

Reducing car commuting through employer-based travel planning in Perth, Australia

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Abstract

The TravelSmart Workplace program is helping employers in Perth, Australia, reduce car trips generated by their workplaces. Workplace travel plans are an important tool to engage employers in promoting sustainable travel choices. By May 2007 the program had supported 22 employers to develop travel plans. Actions implemented under the plans include providing information on travel alternatives, improving workplace facilities and offering incentives to change. Before and after surveys show most workplaces have reduced solo car commuting, averaging -10% in relative terms. Local experience suggests that expanding and sustaining travel demand management in workplaces depends on integrating travel plan measures into good business practice and building a supportive culture.

Introduction

Perth, Australia, is a city of 1.5M people where the car dominates travel choices including commute trips. A study of 100 cities around the world ranked Perth in the top ten for motorised private mode split (at 87%) and passenger car km per capita (at 8,260km) (Kenworthy and Laube, 2001). About four in five people (82%) travel between work and home by car according to the 2001 Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003). Despite this dependence on the car there is potential to replace many solo car commutes with trips by carpool, public transport, bicycle or other travel alternatives. Barriers to travel behavior change include lack of awareness of these alternatives, negative perceptions towards them or habitual driving, as well as more objective issues such as availability of public transport services and bicycle access (Socialdata, 2000).

TravelSmart is a suite of programs supporting voluntary change in travel behavior in the community (www.dpi.wa.gov.au/travelsmart). One of these programs, called TravelSmart Workplace, supports employers in understanding the commute and business trips they generate and developing a plan of action to manage it. TravelSmart Workplace is a joint initiative of two Western Australian government agencies – the Department of Environment and Conservation and the Department for Planning and Infrastructure. The program began in 1997.

Workplace travel plans, also called green transport plans, have been used in parts of Europe and North America to engage employers to promote sustainable travel (Rye, 2002). A travel plan is a package of actions that an employer or site manager implements to address transport impacts. In Australia, travel plans were pioneered in the late 1980s through the Smogbusters Way to Work program by peak environment organizations (Wake, 1999) and are now a key

element of workplace travel demand management efforts in many Australian states and territories. Workplace travel plans have been part of the TravelSmart Workplace program in Perth since 2000.

Program outline

The TravelSmart Workplace program in Perth recruits interested employers, though many have approached program staff themselves. Larger employers with site access problems or a stated commitment to improving their environmental performance have been targeted. A State Government requirement that its agencies reduce car trips and promote travel alternatives in their workplaces has helped (Government of Western Australia, 2004).

Practical support is provided for development of travel plans, including audit and survey tools, guidance material, training and one-to-one advice. A plan may take six to 12 months to prepare depending on workplace complexity and resources allocated. The key steps followed in the planning process are:

1. After management support has been confirmed, appoint a workplace coordinator and planning team. Scoping the plan early in the process is important – this includes determining which workplaces to cover, target groups (e.g. standard hour employees) and outcomes sought by the employer.
2. Audit workplace accessibility by alternative modes. This involves checking public transport services near the workplace, cycle access and end-of-trip facilities such as bicycle parking, personal lockers and showers, employer provided cars and car parking and work policies and practices that affect travel choices – useful to identify barriers and opportunities for change.
3. Survey travel to the site. At most workplaces the focus is on employees. The survey covers commute and recent business trips, reasons for mode choice, interest in using alternatives and where people live.
4. Identify actions. Audit and survey results are used to identify behaviors to target and actions the employer could take to promote them. Employees and management stakeholders are consulted to help create a feasible package of measures.
5. Draft the plan. The actions are written up together with background material, a rationale for change and framework for implementation – with the aim of providing a coherent and practical strategy for change.
6. Approval and promotion. The plan is put to management for approval, sometimes with a specific budget request. An internal launch or coverage in staff newsletters are some of the ways that have been used to promote the plan to employees.

Follow-up advice and training is offered to aid implementation. This includes quarterly events to bring together workplace representatives to exchange information and discuss issues. Marketing material is provided, including TravelSmart Guides with maps showing bicycle and public transport routes. Several workplaces have participated in awareness campaigns where poster displays, talks, competitions and personal journey planning advice are used to encourage employees to consider alternative modes for commute and business travel.

Outcomes

By May 2007 TravelSmart Workplace had assisted 22 employers with 36 workplaces and a total of 18,000 employees to prepare travel plans. These employers include local governments, state government agencies, larger businesses and public and private hospitals. Employers have joined the program to develop travel plans to reduce site parking problems, as part of a corporate commitment to sustainability, to promote physical activity by employees or in response to employee interest. Most of the workplaces covered are in the Perth central area or inner suburbs.

Each of these employers has adopted a travel plan; many plans cover a number of sites. The content and quality of plans varies, with employers deciding what they will commit to do. The extent of implementation also varies. A recent study of eight employers found that, on average, a third of their travel plans actions had been fully implemented (Wake, 2004). Though some had extended efforts beyond the actions defined in their original plan.

Typical actions include:

- Improving cycle facilities at the workplace, e.g. installing secure bicycle parking
- Providing information on options for travel to the workplace in employee induction presentations and packages and on the organization's intranet
- Holding promotional activities such as walking and cycling challenges and talks on travel options
- Establishing a carpool register to link up employees interested in sharing a ride home or for business
- Providing public transport tickets and pool bicycles to aid use of these modes for business trips where appropriate.

A few employers have included actions to limit provision or increase the cost of employee car parking or offer alternatives to an employer-provided car, e.g. cash-out option. Some have offered financial incentives, though scope for this is limited by federal fringe benefits tax laws.

Travel behavior change is assessed through surveys before and after workplaces have adopted travel plans. A review of 13 workplaces found that nine (69%) recorded a reduction in the proportion of commute trips made solo as car driver (Wake, 2004). The average relative reduction was 10 per cent. In most workplaces this mode shift was reflected in greater public transport and carpool commuting.

The greatest reduction was a decline in solo car commuting from 26 per cent to nine per cent for a private sector employer who relocated within central Perth. Travel alternatives were promoted before the move, employees involved in developing the travel plan successfully advocated for good cycle facilities at the new site and the employer reduced the number of employees given vehicle and parking privileges.

Feedback from workplaces involved in the program point to other positive outcomes including:

- employer investment in bicycle parking and change facilities

- improved information on public transport and cycle commuting available to employees and
- staff participation in cycling and walking events.

Discussion

The process of involving employers in considering workplace travel patterns, identifying what they could do and developing a plan is a deliberate strategy for organizational change. A trial of workplace travel demand management interventions in Perth found that travel planning had the greatest potential for long-term change because it engages the organization to a much greater degree than awareness raising activities alone (Baudains, 2003). Perth's TravelSmart Workplace program is premised on starting organizational change to support individual behavior change – recognising that employers influence employee travel choices.

Most Perth employers seem to be at an early stage of change with regard to managing work-related travel. Rye (2002) suggests that organizations can move through a series of phases in their attitudes and actions, from low cost, low commitment travel plans, to more progressive plans as awareness of organizational benefits grows. The position of many local workplaces at the early stages of this process is illustrated by the reliance of most plans on interested staff volunteering their time to organize activities and lobby internally. This is starting to change. For example, some employers are making work on travel plans part of someone's paid job – often a Sustainability or Environment Officer or, for some local government and major destinations, a TravelSmart Officer.

Most local travel plans focus on promotional measures and some cycle facility improvements, though a few have tackled 'perks' like employer-provided cars and parking. Research in the United Kingdom suggests that restricting staff car parking and offering incentives to change are important factors in travel plan success (Cairns et al, 2002). Employers may be more willing to adopt such measures when a business case is demonstrated, e.g. solution to site parking problems. External pressures, like climate change mitigation and increased urban congestion, may also prompt this change. Following the United Kingdom example, some local governments in Melbourne, Australia, have made preparation of travel plans a condition for certain developments – moving travel plans from being voluntary to mandatory through the land use planning system. In time this may also be considered in Perth.

Employee surveys in Perth workplaces suggest that most travel plans are changing travel behavior away from solo car commuting. In some workplaces the response rates for these surveys have been low, averaging 37 per cent. Survey methods are being reviewed to seek more robust measures of individual behavior change. Targeted marketing measures are also being considered to engage commuters interested in switching to travel alternatives. This may include personalised information on commuting options and incentives to try them.

The TravelSmart Workplace program is building the capacity of Perth employers to reduce car commuting and its impacts. A small but growing number of employers are adopting travel plans. Some are moving from raising awareness activities alone to changing employee rewards to favour more sustainable travel choices. Challenges for the program include sustaining and mainstreaming workplace travel demand management whilst scaling up coverage across the metropolitan region.

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