

Holographic business calls are a bit far-fetched, but how about a 'virtual preview' to plan your break?

ROHIT Talwar is a UK based global futurist, strategist and change agent. He has a reputation as an insightful, entertaining and thought-provoking speaker on global trends and challenges.

Talwar works with global corporations, innovative young companies and governments across the world. He advises global leaders and helps them develop insights into the key trends and developments shaping the future and then act on them to create and deliver strategic innovation and change.

His role is to help governments, global businesses, professional service firms and individuals anticipate, understand and act on the trends, forces and ideas that will shape our futures. His work draws on over 10,000 hours of research and he has spoken to and consulted on five continents and in over 20 countries. His current focus is on the future of Asia and he is researching a book on China in the 21st century.

His clients include ABN Amro, The BBC, BT, BAT, BAe Systems, Berwin Leighton Paisner, Cargill, Chloride, Citibank, DeutscheBank, EADS, Glaxo Smith Kline, IBM, Marks and Spencer, Panasonic and Yellow Pages.

In government he has worked with the US Department of Defence, the Singapore National Horizon Scanning Centre and in the UK — the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, Defence Science and Technology Laboratories.

Business Travel News caught up with Talwar in Thailand and sought his views on the future of travel.



Business Travel News: Fuel prices have dropped back sharply from their recent highs. It now costs under US\$60 a barrel. Do you see this as temporary? You are on record as saying when we look back on this time we will think fuel was bargain priced. Do you see it going back up?

Talwar: I think the decline in oil prices is temporary. Over the next five years, I believe oil prices will go back up. Demand will continue to rise — particularly from the emerging economies and in sectors such as air transport. The current wave of forecasts is suggesting global energy demand will rise by at least fifty per cent by 2020. Alongside this demand pressure, there is a finite supply and limited refining capacity globally. Furthermore, the wave of extreme weather events we've seen this year will continue for at least another ten years even if we make dramatic progress - this will affect production every year.

Eventually we will see a big enough switch to

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alternative fuels that our dependency on oil will start to decline — but this won't happen fast enough to correct the imbalance between demand and supply and so prices will be driven up.

Air pollution is a worsening problem. Europe has mooted some form of taxation control such as carbon credits and restricting air travel. Aircraft manufacturers Boeing and Airbus have predicted record sales. The World Tourism Council predicts record travellers in the next 20 years. What is your take on air travel in the future?

Welcome to our world — we live in an era of infinite contradictions. All of these developments you suggest will probably happen. We may see a small decline in travel from Western Markets — however, I think it more likely that we'll want to maintain or increase the amount we travel and simply pay more tax and sign up to carbon-offset schemes to address the climatic impact of our travel. More of the airlines will follow BA's lead in offering a carbon-offset facility as part of the booking process. In emerging markets we'll see a massive surge in demand for air travel as incomes rise and aspirations grow in their wake.

As part of their own efforts to reduce their environmental impact, both corporations and individuals across the world will start to pressure the airlines and travel industry to publicise and reduce their carbon footprints.

Eventually the airlines and aircraft manufacturers will be forced into larger scale action to reduce the environmental impact of air travel — probably through a combination of legislation and pressure from both corporate and domestic clients. This will result in the use of new, smarter lightweight materials, alternative fuels, intelligent fuel management systems and a much more public commitment to reduce their 'environmental footprint'.

Technology is advancing at a phenomenal rate. What impact will this have on the business traveller?

Firstly, we can already see travellers



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using a wider range of personal technology to help plan their trips, stay in contact and do business on the move. Within 10 years we'll think nothing of using virtual reality to explore locations before visiting and connecting up to computer-based sensors to experience the smell, touch and ambience of a resort. Wireless broadband will be a given in the airport, in-flight and everywhere at our destination. We'll expect to use technology to manage our entire travel experience seamlessly — checking us into our hotel while in-flight. Once we've checked into the departure airport we won't expect to see our luggage again until we walk into our rooms. We'll never expect to fill in immigration or hotel registration forms ever again.

Having created our own preference profile electronically, we'll expect airlines, hotels and convention centres to know our needs and expectations from the number of pillows we like to how many eggs we want for breakfast.

Will technology mean more or less travel for the business traveller?

On the one hand, video conferencing, web cameras and holography will enable us to meet in multiple ways without leaving home. On the other, email, the web and business networking tools are

enabling us to connect and create opportunities globally. To explore and close the opportunities we still want and need to travel to physically meet with the people involved, view the business opportunities and gain first hand experience of the local environment. Life would become incredibly dull if we lived it entirely from behind our pc screen.

You said in a recent speech that memory implants for travel experiences were not that far away. What is the timeline? What is the future for travel agents?

Within five years we could start seeing the use of memory implants to help people overcome memory loss in Alzheimer's and the military will use them to upload critical information such as terrain maps and equipment manuals. Within 10 years we may see some basic consumer applications of the technology to enable us to upload information from memory chips and computer systems. Memory implants to give us the feel of a travel experience that's indistinguishable from the real thing are probably 15-25 years away. However, we live in an era of rapid scientific and technological advance and so shouldn't be surprised if such developments came to market much faster.

The Internet is capturing more and more travel business especially from the corporate sector. What is the next wave?

All of us want to make more effective use of information and the technology with which we manipulate it. Corporations in particular want to lower travel costs, have more up to date information and greater control over the planning and management of travel bookings. We will turn to whoever can provide us with the best support and the cheapest deals.

The next stage in web travel management will be the level of support and value offered before, during and after the travel experience.

For example, once I've given my personal details for the first time I never want to give them again. I want the

technology to enable me to manage my travel with the

minimum of fuss. I want automatic notification of special offers and a guarantee that if I book through your portal, you will guarantee that I'll pay the cheapest rate of anyone on that flight or staying in that hotel at that time.

If my flight is delayed, I want to know in-flight whether I'll make a connecting flight, whether I'll be met, exactly how I'll get between terminals, which flight I'll be on if I miss the next one and where I'll stay if I have to wait overnight.

After my stay, if I like the shower I used in my hotel I want an easy facility to buy it via your portal.

One big complaint is that web site functionality still doesn't mirror the infinite flexibility of a human conversation. Developments such as speech recognition and the emergence of a 'semantic web' with a conversational interface should help overcome such limitations.

Do you see the day coming when I will send a clone or hologram on an overseas

trip to do my sales calls?

Holograms have already been used to enable speakers to contribute to conferences without travelling — the use of such technology will grow — if only for the novelty factor. I'm less certain that clones would be accepted into society or used in the manner you describe.

What's your take on hotels investing big dollars in new properties?

In almost every industry we find firms investing in future capacity based on current demand patterns and internal projections. Issues such as climate change and a potential downturn in trade rarely get factored into the planning of new hotel locations. I think

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for most hotel groups they either aren't dealing with the issue, don't want to, or are making the assumption that we'll overcome the problems through innovation and that people will continue to travel.

What will I be doing for my leisure breaks/holidays in future?

People will seek a wider range of pursuits, look for more authentic experiences, conduct more, shorter holidays, be more connected, expect to work when travelling and travel further afield as transport times shorten.

Specialist travel interests will expand — for example I may want to go on holiday with other gadget freaks. My hotel room would ideally be filled with the latest gizmoids from across the

planet — sponsored by the vendors. I'd test them and provide feedback, get to keep one or two as souvenirs and be offered discounts on the rest via my travel portal.

I'll be less tolerant of poor service or any mistakes as my trips may be shorter.

One day, the super-rich may travel into space but the price is likely to be US\$5-10m per trip. Whilst hotels on the moon may be a possibility it's not clear what I'd do when I get there and how you could finance such a project on an economically viable basis.

I'll definitely want my travel to have a low or zero environmental footprint and will expect the travel providers, airlines and hotels to provide the

relevant information and demonstrate that they are reducing their footprints.

How will the western world generate jobs and income if the third world is capturing most of it on price?

The developing world is rapidly moving beyond low cost to innovation. This is the real challenge for the West — how do we keep up with low cost innovation? Firstly we need to get faster and less bureaucratic in our processes and create a greater willingness to change and innovate. Critically, we need to partner with the developing world and encourage our businesses to have the confidence to expand and partner internationally.

For some countries, we'll have to accept that current standards of living are unsustainable and that we'll have to get used to lower incomes and levels of consumption.

The issue is one of mindset. We can either enter then next decade desperately fighting to preserve what we had — knowing we'll eventually lose it anyway. Alternatively, we can be optimistic and opportunistic and look for ways of inventing our futures so we can survive and thrive in a fast-changing world.