

# A mine of information

Management information systems (MIS) remain a thorn in many a travel manager's side, leading us to ask our three panelists the question: 'MI – Are we getting enough quickly enough?' By **Liesl Venter**.

## Are we getting management information quickly enough?

By their very nature, management information reports (MIRs) take time – meaning more often than not they arrive on desks weeks, if not months, after travel. A varied number of reasons exist for this, from having to wait for travel suppliers to close their books to waiting for the accounting process to wrap up. "There is no quick solution or answer to this," says Ernst & Young's **Felicity Meyer**.

"We are definitely not getting MIRs quickly enough from a corporate point of view, but then you must understand that suppliers cannot give it to you any quicker than what they are. I believe identifying and understanding the function of what the MIR is there to do is crucial for the successful use of it within a corporate organisation."

Travellinck's **Stephanie Unsted** agrees, saying for the general travel industry, most travel management providers do not offer 'real-time' reporting, which in essence changes ownership of the data from supplier to client, which is the way it should be. "Clients need to be able to access their MIR at any time, instantly, giving them the most valuable component of travel – data."

Systems ensuring these reports are delivered are just not being developed quickly enough.

"For MIRs to be used effectively, they should be presented in a user-friendly format and according to each client's requirements for use by all the stakeholders," says Carlson Wagonlit Travel's **Ingrid von Moltke**. "The client should be able to identify information

required through executive summaries in dashboard format, with the ability to drill down into specifics. The information gleaned from the MI should assist the travel manager in formulating and refining travel policy, measuring and modifying traveller behaviour, vendor selection and optimising on cost of service and supplier rates."

## What are the current challenges facing industry?

For MI to be meaningful and provide real business intelligence, it needs to be as 'live' as possible, agrees Von Moltke. It must also be accurate, comprehensive, consistent, user-friendly and customisable as well as be available in different formats with the ability to change the view of the data.

"A challenge that has been around for a long time is the consolidation of data from different sources (TMC, car rental, hotels etc.) and in different formats (i.e. credit card data)," says Von Moltke. "Discrepancies can arise due to factors such as naming conventions (traveller and supplier), booked versus ticketed data or even the reporting period used."

Unsted says you'll always have challenges in situations where the information available at the time of booking does not correspond with the final cost of a service. "Historically, this has mainly applied to car hire and accommodation since total flight costs did not deviate from the upfront costs. Car-hire companies are certainly far more proactive than hotels at providing accurate post-trip data, hence the main

challenge at the moment is poor hotel data."

But, says Unsted, if airlines for instance start charging more for services that are not known at the time of making a reservation, today's exception will become tomorrow's norm, presenting industry with an entirely new challenge.

Meyer says the integrity of data remains a big problem and one that is by no means uniquely South African. "The data does not always have the integrity you expect it to have – unused tickets are but one example. How does one police an unused ticket report – if it were accurate, it could be very useful, but is it accurate?"

## Overcoming the challenges...

The answer lies in first accepting that MIRs are not real-time reports and should not be perceived as such, says Meyer. "Expectations of the reports have been unrealistic and there has been much frustration around MIRs being late. But for MI to have any value, you must understand what you need it for and what it's useful for and what not."

Meyer says those wanting to use MIRs to manage their travel will find themselves in murky waters. "MI is valuable to see where your travel spend has gone; it is useful in supply and negotiations. It is a wonderful guideline and one of the tools you can use to measure your travel but it is not the tool to be using to manage travel overall."

Unsted says overcoming the challenges means finding a way of getting 'real-time' reporting – a must for buyers and suppliers. "Partner with a local



**Stephanie Unsted**,  
Travellinck gm



**Ingrid von Moltke**,  
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Travel SA national  
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**Felicity Meyer**,  
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travel manager

technology provider who is able to move and develop solutions and customisations quickly, which act as a consolidated repository for all the client's spend, whether using one or more TMCs".

Von Moltke says ideally all data related to any booking should be captured from the moment of inception, quoting and finalisation. "This would enable travel managers to get a more complete picture of the booking process and traveller behaviour."

She says within a TMC environment, reporting needs to be seamless across the two areas of front office and back office. "To prevent inaccuracies creeping in, automation is key. The main factor in inaccurate reporting is incorrect data capturing at source and if this process is automated, this problem can be eliminated to a large degree."

### How to get more value out of your MIR

Travel managers need to assess the required outcomes for their travel programmes and identify the type of management reporting that would be relevant in assisting them to identify the opportunities to achieve this, says Von Moltke.

"In other words, if used effectively, MIRs allow corporate travel managers to select and monitor their key travel programme metrics against goals and view progress made towards achieving these goals."

She adds: "With a huge amount of development, resource and cost used in the compilation of MIRs, it is a valuable tool not always used to its full potential by corporates."

Meyer says if you know how to use your MIR to its full potential,

there is definitely value in it.

"Expecting too much of the systems and reports is heading for failure. It really is about understanding the limitations but also using MI for the right purpose. The perception of the function has not necessarily been correct and that is the first step in getting more value out of it."

Meyer says it's also about establishing close relationships with all the role players in the travel chain, from booker, to supplier, to manager to the actual travellers. "It really is about relationships and outcomes and not just about relying on a piece of paper that is presented once every six or so weeks. It's also about using your MI correctly, establishing good systems of your own, understanding the various sources of data and the anomalies of the data, and then consolidating all of this into a useful document that your organisation can use."

There is no doubt, says Unsted, that clients who manage travel have become more travel wise and it's time to let technology work for you. ■

Next month our Power Panel looks at social networking and how social media are becoming increasingly impossible for travel buyers to ignore.

“Ideally all management information (MI) should be as ‘live’ as possible, but the challenge is that data does not always tie up the complete picture for a trip.”

– Ingrid von Moltke



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