INSIGHTS SERIES / **TRAVEL LEADER**

Travel and finance: Fostering a strategic partnership for growth

The travel leader's guide to stronger collaboration with finance



SAP Concur

Introduction

As travel gains boardroom visibility, leaders must prove their function drives value, not just trips



With global business travel expenditure set to hit $1.69 trillion in 2026,[1] CFOs expect travel leaders to act as a strategic partner.

As travel gains greater visibility in the boardroom, the travel leader role is expanding beyond operational oversight to enterprise value creation. What was once seen primarily as an operational function (supplier management and policy enforcement) is now recognized as a lever for growth, performance, and risk mitigation. The shift, from “travel manager” to “travel leader,” presents both opportunity and accountability. Higher visibility enables stronger alignment between travel policy and corporate strategy, but it also requires disciplined scrutiny of how travel investment supports business objectives.

This changing role means travel leaders must demonstrate where spend aligns with priorities, where it drifts from intent, and which outcomes matter most.

Stuart Maclean, CFO at Brother UK, says he wants “solution options, not just issues.” CFOs must rely on travel leaders, he says, “because they are that fountain of knowledge in terms of potential options.”

Travel spans multiple functions, notes Anne Delgado, Global Head of Travel Management and Procurement at SAP. It therefore demands broader internal and external collaboration: “You need to be a great networker, know who to reach out to for what, and build connections within your company and within the travel industry as well.”

“As a CFO, what I want from a travel leader is strategic insight – expertise that uncovers opportunities for greater efficiency, savings, and stronger returns on investment.”



Stuart Maclean,
CFO, Brother UK

1. Global Business Travel Association, quoted in The 2026 Outlook | Business Travel News Europe

The CFO's business travel priorities

CFOs want every trip to prove its worth, linking travel to revenue, relationships, and real ROI

CFOs want travel to support positive business outcomes, particularly growth. From their perspective, trips linked to revenue generation or strengthening customer relationships are more justifiable than travel for internal meetings. Even low-cost trips may be questioned if they divert employees from higher-priority assignments. "Travel spend can be significant, so proving ROI is important. That goes beyond budgets: for example, it also includes accounting for opportunity costs like the employee time involved," says Stuart Maclean of Brother UK. Finance leaders expect verifiable interplay between travel activity and business targets. Linked to that, 82% of CFOs[2] believe at least half of their organization's business travel could be virtual meetings.

Then there's employee wellbeing, which is moving up the agenda. Frequent travel can add pressure and undermine performance, especially when staff are expected to remain productive while en route.

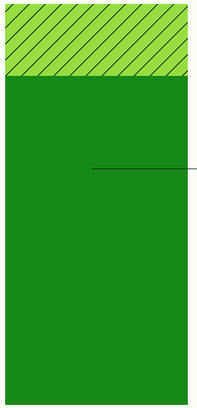
As Maclean notes, "During business trips, employees are under pressure to still work. They're trying to catch up on emails, expense claims, invoice approvals – all while still traveling."

To evaluate ROI when hard data is scarce, travel leaders can focus on correlations.

Christoph Carnier, Director of Travel and Fleet at Merck, observes: "ROI is really hard to deliver... it's a bit easier if you focus on sales teams and customer activity."

Meanwhile, 48% of CFOs[3] feel their travel leaders could improve on keeping costs down. By linking travel spend to customer acquisition costs or deal progression, travel leaders can frame ROI in terms finance understands.

2 & 3. SAP Concur 7th Annual Global Business Travel Research Report



82%

of CFOs believe at least half of their organization's business travel could be virtual meetings

Source: SAP Concur 7th Annual Global Business Travel Research Report

"ROI is difficult to quantify, but it becomes clearer when you focus on sales teams and customer activity. By linking travel spend to revenue from those relationships, you can begin to see what it costs to win a new customer."



Christoph Carnier,
Director Travel and Fleet, Merck

How travel can work more efficiently with finance

Travel leaders who engage proactively with budgeting and forecasting are earning leadership trust

Travel teams are increasingly expected to participate directly in budgeting, forecasting, and variance reviews. Travel leaders who monitor spend patterns, identify emerging risks, and adapt to shifting business needs are apt to earn leadership trust. This requires structured, proactive engagement rather than reactive reporting.

Michael Hill, Global Head of Travel and Indirect Procurement at Kantar, attributes his success to "sitting the CFO and CEO down and taking them through our travel policies, asking what they think, what they feel, what they want, and how we can build that into a suitable and adaptable policy." Such dialogue positions travel leaders as a company contributor.

The complexity of the travel landscape reinforces the need for coordination. Christoph Carnier of Merck points out the multiple interfaces travel leaders must navigate, from tax to duty of care. "A lot of different things come together and if you change something, it might have a huge effect on another area," he says. Quarterly reviews of spend combined with risk flagging ensure finance is not surprised by emerging trends.

Close coordination with HR, legal, and procurement further aligns travel policy with wider requirements. Greater visibility across departments allows travel leaders to anticipate issues early and ensure financial planning gains insights from a broader context.

"My success as a travel leader has always come from sitting the CFO and CEO down and taking them through our travel policies, asking what they think, what they feel, what they want, and how we can build that into a suitable and adaptable policy."



Michael Hill,
Global Head of Travel and Indirect Procurement, Kantar

The role of tech in bridging finance and travel

Siloed systems are holding travel back. Better integration means sharper insights and stronger ROI

CFOs are looking for timely insights, yet many travel programs are hindered by siloed systems, making it difficult to cross-check travel spend with outcomes or to present a unified view of performance. Integrating travel, expense, payments, and financial systems enables finance and travel to operate with a shared perspective on datasets.

Better integration therefore adds credibility to ROI discussions. When data is connected, travel teams can track behavioral shifts in employee booking patterns, anticipate cost pressures, and align spend with business cycles.



Michael Hill of Kantar outlines the discipline required: “In terms of budget alignment, we do monthly reports on travel spend that are presented to the C-levels.” Collecting and analyzing data well in advance and reporting consistently to create transparency, he adds, “helps our travel and finance people prioritize.”

Anne Delgado of SAP sees AI playing a crucial role in helping travel leaders “become more strategic and more visible. The role needs to cater to so many aspects: compliance, cost consciousness, budget control, technology, and sustainability. By reducing operational tasks and enhancing reporting insights, AI enables travel leaders to focus more on shaping strategy than managing logistics.”

That sentiment is reflected by Stuart Maclean at Brother UK. “We have systems and solutions that are taking more of that workload and that opens up the opportunity for travel leaders to become more strategic.”

The bottom line: tech investments should prioritize visibility and integration, creating transparency over key financial metrics and enabling travel to operate as a strategic partner to finance.

“By reducing operational tasks and enhancing reporting insights, AI enables travel leaders to focus more on shaping strategy than managing logistics.”

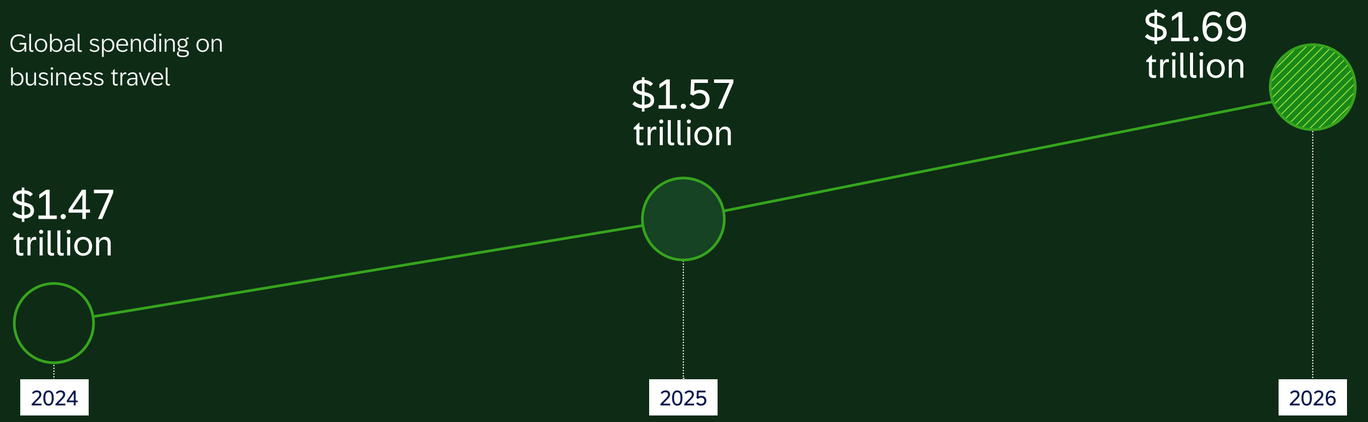


Anne Delgado,
Global Head of Travel Management and Procurement, SAP

Giving the CFO greater visibility over travel programs

Business travel will be under new financial pressure as costs rise

Global spending on business travel



Source: Global Business Travel Association

Global hotel rates are forecast to increase by

4.9%

in average daily rates

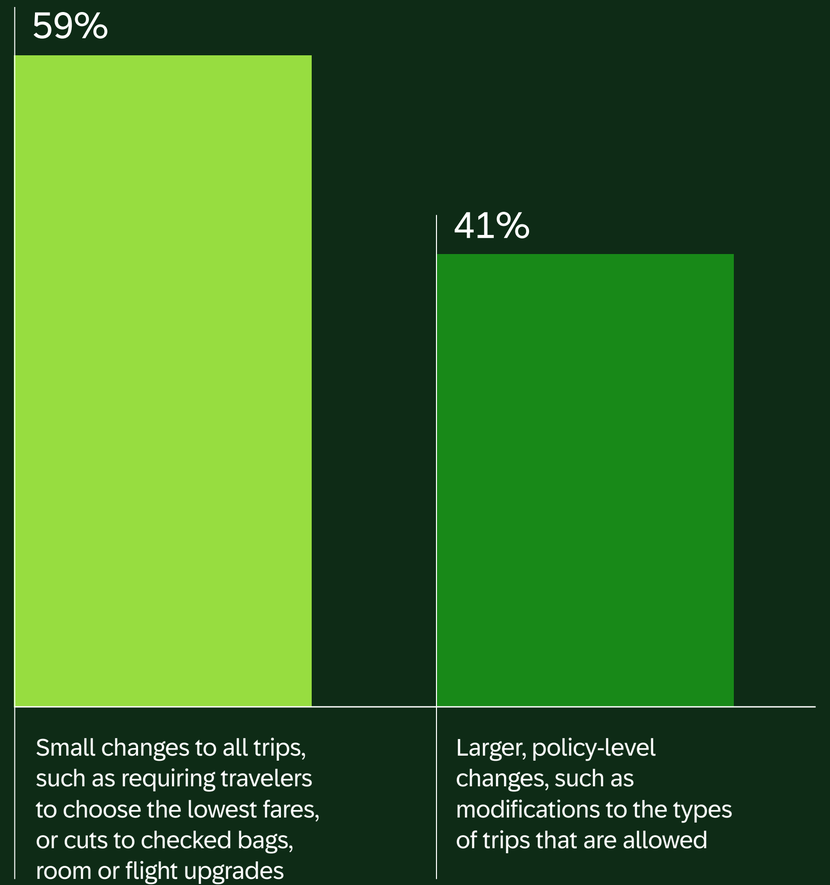
Source: BCD Travel

82%



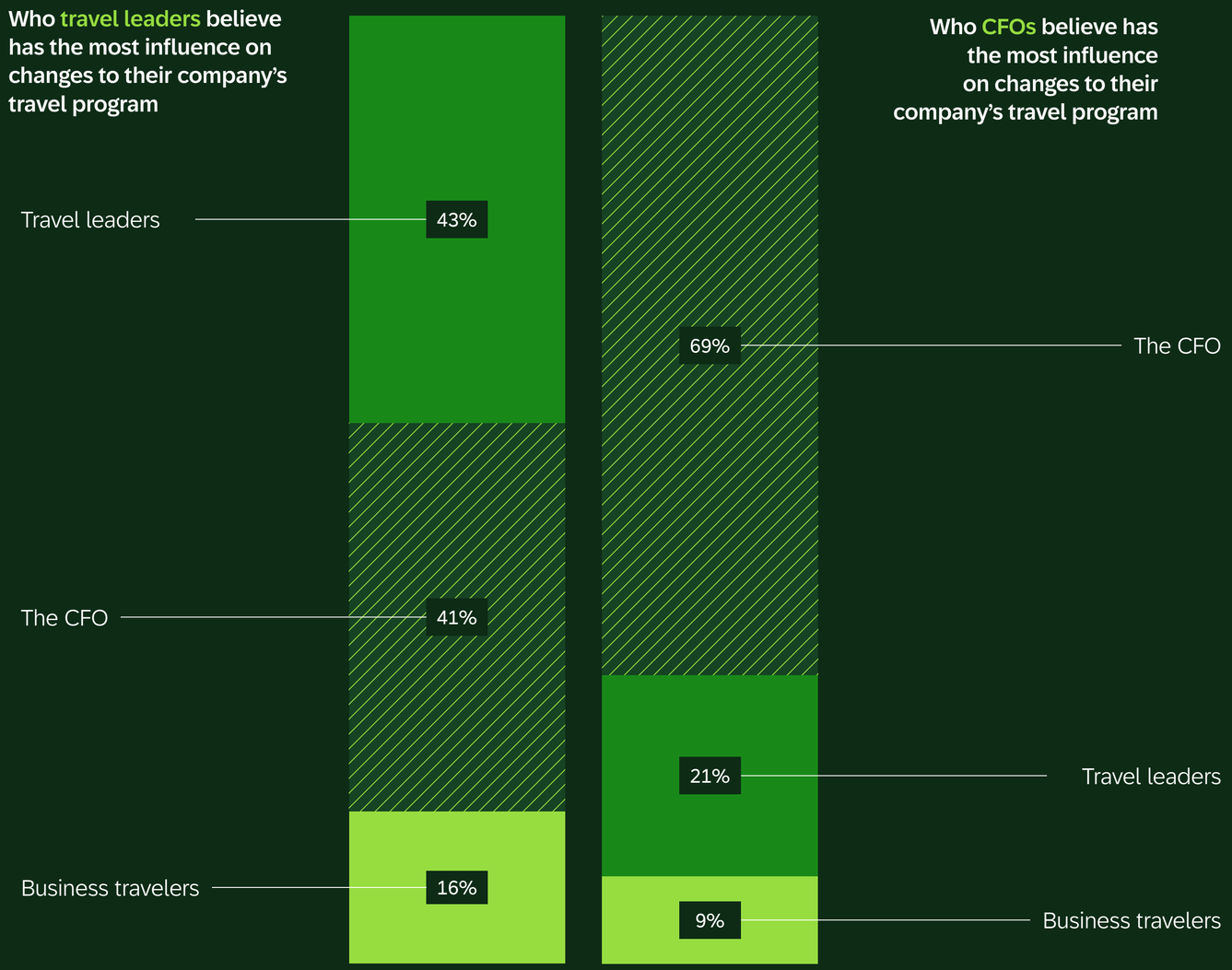
of CFOs believe at least half of their organization's business travel could be virtual meetings

Where CFOs expect to see cuts to travel budgets

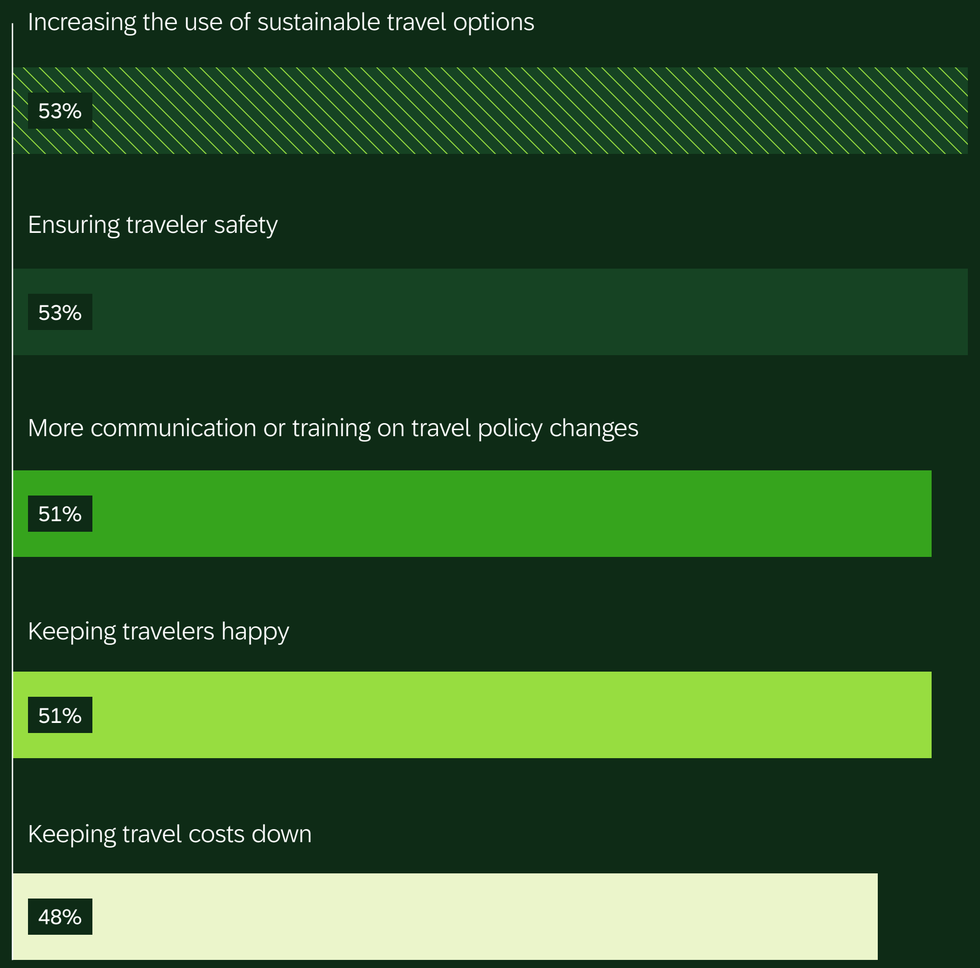


Note: All data is from the SAP Concur 7th Annual Global Business Travel Research Report, except where otherwise stated

Decision-making power between finance and travel is contested



Ultimately, CFOs want greater transparency and strategic thinking





Find out more

Read Seeing travel as an investment, not an expense to discover strategies for demonstrating the value of business travel to executive leadership

About SAP Concur

SAP® Concur® is the world's leading brand for integrated travel, expense, and invoice management.
Driven by a relentless pursuit to simplify and automate everyday processes, the solutions guide employees through business trips, move authorized charges directly into expense reports, and automate invoice approvals.
By integrating near real-time data and using AI to analyze transactions, businesses can see what they're spending, improve compliance, and avoid possible blind spots in the budget. SAP Concur is imagining a world where travel and expenses practically manage themselves, helping businesses run at their best every day.

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