

Rethinking Rail: Realising the Benefits of the Travel Time Experience

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Intriguingly, the British public as a whole spend no more time travelling within these shores today than they did in 1976. The amount the average person travels each day has remained remarkably constant at about 1 hour for the last 30 years. However, something has changed - we are travelling further: over 50% more than 30 years ago. This of course means we are, on average, travelling faster. A lot of this change has been as a result of our love affair with the car (foregoing in turn how much we walk, cycle and catch the bus). Yet ironically, as we know, the more people that jump in their cars the slower we all go as traffic levels increase. Nevertheless, many of us are not discouraged - it has become such a habit to think 'car' and then tolerate the consequences of possible delay and uncertain journey times that we don't give serious attention to alternative ways of getting from A to B. But perhaps this is changing? Another statistic that can be surprising relates to rail travel - since 1994 the amount we travel by rail in Britain has increased by nearly 50%. An obvious question to ask is 'why?'. The answer is not clear but it must relate to the different aspects of a journey that add up to give us an overall impression of whether to go by road or rail (or air). We are conditioned to judge certain aspects more than others - monetary cost, time and reliability are popular considerations. Reliability is certainly a fascinating notion when comparing road and rail - trains run to timetables which makes them more accountable for being on time; cars have no timetable and no-one obvious to blame if we get somewhere late.

Perhaps the rising popularity of rail relates to another aspect of the journey - the journey experience itself or how we use our travel time. This is something I have been researching with colleagues and our work certainly highlights a different way of thinking about travel¹. People have tended to see the benefit of travel as the thing they do when they get to their destination. Travel is assumed to be the price paid for reaching the destination. However, this apparent burden of travel can be viewed quite differently - as a gift. The gift can take the form of the sensation of travel itself - the pulsing train passing through changing landscapes. It can also take the form of transition time and time out. By transition time we mean the mental adjustment we make between different roles in life - leaving the stressful office as a manager and arriving home as a parent; leaving home thinking about football and arriving at the business meeting thinking about strategy. Time out refers to the period of time a journey gives us which is

ours to use as we wish - away from the expectations of others at home or at work. It is selfish time - we could read a book, listen to our choice of music, watch a DVD, phone a friend, daydream, sleep. Equally we might use this uninterrupted time to do some quality thinking, read a report or prepare a presentation. In short, this time out is something we can benefit from and use productively. However, what we can do with the time depends on how we travel and what we have with us. Blue tooth technology will allow the car driver to make phone calls, and one can think while driving. However, sleeping, reading and writing are not yet possibilities for the motorist. Rail travel meanwhile seems characterised by the array of different time uses people indulge in and the presence of a growing range of travel time 'artefacts' - from paper-based to electronic.

We recently consulted 26,000 rail passengers in Britain about their travel time use. The results make interesting reading, highlighting variations: between commuters, business and leisure travellers; between young and old, male and female; according to journey duration; and according to the availability and use of items to fill the time. We found that the majority of rail passengers either make some use or very worthwhile use of their time travelling by train. The most popular activities are reading for leisure, window gazing/people watching and working/studying. The information age is making its mark. Of those who have communication devices with them (laptops, mobile phones, PDAs etc), a fifth indicate that having such a device made the journey time a lot better and nearly half thought their time passed more quickly than otherwise. Those who plan what they will do on their train journey are much less likely to find the time wasted.

So, perhaps we should all give more thought to how we travel - consider breaking some habits and ask ourselves whether we are getting the most out of our daily dose of travel time. The answer may come as a surprise to some of us - travelling by train has a lot to offer. Perhaps more of us should make this transition and start reaping the benefits of taking time out?

ⁱ Professor Lyons is leading a joint 3-year study with Professor John Urry of the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University entitled "Travel Time Use in the Information Age". For further details see <http://www.transport.uwe.ac.uk/research/projects/travel-time-use.asp>