host-country (i.e. arranging for a local language voice over; negotiating with local television companies), but have no responsibility for the strategic work involved in producing an advert (account planning, creative production etc). Such a strategy is becoming less and less common as increasingly reflexive and fragmented consumer markets emerge (Grein and DuCoffe, 2001), but continues to be important when major global, one advert worldwide campaigns are run. Business travel in such an approach principally involves account managers from lead offices travelling infrequently to ensure subsidiaries are following the instructions sent to them, or advertising executives travelling from the ‘post-box’ to the lead office to receive

instructions and guidance. As a result one advertiser described the following situation,

“What happens more is that there is a lead office that has responsibility for generating much of the work, but sometimes you’d get together. So [client x], we run that globally, and last year we had hub meetings where we’d get together with offices from Eastern Europe etc and ensure they’re clear on their role” (AD6).

Hence the role of business travellers *from* lead offices in the most advanced advertising markets – e.g. London, Munich for example – *to* emerging advertising markets – Baku, Ljubljana or Riga – invokes and reproduces certain forms of spatial power relation between places and people.

Second, business travel can have a role in forms of negotiated compromise in which ‘headquarters’ controls the firm but not through command and control tactics. As Jones (2007) has shown, f2f contact and business travel has an important role in aligning offices with the strategies of and visions of the leaders of the firm. Whilst not having formal headquarters, most professional service firms are heavily influenced by the ideals and practice of the firm’s home-country. Indeed, it is from the home-country of the firm that managing partners and influential leaders often emerge. Business travel by both these leaders but also their representatives (senior executives, practice group leaders) is, as a result, often used to facilitate f2f negotiations, allow leaders to understand the national variations in practice and socialise members of overseas offices into the norms of the firm (see Faulconbridge, 2008). Indeed,

lawyers described the role of business travel for training lawyers in offices outside of leading financial centres to follow 'firm', usually Anglo-American best practice. As one noted:

“there are only certain offices in the network that are allowed to run multi-jurisdictional deals. They tend to be the money markets, so Chicago, New York, London and Frankfurt. So we tend to find that there the offices that go off and train other offices on what the practices are for doing a multijurisdictional deal. So once a year, people from the London office go off and train all of Latin America associates on global M&A” (L1).

As a result, in many ways this socializing role for business travel can be associated with the 'Americanization' process that others have described (see Djelic, 1998). At the European level such business travel in PSFs is particularly intense between the London offices of firms – which are frequently the home-country offices of the firm or the European headquarters for US firms – and other European cities as attempts are made to socialize workers into Anglo-American business practices. This is especially important in the cases of finance and law (see Beaverstock, 2006; Faulconbridge, 2008). Consequently wider structural changes that have been examined under the rubrics of dynamics varieties of capitalism and the dynamics of institutional systems (Katz and Darbishire, 2000) might be better understood in terms of causes, trajectories and geographies through an examination of the integral role of business travel within organizations in the negotiation of change. Again questions of who travels, from where and to where and with what purpose and outcome are important.

At the opposite end of the spectrum to the command and control tactics described in advertising, global architecture firms often create a spatial division of labour based on expertise in their projects. This can involve the offshoring of processes to locations that can provide services more cheaply (Tombesi et. al., 2003) but also the fragmentation of project work to tap into the expertise of architects located in different offices or to collaborate with colleagues in other offices with relevant expertise. For example, a firm may have a group of computer scripting experts located in London who manage the refinement of designs produced by a group of stadium design experts in Paris. As one architect described the collaborative arrangement between two offices in his firm:

“We had never done a research building before...But there people in the firm who had...So as soon as we started pursuing the research building we started calling people we knew who had pursued labs, we called lab consultants and picked their brains, but that is the culture and it is one of the assets of (name of firm). I think the average architecture firm is 12 people, here there are 190 people that are all pretty much at the top of their game, and then there is the other 800 people in the firm” (AR33).

In this ‘transnational’ setup mobility has very different geographies. It involves individuals moving in both directions between offices because of (and reproducing) organizational globality premised on very different power relations in which collaboration leads to values of mutual support and respect.

We could develop a similar argument in relation to the role of business travel in project ecologies (Grabher, 2001, 2004). Indeed, PSFs frequently operate using intra- and inter-firm project teams and all of the discussions so far about trust and the cooperation between virtual and corporeal mobility could have been couched in the context of project work. In projects it has been noted that power relations have an important role in facilitating work (stopping continuous negotiation), but can also prohibit effective collaboration (command and control tactics) (Bernuth and Bathelt, 2007). When projects are spatially distributed, business travel, is therefore, influenced by and becomes an essential part of reproducing these power relations.

The discussions above of geography and its significance highlights, then, the inequalities that business travel can (re)produce or, if used appropriately dismantle. Sheppard (2002) has shown that the geography of the global economy is reinforced by present day practices that create 'worm holes' which act as short cuts for economic flows or "relational inequalities within, networked spaces" (Sheppard, 2002, p.308). Understanding the diverse way ecologies of mobility are constructed and used in global firms provides one way to better understand these inequalities and power relations.

## **Discussion**

So far we have argued that developing more nuanced understanding of how virtual and corporeal mobility – technically mediated communication and business travel - cooperate in the operation of global PSFs is an essential

research task. We have also suggested that understanding the spatiality of business travel is significant for studying power relations within global PSFs and the global economy more widely. But what are the implications of these suggestions for future research within the social sciences?

In terms of the need and cues for travel, Urry's (2003) discussions of the 'obligations of proximity' can help us begin to frame future discussions of the causes of business travel. Legal obligations (being present in a courtroom), object obligations (being present to sign a contract), obligations to place (going to visit a building) and event obligations (presence to attend a meeting or watch a presentation) are clear definers of travel when corporeal presence is demanded. Yet the point when corporeal mobility rather than virtual mobility becomes essential in relation to such obligations is less clear cut. Returning to Jones' (2007) typology of when f2f contact is important in PSFs, we might, therefore, ask the following questions:

- In relation to knowledge and innovation, how does the use of virtual mobility in a project lead to a point when corporeal mobility is demanded?
- In relation to the completion of cross-border business, which presentations need to be observed and responded to in person and at which point in a project is such presence essential an video-conferencing not enough ?
- In relation to organizational control, how does the circulation of memos and telephone conference calls lead to the moments when senior and managing partners feel the need to move to be co-present with their

colleagues, and how does virtual mobility then consolidates any benefits gained from f2f encounter?

- How do different forms of business travel, such as that identified by Millar and Salt (2008) cooperate in relation to all of the above and get used differently depending on the business challenge and with different effects on the operation of the firm?

The question is not, then, what f2f contact does as an isolated event, but how f2f contact and business travel fit into and result from the emergence of broader organizational ecologies made up of cooperation between virtual and corporeal mobility? Put another way, where does business travel fit into a sequence in which both virtual and corporeal mobility are used? Whilst much can be learned from discussions of f2f encounters and the role of visual cues and embodied interactions and the trust this produces (see Urry, 2003), existing theoretical framings don't allow us to fully identify the point at which travel is invoked and virtual mobility temporarily abandoned. In effect they don't help us explain how the increasing preponderance to a cooperation between virtual and corporeal mobility defines the contemporary role of the f2f encounter. After all, existing conceptualisations of trust and f2f encounter, the work of Goffman (1967), Boden and Molotoch (1994) and Storper and Venables (2004) amongst others, are based on studies f2f encounters in isolation, and not as part of a broader ecology of mobility. They tell us what f2f contact does, but not what virtual mobility does to make f2f contact necessary or change its role and at which point in a project's or a relationship's lifecycle corporeal mobility becomes necessary. So in global PSFs, colleagues in a

firm who have met and worked together before may already trust one-another, yet regular virtual co-presences lead to certain moments when they feel the need for further corporeal co-presence outside of legal, object or place obligations. Examples of such occasions include annual conferences, away days or weeks, mid-project meetings. Is this a result of the hybrid, socio-technical organizational spaces that now exist inside global firms?

This is not just an issue of academic interest. Better theorising the way the cooperation of virtual and corporeal mobility is used in PSFs is becoming increasingly policy relevant as the environmental costs of travel cause more and more concern. Worries about corporate carbon footprints figure highly on the agenda of both corporations but also politicians and developing a better understanding of what spurs corporeal mobility and how the socio-technical space that is the global firm can be better managed to minimise travel would seem valuable. The comments of the UK Chairman and Senior Partner of KPMG the accounting firm exemplify this dilemma well. He noted that, “half of our carbon footprint is now accounted for by air travel and we can’t quite see how we can deliver services to our international clients without it” (Financial Times, 2007). The questions identified here, whilst advancing understanding associated with the mobilities paradigm more generally, could contribute to addressing such important issues as sustainable business travel becomes a watchword for all global firms.

Explicit focus on who travels, from where, to where and how often also have broad implications for future discussions of mobility and its effects. Our sketch

of the geographical implications of international business travel (the reproduction of power relations in the economy), but also the geographical influences on travel itself (time and distance as two continually important factors) reveal the importance of studying business travel not as an abstract corporate process, but as a *socio-spatial formation*. This means it is vital to develop detailed case studies that compare and contrast the role of short and long-haul international business travel, travel between and within developed and developing countries, Western Europe and European Accession States, and Asia and North America and Europe. Findings from such research may well be of significance in relation to concerns about uneven development and the power relations associated with the work of TNCs (Dicken et al., 2001; Coe, Dicken and Hess, 2008). More widely, increasingly important debates about work-life balance and the tyranny of the travel often viewed as essential for securing promotion in TNCs (Gufstason, 2006) might be enriched by detailed empirical study of business travel and the varying pressure of travel on different groups in an organization. The concepts of 'network capital' and 'motility' might also be further used to draw attention to the significance of who travels in terms of the way gender, race and age affect who gets to travel and the implications of this for individual careers and equality with firms more generally. In particular, such discussions have implications for equality in that the ability and willingness of workers to travel may have significant impacts on the promotion prospects of certain groups within an organization.

Of course, the key challenge is to couple ideas about the ecology of mobility that lies behind the operation of global PSFs to questions about how socio-

spatial power relations are created, changed and reproduced by the use of virtual mobility and business travel in different sequences and with different frequencies. It is possible to imagine a situation in which greater reliance on one form of mobility changes the nature of relationships between individuals, offices and places. When this means a predominant reliance on virtual forms of mobility (email, videoconference, the circulation of documents etc.) this seems likely to result in a changed meaning for business travel and differential power relations as a result of the format of the ecology of mobility. Such questions clearly need further attention so that we can better understand their implications for the operation of global PSFs.

### **Conclusions: working towards a research agenda**

In this paper we have examined the practice of business travel as international mobility head-on, considered its role in ecologies of mobility in firms, highlighted the significance of the geography of international business travel flows within and between Europe, and intimated several questions for future research. In sum, we have made a number of interrelated claims about the necessity (and urgency) of placing the study of international business travel on the geographical agenda.

First, we have suggested that business travel itself deserves more detailed attention from academics through in-depth qualitative studies. Further research on the hyper-mobility and geographies of international business

travel are likely to enhance future work on the mobilities paradigm (Sheller and Urry, 2006), knowledge and transient migration studies (Williams, 2007); relational economic geography (Yeung, 2005), the firm (Beaverstock, 2004; Faulconbridge, 2007a) and transport studies (Derudder and Witlox, 2005). Importantly, though, we have argued that this should be as part of studies of the whole ecology of mobility in firms because business travel and f2f meetings cannot be understood in isolation from other forms of mobility.

In addition, second, we have suggested that further research would allow issues that preoccupy both business and government to be better addressed. Indeed, one of our main arguments has been that there is a rich body of work that can help us understand the role of international business travel, yet important empirical gaps that allow us to fully apply existing theoretical frameworks. By highlighting the need to know *when* people travel, *why*, *where* they travel from and to, *how* this relates to virtual forms of mobility (information communication technologies etc.) and mobilities' 'political' impacts more broadly we have attempted to identify a rich research agenda in which further studies can be used to both answer academic questions about business travel in the global economy, but also policy questions about strategies for making business travel 'sustainable'.

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