



The Next Era of Business Travel:

What's Changing and How to Stay Ahead in 2026

As global business travel is projected to surge to [record levels in 2026](#), travel managers and suppliers face a growing set of emerging challenges. Beneath these issues lies a common thread: business travel is shifting into a new era defined by integration, intelligence, and elevated traveler expectations. Organizations that succeed will connect their systems, enhance service delivery, and use real-time data to make smarter decisions.

This paper explores five forces reshaping managed travel, how they intersect, and what travel leaders can do to stay ahead.

Five Issues to Watch

- 1 Business travelers are demanding more from their companies and from service and content suppliers.
- 2 Stakeholders expect real-time, integrated data as a standard practice.
- 3 Mergers, acquisitions, and new partnerships are reshaping the landscape in the latest wave of industry consolidation.
- 4 Travel risks are increasing, requiring more sophisticated duty of care strategies.
- 5 AI is being tested and deployed at unprecedented speed.



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Demands For A Better Traveler Experience

As corporate travel rebounds, business travelers are clear about what they want: smarter booking and expense management solutions, more flexible policies, better service, integrated experiences and proactive disruption support.

Several forces are driving this shift:

- Hybrid and remote work models
- Younger workforce demographics, led by Millennials and Gen Z ([known for being the most vocal](#) of the five generations in the workforce today)
- Growing expectations for consumer-grade digital experiences

Travelers now expect personalization, flexibility, wellbeing, and sustainability to be embedded in programs—with minimal

friction. Buyers are responding by seeking intuitive tools that support self-service, all available content (including NDC fares) and integrate policy guidance directly into the booking flow. Some tools even integrate with common office tools, making team trips easier to book, such as Cytric for Microsoft Teams.

Business travel is entering a new era—where integration, intelligence and travel experience define success. The organizations that thrive will be those that connect their systems, elevate their service, and use real-time data to drive smarter decisions.

Unifying Themes Behind the 5 Trends Reshaping Managed Travel

- ✓ Rising expectations for speed, transparency and control
- ✓ Pressures to break down silos and build integrated ecosystems
- ✓ A shift from cost control to value creation
- ✓ Increasing complexity requiring more automation and intelligence
- ✓ A new definition of trust in the travel ecosystem

An [Amadeus study](#) found that connected platforms offering comprehensive content access and efficient comparisons—combined with policy visibility—can significantly reduce traveler frustration. Travelers also want tools that support the entire journey, from door-to-door planning to real-time disruption assistance.

Business Travel News' 2025 Corporate Travel 100 highlighted [traveler experience](#) as a top priority for large travel programs. Longer domestic and international trips are becoming more common as companies aim to maximize travel ROI. Premium seating, lounge access, expedited airport services, and upgraded lodging are also on the rise.



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Survey data reinforces these trends:

- [In an Amadeus Cytric survey](#) of 500+ travelers, 58% requested more self-service tools, and many asked for integrated travel and expense functionality.
- BTN's [2025 State of the Industry survey ranked TMCs last](#) among major supplier categories for meeting traveler service expectations.
- Nearly one third of buyers surveyed by Business Travel Show Europe were dissatisfied with their TMCs.

As a result, many organizations initiated RFPs in 2025 for new TMCs, booking tools, or both—driven largely by traveler experience concerns.

The stakes are high. [GBTA projects](#) global business travel spending will reach \$1.69 trillion in 2026 and \$2 trillion by 2029. Business travel remains central to company culture, talent retention, and profitability. BTN reports that three quarters of employees view travel as vital to job success. GBTA research also shows that every \$1 invested in business travel generates more than \$14 in revenue, and an 8% increase in travel spend can yield a 6% revenue return—equivalent to just \$184 more per employee annually.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO **STAY AHEAD?**

Travel managers who act proactively earn greater trust, compliance, and program performance. You don't need to rebuild your program—but you do need visible action, clear communications, and a roadmap that shows travelers their concerns matter.

Practical steps include:

- **Survey travelers** to identify pain points in booking tools, expense processes, policies, or service providers. Many companies use TMC soft dollars or hire outside consultants to support this work. BTN offers corporate travel managers a free "[Traveler Experience Survey](#)" to deploy to travelers to understand both the importance and satisfaction of the company's travel program pre-trip, on-trip and post-trip. Results are delivered only to the company travel manager, who may benchmark results against other companies. All data and companies are anonymized.
- **Engage internal stakeholders**—sales, finance, HR and leadership—to align on program enhancements. Look for opportunities to co-sponsor employee surveys with other internal departments.
- **Meet with your OBT, TMC and GDS partners** to review configuration issues. Many frustrations stem from settings, not technology limitations. Invite supplier partners to help brainstorm improvements.
- **Enable modern features** such as AI assistance, integration with workplace tools like Microsoft Teams, NDC content, branded fares, and ancillaries where possible.
- **Review emerging products and suppliers** across booking, expense, payment, duty of care, and travel services.
- **Pilot alternative tools** with a small group—especially vocal critics—to test whether new solutions address key concerns.
- **Create and share a booking experience-roadmap** so employees can see progress and understand what's coming next.



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Integration Can Enhance Traveler And Stakeholder Experiences

To deliver a more seamless experience for travelers, many travel programs are layering third-party tools onto their booking and expense platforms. Integration is the connective tissue that turns a fragmented travel program into a coherent experience for travelers, finance, HR, risk and suppliers. When systems, content and channels are integrated, every stakeholder sees a clearer picture, close to real time, with less friction.

Integrated tools can guide travelers toward higher-value options, even when they aren't the lowest fare, or highlight preferred suppliers that deliver enhanced services or other benefits. On the ground, apps and platforms provide real-time support when travelers most need it – on arrival in a city or during disruptions.

Integration between booking, payment, and expense systems has accelerated. Pre-populated expense data reduces manual entry and speeds reimbursement. When expenses fall within policy or align with approved trip parameters, additional approvals may not be required.

Travel is no longer a procurement category, it's a strategic enabler of revenue, relationships and resilience.

The push to [close monthly financial books faster](#) is also driving deeper integration across travel booking, expense, payment, and ERP systems. Connecting travel data to general ledger and ERP tools enables faster, more accurate reporting for budget owners and executives—who increasingly expect travel programs to demonstrate measurable value.

A benchmarking analysis of 3,200 U.S. firms found that companies with strategic, well governed travel programs can achieve up to 30% higher revenues than peers, according to GBTA and ASTA. The study also showed that every 1% increase in managed travel spend correlates with a 0.20% rise in revenue.

As Cornerstone Information Systems noted, “Disconnected platforms create errors, inefficiencies, and manual work—from missing employee records in expense systems to inaccurate accruals and delayed reimbursements.” Breaking down data silos is now essential for efficiency, visibility, and compliance.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO **STAY AHEAD?**

- ▶ **Work with IT and finance** to define integration objectives and remove data silos, improve accuracy, standardize data and strengthen financial controls.
- ▶ **Map all travel related data sources** (OBT, TMC, corporate card, expense tools, HR) to understand what you have and where it needs to go.
- ▶ **Establish API** based integrations with ERP or financial systems.
- ▶ **Require** suppliers and TMCs to provide standardized data feeds.
- ▶ **Build a unified data layer** to support analytics and reporting.
- ▶ If resources are limited, **consider using a data consolidator, integrator, or your TMC** to jumpstart the process.
- ▶ Enable budget owners to **see real-time bookings and costs** to manage spend proactively.
- ▶ **Use integrated data** to tell a clear story about travel trends, department level spending, and opportunities for optimization.



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Expect More Industry Consolidation

Heading into 2025, industry analysts [projected an increased number of mergers and acquisitions](#) across the travel sector. M&A broker Matt Zito forecast a [doubling of activity](#) as larger entities acquired smaller ones, and private equity re-entered the market. By year-end 2025, Zito said, “we’ll continue to see the larger companies buy smaller TMCs—it’s a really active marketplace.” One reason for some mergers and acquisitions occurring now, he said, is due to pent-up demand after the pandemic and the other reason is due to public markets. “The public markets really drive a lot of M&A, at least in the U.S. ... we’ll continue to see a lot of activity in TMC transactions” in 2026, he added.

Industry consolidation isn't slowing—it's reshaping managed travel. In 2026, the winners will be travel managers who proactively evaluate partners, integration strength, and long-term fit before consolidation forces their hand.

American Express Global Business Travel finally [completed its \\$540 million acquisition of CWT](#) in September after 17 months of regulatory review. Additional deals followed across Europe and beyond: Netherlands-based [ATG Travel Worldwide bought CWT's](#) business travel operations in Germany. [Direct Travel bought](#) its European partner ATPI, just one of [several other European deals](#). Technology partnerships have also expanded, including a new alliance between Amex GBT and SAP Concur offering exclusive future enhancements to TMC clients.

The developments have left many travel buyers asking [what they should consider](#) when such news breaks involving their suppliers.

The industry consolidation is the latest of three waves that have redefined managed travel, Austin Lorenzen, Head of Partners at Amadeus Cytric, said on a [recent webinar](#). The first wave occurred in the 1990s with the launch of new online booking tools. The second began in the mid-2000s as airlines reduced and then eliminated commissions, prompting TMCs to devise new revenue models to support corporate customers.

With increasing demands for speed and service integration, many corporations and suppliers are adopting the latest technologies. Corporate buyers are closely monitoring news about various consolidations, questioning partners and trying to understand the short- and long-term impact any such development might have on their own programs.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO **STAY AHEAD?**

- **Supplier strategies require continuous reevaluation;** travel managers need to anticipate—not react to—market shifts.
- **Reassess** supplier portfolios annually.
- **Prioritize partners** with strong integration roadmaps that align with your own priorities.



Travel Risks Are Increasing In Frequency And Complexity

“As global travel accelerates in step with economic recovery and growing geopolitical complexity, the conversation around risk is evolving rapidly,” wrote Carl Sykes, CEO of Neptune P2P, in [Gulf Business](#). “In 2026, corporate travel risk management will no longer be viewed as a peripheral function. It will become a defining element of organizational resilience, operational continuity, and reputational stewardship.”

In the convergence of two trends, industry firms are exploring how AI and technology can solve for travel disruption as the “next big leap forward,” Amadeus SVP of solution consulting Robert Buckman told BTN editors, citing technology such as Acai, in which Amadeus is an investor. In several pilot programs, AI models can connect with external tools and services, including a voice-activated agent, respond in natural language—even in multiple languages—and record changes, he said.

The biggest risk in 2026 is fragmentation. Disconnected systems slow decisions, weaken duty of care, and frustrate travelers.

Geopolitical instability, cyber threats, health risks, and climate-driven disruptions are rising. Travelers expect proactive protection, and in many regions, duty of care obligations are legally mandated. Modern platforms now integrate real-time alerts, digital security features, and continuous monitoring to help organizations respond quickly.

“Flight delays, cancellations and unexpected disruptions can significantly impact the ability to attend important meetings or events leading to increased stress,” noted Amadeus Cytric Solutions Chief Commercial Officer Mark Cullen.

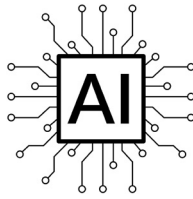
In today’s reality, traveler tracking, rapid responses, solid scenario planning, and targeted communication during incidents remains essential. TMCs and third-party providers offer scalable risk management solutions that can be tailored to different budgets and global footprints.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO **STAY AHEAD?**

- **Integrate booking, HR, risk, and communication platforms** to ensure unified visibility.
- **Implement real-time traveler tracking and alerting**—typically through a specialized third-party provider.
- **Develop scenario-based response playbooks** that clearly define roles, responsibilities, and decision-making authority.
- **Increase adoption of the corporate travel management tool** - the more data available to travel managers, the easier it is to understand where business travelers are, in case of disruptions.



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AI Growth And Reality

Time magazine named the architects of AI its [2025 Person of the Year](#), noting that artificial intelligence's "full potential roared into view," and that there is now "no turning back or opting out," as Editor Sam Jacobs wrote.

Across the travel sector, adoption is accelerating. In a McKinsey-Skift study, 90% of travel executives [surveyed](#) said their companies are using generative AI, while 38% reported they are not yet using agentic AI. An [October 2025 poll by GBTA](#) found that nearly half of suppliers and TMC professionals and one-third of buyers are already experimenting with autonomous AI.

Within corporate travel, AI is "streamlining travel bookings, disruption management, expense reconciliation and intelligence reporting," according to a [BTN primer](#). New booking and [meeting management](#) tools are using agentic AI to likewise simplify complex tasks for travelers and meeting arrangers.

As Areka Consulting's Tauseef Hussain explains, early adoption spans multiple layers of AI:

- "Machine learning draws on past data to identify patterns and predicts outcomes.
- Generative AI produces new outputs, content and recommendations.
- Agentic AI interprets prompts, then goes a step further by completing tasks."

Industry experts continue to be surprised by the speed of adoption. Travel buyers report working with internal teams to build [chatbots](#) and agents for reporting, automation and efficiency gains.

"AI is a learning curve, but getting comfortable with these tools can really help you and your travelers," said consultant Caroline Strachan, Festive Road CEO.

"Agentic AI is going to touch it all: the sourcing, the customer experience, the messaging, the booking, the individual traveler, the data," GoldSpring Consulting partner [Will Tate](#) [told BTN editors](#). "It's going to weave its way through the entire ecosystem in a way that's just beginning, so to be thinking about that as you move into the next five years is critical."

On a recent BTN News Desk, FCM global head of customer management and consulting Jo Lloyd emphasized the pace of change: generative AI is already transforming operations behind the scenes, in chatbots, and across supplier workflows. "AI is going to revolutionize the entire way we engage in the ecosystem and look at things," she said. Buyers need to be "thinking about how you can use AI within your program, end-to-end ... If it's not there already, every travel program should have a strategy on how they're incorporating AI into their user experience from start to finish."

AI is accelerating faster than the industry can absorb it, being deployed across booking, service, analytics and risk. It is reducing manual work and enabling predictive insights. At the same time, companies must ensure strong governance, responsible use, and data-trust frameworks.

"AI agents are uniquely well suited to the travel industry," Amadeus and Microsoft wrote in a [white paper](#) about how they're partnering to transform operational efficiency in travel. "With complex processes that often run on unstructured text data, housed in multiple different systems, across multiple different organizations, AI agents can help our industry perform a technology 'leapfrog.' The world is rapidly heading towards a future with billions of AI agents that work together and with humans to get things done."

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO **STAY AHEAD?**

- ▶ **Identify high-value AI use cases**, manually intensive tasks such as group air bookings or profile builds.
- ▶ **Ensure data readiness** and governance on use of data.
- ▶ **Ask suppliers how they're using AI** and protecting your data from it.
- ▶ **Build human-in-the-loop operating models**.
- ▶ **Consider the need for a [people roadmap for AI](#)** as consultant Katie Virtue opines – using AI to free up human talent for more innovation.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS

The next era of business travel is emerging—one defined by **connected ecosystems, predictive intelligence, and value creation** rather than fragmented tools and reactive service.

As in previous waves of disruption, travel managers have shown remarkable adaptability in reviewing and rethinking programs and relationships. Thayer Investment Partners' Cara Whitehill noted in a BTN op-ed that the industry is “on the cusp of a [major rethink of the entire corporate travel tech stack](#), both commercially and technologically.”

Suppliers and forward-thinking travel managers are already rising to the challenges. [BTN](#), [BTN Europe](#) and [industry associations](#) in the past year have recognized several travel managers who rapidly adopted new technologies and hybrid models as they tried to enhance travel programs and better serve their traveling workforces.

Those who lead the next era will be the ones who:

- ✓ Enable real-time visibility.
- ✓ Harness AI and automation.
- ✓ Strengthen duty of care programs.
- ✓ Elevate traveler experience.
- ✓ Build resilient, integrated supplier partnerships.
- ✓ Communicate a clear vision to travelers and stakeholders.

As Amadeus' Senior Vice President of Corporate Strategy, Rongrong Hu observed, “Transformation in travel has never been just about technology: it's about people, ideas, and the shared desire to make travel work better.” From cloud platforms to NDC, mobile payments, and now AI, innovation continues to expand what's possible for travelers and the industry. “At Amadeus, we've learned that innovation is about more than just adopting new tools, it's about building with an open mindset, exploring fresh ideas, and collaborating across the ecosystem to unlock new opportunities for growth.”