



Software *and* Service

Navigating the modern business travel landscape

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This white paper draws on AmTrav's business travel expertise along with valuable insights generously shared by speakers on AmTrav's [Full Service? Self-Service? Real Talk webinar](#). Our guests included Jackie Collins, Travel Manager at Mesirow Financial, [Louise Miller](#), Business Travel Consultant, Results Plus Consulting, and [Jeff Klee](#), Co-Founder and CEO at [AmTrav Corporate Travel](#).



Jackie Collins
Mesirow Financial



Louise Miller
Results Plus



Jeff Klee
AmTrav

Imagine this: Sarah, a rising sales executive, is on her way to a career-defining presentation. She's meticulously planned her trip in the corporate travel booking tool. But as she lands for her connecting flight, a notification pings – her next flight is canceled due to crew shortages. The airline's app offers a rebooking, but it's for a flight the next day, arriving after her career-defining meeting. The automated chat assistant keeps suggesting the same unhelpful options. Panic sets in. This isn't just an inconvenience, it's a dagger in her high-stakes deal. The sleek booking tool that Sarah relies on and that worked perfectly yesterday – now it's a cold, indifferent barrier. All the automation in the world can't understand the urgency, the stress, or the need for a creative, immediate solution.

Sarah doesn't need a faster algorithm; she needs an understanding human.

This scenario, unfortunately, isn't fiction for many business travelers. While technology has undeniably made booking travel faster and more convenient in many ways, there's still a need for expert human service.

Our thesis is simple: software and service.

I. Introduction: The new traveler expectation

"Everyone wants to book online – until the flight gets canceled." This simple statement captures a fundamental truth about modern business travel. In an era defined by digital convenience, business travelers have come to expect seamless, intuitive online booking experiences. They crave the autonomy to manage their arrangements quickly and efficiently. Yet, the moment a carefully planned trip encounters a disruption – a canceled flight, a sold-out hotel, or an unexpected change in plans – expert human support becomes really, really valuable.

This creates a paradox for travel administrators: how do you cater to the strong preference for self-service while ensuring a robust safety net is in place for when things inevitably go awry? Today's business travelers don't just want flexibility; they need it, and they also need the reassurance of reliable support when travel complexities arise.

This white paper delves into this evolving landscape. We explore who today's business traveler is and what they expect. We examine why, even in a technologically advanced world, human service remains indispensable. Crucially, we discuss how to find the right balance, building a hybrid travel program that successfully marries the efficiency of self-service with the reassurance of expert human support. We will also touch upon how emerging technologies like AI are further shaping this equation and provide a simple checklist to help you assess if your current program is meeting these dual needs. Ultimately, the goal is to empower you to structure a travel program that serves both your travelers and your business effectively.

II. Today's traveler: Self-service empowerment

The expectation for online booking tools is no longer a niche demand; it's the norm. As AmTrav CEO Jeff Klee notes in the [AmTrav online booking report](#), "from Gen Z to Baby Boomers, from junior staff to travel arrangers to C-suite leaders, everybody wants to book corporate travel online." This isn't surprising. We live in a world powered by on-demand services, from ordering dinner via an app to streaming entertainment. Why should booking business travel be any different?

When an online booking tool (OBT) is capable, self-service is the undisputed champion. The data strongly supports this. [AmTrav's own data](#) reveals that an overwhelming 97% of trips are booked online by clients. This preference spans across demographics and job titles. For instance, 97% of Gen X, Millennials and Gen Z trips are booked online, and even Baby Boomers book 93% of trips online. Even at the C-suite level, 94% of bookings are made online, either self-booked or by an arranger.

Jackie Collins from Mesirow Financial [shared a compelling example](#): "Before, 90% of our bookings were with agents, but in the first month after we switched [to a user-friendly booking platform], we went to 78% online bookings – it tells you they want to self-serve now." This significant shift highlights that when provided with a user-friendly and capable tool, travelers and arrangers will eagerly embrace it.

The benefits of high online adoption are manifold:

- **Happier Bookers & Travelers:** Giving people the capable self-service tools they want leads to greater satisfaction and adoption of the travel program.
- **Time Savings:** Online booking is inherently faster than traditional methods, freeing up valuable time for both travelers and arrangers. As AmTrav's [report](#) points out, "Your team's time is money, and online booking is faster."
- **Control & Visibility:** Modern OBTs provide administrators with full control over travel spend and policy compliance, offering real-time data and reporting.
- **Fewer Handoffs:** Self-service reduces the number of touchpoints and potential for miscommunication compared to legacy travel agent processes.
- **Cost Savings:** Higher online adoption often translates to lower travel management company (TMC) fees. The AmTrav report illustrates potential travel management savings of 50%+ by improving online booking rates.

The message is clear: travelers and their arrangers expect robust online booking capabilities that can handle everything from simple domestic trips (97% booked online) to applying unused tickets (96% booked online) and even complex multi-stop itineraries (95% booked online). The need for "instant gratification," as Jackie termed it, is a powerful driver.

III. Why human service still matters: the indispensable human touch

While the efficiency of self-service is undeniable, the travel landscape is still fraught with complexities that even the most sophisticated technology cannot resolve alone. As Jeff Klee put it, "there's still this small but really, really important number of situations where a traveler, for one reason or another, still wants and highly values service." This is where expert human service remains critical.

Consider these scenarios:

- **Complex Itineraries:** While many multi-stop trips can be booked online, bookers and travelers may want help with intricate international travel to navigate visa requirements, optimal routing, and nuanced supplier rules. Long-haul international is one area where AmTrav sees slightly higher use of agents with only 90% online booking for these more complex scenarios.
- **Last-Minute Changes & Disruptions:** This is the most cited reason for needing human intervention. A traveler wakes up to their 6 AM flight canceled, a sudden weather event grounding all aircraft, or a missed connection can leave a traveler stressed and stranded. In these high-stress moments, some travelers really value swift, decisive action from a knowledgeable travel advisor.
- **Nervous Travelers, Emotional Needs & Empathy:** Disruptions aren't just logistical challenges, there's an emotional toll for travelers, particularly if they're forced to be entirely self-sufficient. The challenge of navigating complex rebooking, the feeling of being alone, the anxiety of not knowing if a solution will be found – that hurts a traveler's well-being and productivity. In these situations, reassurance and empathy are critical. Jeff drew a parallel: "If I want to talk to someone, I want it in the moment, even if it's just to hear someone with a little empathy on the phone." Jackie echoed this: "You want to know that there's a lifesaver at the end of the line."
- **Creative Problem-Solving:** Experienced travel advisors possess a knack for finding solutions that APIs and algorithms might miss – securing a room in a supposedly sold-out hotel, finding an unconventional routing to get a traveler home, or leveraging supplier relationships to an advantage.
- **Supporting the Administrator:** A robust travel support system also means that the travel administrator doesn't have to be the 24x7 point of contact for every traveler issue. Reliable support allows them to focus on strategic program management rather than constant firefighting. As Jackie said: "I can finally get to the list of to-dos on the whiteboard in my office!"

The technology for human support is critical. Travelers expect to connect through various channels – chat while on the plane, a phone call from the car, or email or Teams from their desk. Louise Miller with Results Plus Consulting noted: "I love when I get red carpet service through chat, through email, through phone, and through my online tools."

And when travelers do connect, they expect fully capable agents who can handle any request efficiently — at noon and at midnight. Jackie highlighted the value of this: "it's critical to us, our travelers have to have 24x7 service."

The reality is, even with the best self-service online tools, travelers may still want help from a fellow human who they can trust.

IV. Finding the Balance: Building a Hybrid Travel Program

The optimal travel program isn't an "either/or" proposition when it comes to self-service and human support, it's unequivocally "both." The key is to create a flexible, hybrid model that seamlessly integrates technology with readily accessible expert human assistance. This approach caters to the traveler's desire for autonomy while providing a critical safety net, ultimately fostering traveler well-being, productivity, and cost-effectiveness.

What are the key ingredients of that model?

- **Seamless, Fully Capable Online Booking:** The foundation is a powerful, intuitive booking platform that allows travelers and arrangers to book what they need, when they need it, without unnecessary friction. This includes handling diverse booking types – from simple domestic to multi-leg international, applying unused tickets, and supporting guest travel.
- **Instant Access to Live, Expert Support:** When self-service isn't enough, travelers need immediate access to knowledgeable human support through the channels they prefer (phone, chat, email). This support should be available 24/7, because travel disruptions don't adhere to business hours. As Louise Miller stated, "Every single one [company]—small, medium, large—all need 24x7 support."

AmTrav CEO Jeff Klee on the two kinds of business travel service

"There are fundamentally two kinds of service in business travel today."

"The first kind is indispensable. This is the expert human help that travelers genuinely want, especially when things go sideways. Think about complex international itineraries, last-minute disruptions at the airport, or simply the need for a calm, empathetic expert when a traveler is stressed and needs help. This is where skilled, knowledgeable travel experts earn their stripes, providing value that technology alone can't replicate."

"Then there's the other kind of service, the kind that needs to die a swift death. This is the 'service' that exists purely because technology failed. It's the call you're forced to make because the online tool is missing fares, can't book a split-carrier booking, can't make a trip change, or just plain doesn't work. Let's be blunt: TMCs charging extra when the tech breaks is a problem. That's not service, it's a tax on bad tech paid by the customer, and it's a model that discourages better tools and innovation."

- **Clear Guidelines & Fair Pricing Models:** Travelers and administrators shouldn't be penalized for needing help. Jeff has long advocated against per-transaction fees that "ding you for an extra amount" every time service is utilized, as it disincentivizes seeking necessary help. A per-trip or subscription model, where support is an integral part of the service, aligns better with traveler needs and encourages the TMC to continuously improve its technology. As Lifeway Christian Resources Travel Manager Robin Tenpenny said of the flat per-trip model: "I don't have to say 'don't call because you'll pay more' – instead I say 'Sure, give the agency a call, chat or email.'"
- **Actively Solicit Feedback:** Continuously soliciting and acting on feedback from bookers and travelers is crucial for monitoring and improving both the technology and the service components of the program. Plus it shows both travelers and your leaders that you're responsive to the team's needs.
- **Training and Support for All Preferences:** Recognize that different individuals within your organization may have varying levels of comfort with technology. Provide adequate training and self-service resources to support employees across this spectrum.

V. How AI changes the equation

The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) is poised to further transform the travel service landscape. AI is already improving aspects of the travel experience and promises even more significant changes ahead.

Louise Miller observed that AI is "currently excelling in handling simple responses and is prevalent in chat functionalities, moving from basic bots to learning systems." Many companies are already using AI internally to help travelers understand travel policies more easily. Suppliers like airlines and hotels are also leveraging AI to optimize staffing and enhance guest experiences.

The potential impact is vast. Jeff envisions two categories for AI's role: "first, how can we use AI to do the things that we've always done, you know, better, faster, and cheaper. Then second, there are the things that we haven't even imagined... where it's completely blowing up the whole process." This could range from more intelligent chatbots and improved policy tools to the futuristic concept of a personal AI agent that books all travel automatically based on learned preferences and company policy.

Travelers seem ready to embrace these advancements if they deliver genuine value. Jackie shared her own experience seeing AI tools: "I said, 'Oh, my gosh! Those will change my life!'" Jackie believes her travelers would definitely embrace AI if it offers that instant gratification and solves problems more efficiently than waiting for human intervention.

However, the key will be implementing AI in a way that truly enhances the experience, rather than creating new frustrations. As Louise Miller cautioned, "It's our job, I think, in the intermediary space to figure out how to make it really work." Jeff Klee remains optimistic, stating: "the great thing about AI is it's a way to do things much faster than we've ever done it before, it is going to make life better for travelers, and it is going to make life better for companies." AI can help manage the inherent complexity in travel, making it less burdensome for everyone involved.

While AI will undoubtedly automate more tasks and provide new levels of personalization, we'll see when and if it entirely replaces human empathy and complex problem-solving, especially in high-stress or unusual situations. It is clear, though, that AI will augment human capabilities, freeing up expert advisors to handle the most challenging and nuanced issues where their skills are most valuable.

VI. Checklist: Is your program delivering both freedom and support?

Take a moment to assess your current travel program. Consider these diagnostic questions to gauge whether you're effectively balancing traveler autonomy with robust support:

- Can your travelers book what they need, when they need it, easily on their own? (Think about different trip types, applying credits, guest bookings.)
- Is your online booking tool intuitive and comprehensive, or do travelers frequently need to go offline for routine bookings?
- Do your travelers and arrangers know how to quickly reach expert help 24/7, through chat, phone and email?
- Are your team's profiles, itineraries and bookings consistent across online and agent systems?
- When disruptions occur, is your team rerouted swiftly, efficiently, and with compassion by the support team?
- Does your TMC pricing model allow or discourage travelers from seeking assistance when they need it?
- Are you actively soliciting and incorporating traveler feedback to improve the program?
- Do your people feel genuinely taken care of throughout their travel journey, regardless of whether they self-serve or need assistance?

Answering these questions honestly can highlight areas where your program excels and where there might be opportunities for improvement to better meet the dual needs of modern business travelers.

VII. Conclusion: Serve the traveler, serve the business

The modern business travel landscape demands a nuanced approach. The expectation for seamless self-service is a given, driven by a desire for autonomy and efficiency. Yet, the unpredictable nature of travel means that readily-available, empathetic, and expert human support remains indispensable.

The paradox of wanting both self-sufficiency and a safety net isn't a contradiction to be resolved, but rather the path forward. Empowerment and support are not mutually exclusive; they are the winning combination for a successful travel program.

By strategically blending capable technology with dedicated human service, businesses can create a travel program that not only meets the evolving expectations of their travelers but also delivers tangible benefits to the organization – from cost savings and efficiency gains to improved traveler satisfaction and productivity. The goal is to provide a system where travelers feel confident booking for themselves, knowing that if anything goes wrong, a knowledgeable and caring expert is just a call, chat, or click away. That's how you serve the traveler, and in doing so, truly serve the business.





Talking AI with Acai Travel's Ron Glickman

Can't get enough AI? We can't either. We sat down with **Acai Travel's Ron Glickman**, Ron shared five key insights for AI in corporate travel:

AI's immediate impact on traveler support and self-service: AI is already helping Travel Management Companies (TMCs) offer self-service options. A key example is its use in facilitating quicker deployment of new airline connections or changes. Instead of waiting for full front-end display development for complex scenarios like re-shopping flights after a distribution model change, AI can provide natural language responses via chat, email, or even voice, allowing travelers to proceed with changes faster. This supplements the traditional GUI experience, enabling faster deployment.

AI can help with supplier policy ingestion and accuracy: While generic AI can retrieve information, one real use case for agents is in accurately ingesting and explaining complex data like airline policies, name change instructions and waivers. This accurate guidance replaces vast internal libraries. Accuracy is key, Ron urged buyers to thoroughly question AI providers about their models, fine-tuning processes, and data training practices to ensure reliability.

The "human in the loop" is crucial for corporate travel: Despite promises of full automation, Ron stresses that humans will remain essential in corporate travel due to the complexity of travel programs' cases. AI "forgets" and requires constant refreshing, and corporate travel demands a high degree of personalization – profiles, duty of care, and multi-layered policies beyond simple search results. Unleashing unfiltered AI into this environment carries a significant risk of providing incorrect answers, which severely damages a TMC's relationship with corporate clients.

Corporate travel's complexity makes AI automation harder than leisure travel: Corporate travel is far more intricate than leisure travel due to factors like traveler profiles, company policies, duty of care, and varied preferences from different stakeholders (traveler, travel manager, TMC). Ron highlights that leisure travel has an easier path to AI implementation because it lacks these complex variables. Ron cautioned against drawing direct comparisons to leisure travel AI solutions (like those from OTAs) and emphasized that developing AI models for corporate travel requires carefully weighting and considering numerous variables, a task that is a lot more complex than people understand.

Pilot programs must prioritize privacy, define success metrics, and include control groups: For buyers looking to pilot AI solutions, Ron's advice is to first involve the CTO and IT department to ensure data privacy, licensing, and security align with company policies. Once the green light is given, buyers should clearly define what they aim to achieve (faster resolution time, improved CSAT scores, higher compliance, etc.). Crucially, he recommends using control groups to measure the AI's actual impact and determine its value and effectiveness. Sentiment analysis helps ensure that AI does not frustrate travelers and knows when a human touch is needed to maintain empathy.

Thanks to Ron for his time and insight. [Follow Ron on LinkedIn.](#)

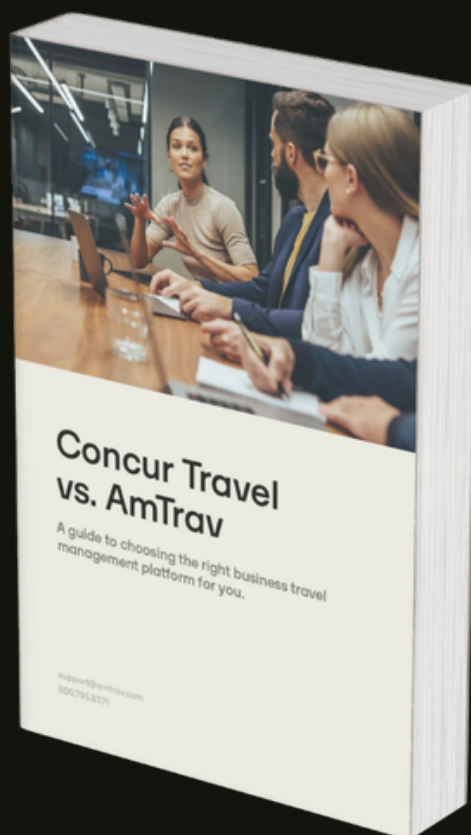
Take the next step: See how leading travel platforms stack up

Looking for a travel platform that really works for your travelers and your business? You've seen why self-service and service both matter — now compare the tools that promise to deliver both. See how AmTrav's all-in-one platform and people-first service model compares to legacy platforms like Concur. [Learn more here.](#)

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