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**By Betty Stark**

## **Not Even Skype Can Replace Face-To-Face Contact with Clients**

At a recent convention of the **National Business Travel Association (NBTA)**, **former Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan** predicted that business travel would continue to boom, in spite of problem-plagued airlines, soaring fuel prices and cramped cabins.

"The corporate travel industry," Greenspan said, "is fundamentally about moving people around. One thing that is amazing from the end of the Cold War onward is the extent of globalization."

But what about video conferencing and other technologies that make it possible to communicate without boarding an aircraft, several attendees asked.

"There is no substitute for sitting and talking with someone. You just can't do business over the phone," Greenspan declared.

My sentiments exactly, and I wrote as much in this column space nearly three years ago, when business travel was on an upswing, especially internationally. Of course I was curious what I would learn from those involved in corporate travel programs if I were to raise this question today: Is international business travel worth the hassle?

According to Becky **Deutmeyer, Director of Human Resources** at Cottage Grove-based **Johnson Health Tech North America (JHTNA)**, the answer would be a resounding "Yes!"

JHTNA is the North America parent company of area-based **Horizon Fitness, Vision Fitness** and **Matrix Fitness**, companies that manufacture and sell fitness equipment to various entities and individuals around the world.

“The pace of our international travel has actually increased over the past few years and I don’t see that trending down anytime soon as long as we have international counterparts in China, Taiwan and other countries,” Deutmeyer said.

“Although we do communicate frequently via e-mail, phone calls, video conferencing and **Skype**, there is nothing that has the same effect as our face-to-face discussions and meetings, especially when there are language barriers to overcome when communicating with our international counterparts.”

Skype, Deutmeyer notes, is an effective and popular communication software that allows users to make free calls (including multi-participant video calls) typically through an Internet connection, to anyone else connected to Skype. (Learn more at <http://www.skype.com/business> ).

“Our IT department integrated Skype into our phone system this year to reduce the costs of teleconferencing and enable our travelers to call back home with no cost. We invested in only one inexpensive piece of equipment for the integration. Our employees can now teleconference and video conference with counterparts in China at no cost to the company.”

But does this increasingly popular technology replace those long flights and actual face-time with their associates in China? Not at all, if JHTNA international travel trends are any indication. “There is nothing that has the same effect as our face-to-face discussions and meetings, especially when there are language barriers to overcome when communicating with our international counterparts.

“Also, due to the difference in time zones, it’s difficult to pull everyone together for a regular conference call at a time that works for both sides of the world. Under some circumstances, it’s possible to have a late night or early morning conference, but this starts to affect the employee’s family life if it’s held on a regular basis outside of normal working hours.”

I posed similar questions to **Annette Konicek**, Executive Assistant and corporate meeting planner with **Weir Minerals** in Madison. She oversees executive-level international travel to the Scotland-based company's many global installations and for the company’s recently-launched global acquisitions program.

"Weir business travelers are traveling at the same pace as previous years. Due to Weir making acquisitions in the past year, I would say some of our [international] business travel has actually increased. For meetings with key clients, teleconferencing does not have the same impact that face to face meetings do," noted Konicek.

And what about the hassle factor, I asked. Aren't the airlines making it increasingly difficult to engage in international travel? Konicek agrees. "British Airway's cancellations of direct flights from Detroit to Amsterdam and London have made us be more creative in our travel itineraries, but we are coping."

"Coping" appears to be the operative word when it comes to international business travel. How can companies looking to expand their business opportunities globally make the travel process easier on their time-zone transiting travelers who routinely endure hours on long-haul flights to every corner of the globe?

The powers-that-be at JHTNA have thought about this too. Becky Deutmeyer notes, "We've realized that traveling internationally frequently can take its toll on our employees' work/life balance. If they travel frequently and work long days, when they return to the office in the US, it can lead to burnout or to the point where they decide they no longer can travel. Therefore, we offer frequent travelers some flex time. So if they need to take care of family and personal needs when they return from a long international trip, they can take time off if needed."

Back at the 2008 NBTA convention in Los Angeles, Alan Greenspan continued to be bullish on international travel. He proclaimed emphatically that business travel would continue to boom in spite of increasing airfares and the rigors of travel.

"You can see the force of business moving beyond sovereign countries. And that means people have to move around," Greenspan said.

Though they probably have never met, Becky Deutmeyer and Alan Greenspan think alike.

"While teleconference and video conferencing is adequate for some matters, it still does not replace the value of communicating face-to-face by traveling," says Deutmeyer.

Greenspan agrees.

“People want to be with people.” And that’s not likely to change.