

Fortis

The way ahead: "Gentle Force"

Fortis, the bank and insurance group, now has an online quota of 80 per cent for business travel bookings thanks to strict travel regulations. Staff members in seven countries have quickly adapted to this new channel when booking flights, hotels and trains (Eurostar/Thalys/Deutsche Bahn).



Whenever a based Fortis employee books a flight to the Group's Brussels HQ using email, he receives an automatic email response from the TQ3 implant in Brussels. Together with the confirmation of the ticket, a friendly voice reminds him to make the next flight booking online - in the Fortis intranet using cytric from i:FAO.

If that self-same staff member makes a subsequent booking per email, the response from Brussels escalates one level: a standard message is issued demanding that in the future he should remember to organise his journeys via cytric - otherwise his ticket request will be simply ignored. This is the phased guidance method implemented to gradually help the financial Group's staff members adapt to the online booking procedures. There is "simply no alternative" to this principle of "gentle force" says Pierre Meert, travel manager at the globally active Fortis Group. Achievements to date confirm this: when Fortis introduced cytric into Holland, within four months 60 percent of all business trips were being booked online.

Today, no less than 80 per cent of all business trips taken by Fortis staff in Holland are booked via cytric; in Belgium, the figure has now reached 75 per cent. These numbers mean the company has already reached its target. It is not yet technically feasible for all journeys to be booked online.

This high share of online activity represent considerable savings for Fortis. "15 percent at least," estimates Pierre Meert, who is extremely pleased that travel agents working in the TQ3 implant at the Brussels HQ have fewer routine tasks. "They now have more time to focus on getting the best rates for more complex itineraries," says the travel manager.

Fortis, headquartered in Brussels, is one of Europe's Top 20 financial services companies. The Group is active in 55 countries with a workforce of over 50,000. Its areas of activity include insurance, private banking, asset management and commercial banking. The quoted company has a market capital value of Euro 24 billion.

Staff at Fortis are very much on the move. The annual travel budget is about Euro 15 million. The Group has grown rapidly in recent years, with many new acquisitions. Following this growth phase, Fortis is now consolidating and seeking ways to cut costs. With this in mind, the Group created a central purchasing organisation (CPO), tasked with reviewing all processes for possible cost saving options. During this procedure, travel expenditure was quickly noticed. The HQ-based CPO department took the step of drafting travel regulations for the company as a whole. In a simultaneous move, it was decided that all 7 countries (Benelux, France, GB, Poland and USA) should be served by only a single travel

agent partner, breaking with the tradition of having several service providers. A key role of the new travel agency partner was to smooth the banking group's path to online booking.

Fortis sent a Request For Information to several leading travel organisations in 2002. The result was unequivocal, says Pierre Meert. Only one contender, TQ3 Travel Solutions, was actually able to offer a convincing response to the financial group's demands. Furthermore, only TQ3 could offer an online booking system "which really worked". Fortis had previously cooperated with TQ3 on a national basis in some countries - from now on TQ3 was to act as partner to the entire Group. Payment mode: management fee.

Fortis and TQ3 set up a multinational implant at the Brussels HQ, while simultaneously introducing the new corporate travel regulations. In an initial phase, all 20,000 potential travellers (of which 8,000 frequent travellers) were instructed to book their journeys either by phone or email. After three months Fortis switched over to online booking, starting in Holland. The Dutch-based employees quickly assimilated the details of the new process: the adaptation rate climbed to 60 percent in only four months. The roll-out of cytric then followed in Belgium and the other countries: within six months, staff in six Fortis countries were booking their business trips with cytric. Poland is the only exception, the booking volume is still low enough to make it more economical to continue booking tickets and hotel reservations by email.

The rapid and smooth change-over from off-line to online is explained by Pierre Meert as being a direct result of the clear

guidelines implemented by travel management and the staff's readiness to accept innovations. The company did not experience any major resistance in the switchover to online booking, apart from a few isolated critical voices. Travel manager Meert says: "Twenty years ago some people didn't want to say goodbye to their typewriters, either."

Because employees and travel arrangers at Fortis book their journeys themselves, the entire procurement process is now a much leaner operation. The person making the booking is immediately advised of flight availability, seats can be reserved and all key information is presented online. Pierre Meert: "Even though staff now make bookings themselves, the end result is not time lost, but an overall time gain."

According to Pierre Meert, Fortis has not yet had any major difficulties with cytric, the only caveat being that response times are sometimes slightly too long, a problem related to individual internet access configurations. So far, the "Complaints" page on the Fortis intranet online booking platform has only been used by five staff members, referring to problems which didn't actually relate to cytric, says Mr Meert: "Basically, the system is the most fully developed package on the market today."

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