

## Travel-Time Use in the Information Age

Workshop January 2007



### Research Summary 5: Travel Remedy Kit

Validation of the research to create in-depth accounts of the affects of the research on particular journeys. Conducted with five participants. Structured interviews were conducted using a card game, with 30 different concepts developed during the research. The participant used these cards to articulate a journey they wanted to improve, and explore things they might do or take with them to do this. A highly personalised travel remedy kit was then created on the basis of this interview. The participant took this kit on the journey (in the form of a small bag containing instructions, magazines, snack pack, ear plugs, music player, landmark guide, and other items). The participant was then debriefed to see how effective the ideas and the artefacts had been.

#### Valuable not valued

Travel time is important and valuable, never undesirable, but it's value to participants is not measurable – and it is that immeasurability which is part of its value. It is liminal, time in between measurement or auditing by others (family as well as office), time in between roles. Although there was a sense that travel time should be productive in parts, for moments, the whole journey was never considered merely an extension of the office and there was no desire for this to be so.

#### Journey specificity not homogeneity

Journeys were almost impossible to group or categorise and certainly business, leisure and commuter are misleading. Each journey had its own unique characteristics, its own very diverse possibilities for activities and therefore what made it valuable. A journey to work has almost no correlation with a journey from work. A journey to one meeting one day could be very different if conducted again but with an onward journey to a friend. The same journey in an early morning summer is utterly changed on a dark and wet winter's morning – e.g. walking across a city park to the station becomes a unsafe.

#### Travel time is transition time and reflection time

Notebook and pen are as much a constant companion to travellers as a mobile phone (perhaps Virgin already are aware of this, given their last campaign). Daydreaming, imagining, reflecting on life, a sense of spirituality, and contemplation were all part of travelling, often as part of looking out of the window. Self reflection was almost inseparable from reflections through the window. Participants always wanted to have the possibility to write and make notes on ideas, letters, emails, diaries. Without exception every participant regarded their journey as providing the possibility to contemplate, reflect and be creative in some way.

Travel time is located and personal

Travel was intensely personal. Idealised journeys and preference for activities was very nuanced. The difference was in the detail. Special food of exceptional high quality was much lauded. Choice of magazine, music and book were very specific – participants were usually very articulate as to what they wanted. Food was particularly an issue, since it was part of every kit and I always chose very luxurious items (e.g. M&S range of luxury organic biscuits and snacks), most participants had developed tactics to avoid buying food at stations – aside from coffee and tea – due to its poor quality.

Diverse activities compress time

Consistent across the participants was the feeling that the travel remedy kit made the experience of the journey go faster – it compressed the journey. This was, I believe, for two reasons: a) I made suggestions for what they should do at every stage of the journey, including at hourly intervals during the journey, and they often followed my suggestions; b) the kit provided them with a wealth of possible activities – it therefore expanded the possibilities of what the journey could be. For several of the participants there was almost not enough time to do everything, even though they wanted to! I was told on several occasions that they wanted to use the neck-pillow but the journey was not that long i.e. because of the kit the journey was being conceived of as relatively short (even in the case of a three hour journey from Lancaster to London).

Note: as a corollary of this the iPod along with the notebook and pen (but not the mobile phone) were perhaps the best technologies for providing very diverse activities. They were swiss-army knife devices, affording multiple activities and possibilities for use. However, this was after suggestions from me as to what to do with them (e.g. I asked each participant to draw or describe in the notebook one thing they had not noticed before, and I provided the iPod with around 20 free podcasts, as well as albums and games, and an instruction booklet for how to make the most of it)

Viscous time

Although this card did not meet with much fanfare during initial interviews (although generally agreed with), it was clear that for longer journeys the last hour or last half hour was always the most difficult and draining. Typically participants talked about the last half hour as being when they were most bored and just wanted to arrive. It was this part of the journey that I specifically tackled in each of the individual travel guides I produced. I broke the journey down into segments and suggested activities for each, usually an initial settling in and doing some work, then a period of eating and relaxing, then a final period of playing and imagining. This is, essentially, another form of journey planning, but not one normally considered. By holding back some of the activities until these viscous moments when people are normally bored the journey was experienced as consistently exciting, pleasurable and never boring.

Note: Participants also said although they appreciated the

suggestions, they were unlikely to do this level of planning for themselves, it was part of the gift of the travel remedy kit.

#### Forgotten travel times

For several participants some of the biggest differences created by the kit were the suggestions for getting to/from the train station. This was a source of huge frustration – generally train companies sell train tickets and not train journeys. Train journeys involve figuring out the local bus service to get you there, or thinking through where to park, or where (and when) to buy a ticket etc. All of the participants bought tickets in advance (even the commuters) but had forgotten the travel time before the train. I often worked through in detail better options for getting them to/from station (including bus timetables and maps to bus stops), and I always made suggestions for what to do whilst waiting at the station. The most work to do for improvements to the experience of travel time may, ironically, be here – in the integration of the journey and the buildings and amenities of the stations themselves.