

How do people value Travel Time

Is travel time 'lost time'? Often, we think of travel time purely in terms of duration and cost. But are there ways travel time itself can be valuable? Through research with residents of a West Midlands village, we have uncovered a series of ways in which people can attribute value to the time they spend travelling.

The research involved 12 participants – a sample size chosen to allow us to develop a deep understanding of their experiences of mobility. The group ranged in age from 18-75, and included a mix of genders,

relatively new and long-term residents, and drivers and non-drivers. Participants took part in diary studies (12 people), in-depth interviews (8), accompanied journeys (7), and group discussions (10).

In these pages, we outline seven 'value areas' identified through analysis of the research data. These value areas are intended to inspire innovators or service designers, whom we believe can benefit from investigating how these seven value areas can be exploited to attract new customers and keep existing ones happy.



Travel Time is... Me Time

Travelling alone can be a chance to get away from work, family, or worries and enjoy some 'me time'.

“

In my car I can do what I like. I actually quite like a bit of a journey home to listen to music and just be by myself and have that opportunity to sing along to my favourite songs or whatever.

”

Karen, 50s

Karen is married with a teenage daughter and works full-time. Between work, home, and social activities, life is busy. While in the car, she'll sometimes phone family members, but keeps calls short so she can turn up her music and sing along without annoying others. She likes 'longish' train journeys too, where she can sit and read... do whatever she likes.

Jane and Michael both value commuting by car for the time to think and problem solve.

Sophie refuses to take work calls in the car – she listens to the radio and it gives her time to wind down and recharge after meetings.

For Kate, taking a walk is a **“chance to take some time out for myself”**, where she listens to her music and concentrates on the moment.

But... (it's not that simple)

The above relates to the perceived benefits of solo travel, however several participants felt instead that travelling alone can be boring, particularly on longer journeys.



RELATED RESEARCH

Juliet Jain and Glenn Lyons have argued that individuals can sometimes perceive travel time as a 'gift'. A key aspect of this is that travel can be 'time out' – “a space away from the obligations of work and home”. Travellers may spend this time out doing very little or it can be 'time for', where their focus group participants described using travel time for personal activities such as reading or social communication.

Jain, J. & G. Lyons (2008) 'The gift of travel time'. In *Journal of Transport Geography* 16, pp 81-89

Travel Time is... Relationship Building

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Travelling with others offers opportunities for catching up, getting to know one another better, team building, or for squeezing in conversation with family into an otherwise busy schedule.

“

I quite like the school run in the car, because it's an opportunity to talk to the kids about their day. Especially with a teenager who's a bit grumpy, having him sat next to you for 15 minutes... it's a kind of forced engagement with your parents.

”

Sophie, 40s

Sophie works full time and is very active in her spare time. For her, driving the kids to school or sharing a ride with her partner is a way to fit in some precious quality time with the family. When travelling together, *“you're forced to sit and have a conversation”*, which is good when life is busy.

Karen finds that travelling with colleagues offers a chance to speak about things other than work and to get to know one another better. She also enjoys mother-daughter time in the car or on public transport.

Travelling together by car provides an opportunity to get some one-to-one time with friends. Karen recalled a recent journey with a family friend: *“It was a bit different, because I felt like I had her to myself. Somehow it was a bit more... intimate. Just the two of us sitting next to each other.”*

To Richard, on a longer work trip, *“being stuck on a train for three hours can be valuable as a team building activity”*.

Travel time can help relationship building even when the journey itself isn't shared. For instance, Michael uses the time during his drive home from work to call his wife to chat about the work day.

But... (it's not that simple)

For our participants, the relationship building qualities of co-travel was limited to journeys with people they already knew well, or at least had an interest in getting to know better. Many often try to avoid colleagues or acquaintances while travelling, so they don't have to engage in small talk or conversations about work.

As Brian explained: *“I've had clients where we're both going to the same place. The sensible thing would be to suggest going together in the car. But you don't. I get on with them fine, but don't want to spend two hours in the car with them.”*



RELATED RESEARCH

While our research has highlighted the opportunity for parents to spend time with their children, Eric Laurier and colleagues have discussed how the car offers children “fullest access to the captive parent” and they use the chance, particularly in the front seat, to “ask questions, make pleas, tell troubles, recollect events, describe objects, plot stories...”.

Laurier, E., et al. (2008) 'Driving and 'passenger': Notes on the ordinary organisation of car travel'. *Mobilities* 3 (1), pp 1-23

Travel Time... Facilitates Transition

Travel time can be a valuable marker of change, for example helping the transition from work to home.

“

Travelling is that step you have to go through to get home (or to work), which is clearly different from being at home or work. It's a differentiator between the two and it gives you that break.

”

Richard, 40s

Richard travels to the office every day, despite his company offering flexible working. He finds the commute itself helps him switch between work and leisure. When he doesn't have this 'gap', it is difficult to get started working in the morning and to properly turn off after work.

Karen sees the commute as a marker of change. She feels the drive home is a 'buffer' between work and home life where she gets a chance to relax and be by herself.

For David and Michael, transitions between things that aren't work related are also important. For example, the journey home from a concert or a performance allows time to think and talk about what has just been experienced. Michael says that, *"if you teleported yourself*

straight home you would lose that whole emotional value of talking about it. You would immediately hit that next stage, when it is late, and you've got to go to bed."

But... (it's not that simple)

For the work/home transition, the travel itself is one of potentially several facets. For example, Richard said that the act of changing into/out of his work clothes also contributes to the feeling of being at work versus home.

For some, the journey allows time to ease into and out of different mindsets, for example by stopping/starting thinking about work, or making phone calls to family members. For others, the journey allows a neither-nor period, which is more a break from both work and home life.



RELATED RESEARCH

In a series of focus groups, Laura Watts and John Urry found travel time to be "a time and place of transition between different sets of social practices located in different kinds of place Passengers are neither at home nor at work, acting neither as parent nor as manager, but transiting between responsibilities and social practices."

Watt, L. & J. Urry (2008) 'Moving Methods, Travelling Times'. In *Environment and Planning B: Society and Space* 26, pp 860-874

Travel Time is... Not just the time between A and B

The travel experience begins well before setting out and permeates the rest of the day.

“

An enjoyable journey is when there's something you really want to do when you get there.

”

Previously I focused on work while driving home, but my wife complained that I was coming home grumpy.

Michael, 50s

There are several ways in which the experience of travel is not restricted to the time between A and B.

- **Anticipation of the destination.**

When asked about 'good' or memorable journeys, several participants described trips where they were looking forward to the destination – collecting children from a week away, eating out, or going on holiday. The anticipation can be a valuable extension of the activity.

On the other hand, you may spend the trip stressed about taking an exam (Kate) or anxious about whether there will still be a hot desk free when you arrive at work (Michael).

- **The journey experience can impact on the rest of the day.**

As Michael said, *“it colours your day if it was a bad trip”*. However, when the journey goes as expected, it is very quickly forgotten.

- **A journey can extend an occasion.**

David and Michael talked about how the trip home after a concert or performance can give time to discuss or reflect on the event, effectively extending the experience.

- **Time taken planning a journey is part of the full experience.**

Participants talked about checking travel conditions, planning their route, or looking at Google Street View for an advance glimpse of their destination. David said that, *“trying to find out where you are going to go is part of the experience.”*



RELATED RESEARCH

Les Todres and Kathleen Galvin conducted research with elderly people in rural Wales and SW England. They draw on the concept of 'Potential Mobility' to explain how, for their participants, the *potential* to travel and the anticipation of a possible future trip is itself valuable.

Todres, L. & K. Galvin (2012) "In the Middle of Everywhere: A Phenomenological Study of Mobility and Dwelling Amongst Rural Elders". In *Phenomenology and Practice* 6 (1), pp55-68

Travel Time is... Exposure to the World

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Travelling, particularly on public transport, exposes you to people with whom you may not normally mix and to different aspects of society.

“

Sometimes I look at how people dress for some fashion advice... look at interesting people... try to get into their heads somehow.

”

Tracy, mid-30s

Tracy can drive but feels more confident taking public transport to get around – most often the short train to work or into Coventry for shopping or the gym. She likes to use the time to people-watch, to listen-in to conversations, or to observe how people dress.

Travelling together with others means you are sharing an experience. As Kate puts it, when you are on public transport, *“all these people around you – for a brief moment, you’re a part of their life and they’re part of yours”*.

Alison chooses not to use earphones when mobile – she likes to listen to what’s going on around while she’s out with her dog, and, if she’s travelling by train, she prefers to listen out for announcements.

Karen enjoys taking the train into Birmingham because she likes the hubbub of the station and has *“always liked the ‘buzz’ of being in a city”*.

But... (it's not that simple)

Being exposed to the world brings its hazards or inconveniences. For Richard, a big disadvantage of public transport is *“having to share space with a bunch of people you’ve never met before”*, and several people mentioned their dislike of other people bringing smelly food on board.

Research participants discussed their use of ‘props’ or bodily techniques to erect physical or symbolic barriers to limit their exposure to the wider world (such as opening a laptop, putting in earphones, or avoiding eye contact).



RELATED RESEARCH

Based on research with older people in the UK, Charles Musselwhite and Hebba Haddad articulate three ascending levels of travel needs: Utilitarian, Affective and Aesthetic. Aesthetic needs, they argue, includes the need to “view life and nature” and the value of “having chance encounters”.

Musselwhite, C. & H. Haddad (2010) ‘Mobility, accessibility and quality of later life’. In *Quality in Ageing and Older Adults* 11, (1), pp 25-37

Travel Time is... Useful Time

Travelling can offer a block of time or a convenient context to do something 'useful'.

“

When I was still working, it was always useful to have time to go through a presentation on the train.

It can be useful travelling by public transport. You can do what you want... have your iPad... think about things.

”

David, 75+

David is retired but travels frequently by car and public transport. He recognises that he is less time-constrained than others, but nonetheless likes to ensure his travel time is well-used.

For Richard, it is very important that he can spend his commuting time usefully – usually reading for work or personal interest. Sophie values her commute as reflection time for work.

The constraints travelling imposes on available activities can help ensure the time is useful.

Alison found that, at home, she spends too much time *“faffing on the computer”*, whereas a train trip offers *“an opportunity to get some reading done”*. Michael said that you can't actually work in the car, so you're *“forced to take a step back and think more widely about what you are doing or what you are trying to achieve”*.

There are many ways participants make use of their travel time:

- Karen mentally walks through dance steps for her class;
- Elaine learns lyrics for a show she will perform in;
- Bryan prepares for meetings while travelling with a colleague, ensuring the time is 'well-spent'.

But... (it's not that simple)

Different transport modes offer different utility benefits: the train allows you to devote your full concentration to a task, while a private car offers space for more private conversations than are possible on public transport.

The enforced thinking time on a trip can back-fire. As Karen said, it becomes time to fret rather than to plan.



RELATED RESEARCH

Research conducted by Transport for London in 2016 found 69% of 607 respondents rated their journey as “productive”; while 75% of leisure travellers (74% of commuters) rated it as “worthwhile”.

Travel Time is... Wasted Time

Travel time can sometimes be perceived as 'wasted' or 'dead' time – effectively devoid of value.



The travel time itself has no value, it just enables me to do the things I need to do. It's a means to an end; a necessary evil.

Jane, 40s



Jane is married without children and commutes by car. She feels most journeys serve the sole purpose of taking her where she needs or wants to be. When the activity at the destination disappoints, for example if she spends most of her work day alone at her desk, she feels the journey itself was wasted; she could have just as well worked at home.

For Richard, the journey time is a waste when he is delayed and *"arrives to a meeting after it's finished"* or when the time travelling is not useful: *"I hate having to stand, it's a complete waste of time and negates all benefits of travelling by train."*

Michael feels that some journeys are just a means to an end. This includes travelling to work, but also longer journeys abroad: *"If I want to see stuff that's on my bucket list, I'll have to get there somehow even if it might be very uncomfortable: in the end it's still worth it."*

But... (it's not that simple)

Travel time was usually described as 'wasted' in relation to journeys to work or to carry out chores (e.g. grocery shopping).

'Dead' time on journeys can sometimes be something positive; Richard says that travel *"constrains the number of things you can do"* so you end up doing *"things you wouldn't have otherwise done."*



RELATED RESEARCH

In an in-depth study with intensive travellers (travelling 2 hours+ per day) in eight European cities, Igraël Joly and Stéphanie Vincent-Geslin suggest that people perceive travel time differently. For some, travel time is 'time to kill', however others intentionally choose longer trips in order to use the time effectively.

Joly, I. & Vincent-Geslin, S. (2016) 'Intensive travel time: an obligation or a choice?' In *European Transport Research Review* 8 (10)