

## Executive Summary

### Results from interviews with 18 organisations about business flight reduction

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#### Background and Methodology

Air travel is a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, and business-related flights, in particular long-distance flights, often constitute a significant share of organisational carbon footprints. To understand how organisations across different sectors address business-related flight emissions, which challenges they encounter with reducing their emissions and what conditions could enable more ambitious reduction pathways, the cantons of Basel-Stadt and Geneva and the city of Zurich mandated Susann Görlinger (iilo GmbH) to perform interviews with different organisations. A variety of organisations, for which flight emissions have a significant impact on their carbon footprint, were invited to participate in the interviews. In the end, ten for-profit and eight non-profit organisations across seven different sectors (academia, industry, consulting, finance & insurance, NGO, culture, and sport) participated. Semi-structured interviews, typically with sustainability or travel management officers lasting one hour, were conducted covering five thematic areas: (i) net-zero targets and the inclusion of flight emissions; (ii) motivation for addressing business air travel; (iii) opportunities and challenges related to flight reduction; (iv) implemented measures; and (v) enabling factors for a long-term reduction. Where possible, publicly available documents were reviewed beforehand to make the interviews more efficient. Notes and transcripts of the interviews were synthesised and analysed per organisation and across organisations to identify common patterns. Based on their level of ambition and implementation progress, organisations were categorised into “frontrunners” and “slow movers”.

#### Main Results

The interviews revealed substantial differences in ambition and implementation amongst the 18 organisations, though there was no significant difference between for-profit and non-profit organisations. Overall, only two organisations, one from the for-profit and one from the non-profit sector could be characterised as frontrunners, while the other organisations belong to the slow movers.

*Frontrunners* address business flights because their leadership recognises the strategic relevance of the topic and shows strong commitment. They aim to future-proof their business, remain competitive, and respond to internal (staff) ambition as well as external pressure from society, politics and customers. They see flight emissions as a concrete lever for advancing net-zero goals, thereby also promoting their reputation and credibility. These organisations address environmental, social and economic sustainability aspects by emphasizing the co-benefits of air travel reduction, which are reduced emissions and costs and also improved employee wellbeing, efficiency and long-term competitiveness. Frontrunners implement a long-term strategy with an impact analysis and quantitative reduction targets. Processes are established that ensure clear responsibility and accountability (defining who is responsible for what) that enable discussions on values and norms, supported by collaborative and participatory formats. They focus on impactful mandatory measures such as carbon budgets or internal taxes and rely on a comprehensive monitoring system along with high-quality data. Internal and - where relevant - external transparency and communication are central, complemented by exchange with and learning from other organisations. For frontrunners, COVID-19 acted as an important enabler by demonstrating the feasibility of virtual collaboration and questioning the previously perceived necessity of frequent travel.

*Slow movers* express a general awareness of the climate relevance of reducing business air travel. However, they often do not know how to address the topic, have limited leadership commitment and encounter cultural and structural barriers for change. Cultural barriers can include entrenched values and norms that equate travel with prestige and visibility. Incentive systems often reward frequent travel, and career progression may depend on it. Many organisations in this category perceive their current business models as highly dependent on travel, particularly when in-person relationships or international visibility are seen as central (business model lock-in). Responsibility and accountability as to who coordinates the flight reduction strategy and how it should be put in practise is often diffuse. Structural barriers are insufficient resources, limited data quality about flight emissions, fragmented monitoring systems across the organisation, insufficient virtual communication support and tools, and a focus on voluntary reduction measures. If there are mandatory measures, they tend to focus on short-haul flights, despite long-haul travel being responsible for the largest share of emissions. Instead of addressing the reduction of (long-distance) flights, they rely on compensation certificates, despite acknowledging their limited effect, and on (future) technologies such as sustainable aviation fuels (SAFs) and carbon dioxide removal (CDR). All interviewees in this category further highlighted the delicate dynamics associated with discussing travel restrictions, given the emotional and symbolic significance of flying. This challenge is also reflected in limited or no communication strategies and transparency on flight emissions and reduction.

The group of the slow movers can be further differentiated in terms of their willingness to tackle business flights: the “willing and some engagement” show genuine interest but do not know how to tackle the topic and often lack sufficient resources to implement effective measures. The “wait and see” organisations recognise the importance of the topic but are reluctant to alter established business models and prefer minimal engagement until external pressure increases. The “not movers” deliberately exclude flight emissions from their carbon accounting, thereby avoiding engagement with the topic. For these organisations, the net-zero strategy is incomplete.

An important result is that, across the sample, all organisations mention insufficient external pressure from policymakers and funders, leading to an insufficient need act. Without binding regulations and harmonised reporting requirements, organisational efforts remain voluntary and inconsistent. Many interviewees argued that clearer rules would reduce fears of competitive disadvantage and facilitate organisational alignment, as long as there is no major additional administrative burden.

To provide a concise overview on the key results, the tables below summarize why frontrunners engage with flight reduction while slow movers do not (or much less), and how this is done, i.e. what measures they have taken so far.

*Table 1: Summary of key aspects of why frontrunners engage with flight reduction and slow movers are less engaged. More details about the table entries can be found in the text.*

	Frontrunners	Slow movers
Why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Have <b>strong leadership</b> commitment</li> <li>- Remain <b>competitive</b> &amp; make business future proof</li> <li>- Have <b>intrinsic motivation</b> &amp; respond to external <b>pressure</b> (from society, politics, customers)</li> <li>- See flight emissions as a <b>lever</b> to reach net zero goals</li> <li>- Care about <b>reputation</b> &amp; <b>credibility</b></li> <li>- Regard all three <b>sustainability dimensions</b> as relevant (e.g. emissions, health, costs)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Have <b>limited leadership</b> commitment</li> <li>- Are blocked by <b>business model lock-in</b></li> <li>- Lack <b>knowledge</b> how to address the topic</li> <li>- Lack sufficient <b>data</b> &amp; <b>resources</b></li> <li>- <b>Rely</b> on (future) <b>technologies</b> (e.g. SAF, CDR)</li> <li>- Some of them <b>exclude flight emissions</b> from net zero targets</li> </ul>

Table 2: Summary of key aspects of how they address the topic. More details about the table entries can be found in the text.

	Frontrunners	Slow movers
How?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Long term strategy with quantitative reduction targets &amp; impact analysis</li> <li>- Clear responsibility &amp; accountability</li> <li>- Process to discuss values, norms and incentive systems</li> <li>- Collaborative, participatory approach to involve employees</li> <li>- Focus on impactful mandatory measures (carbon budget, tax)</li> <li>- Comprehensive monitoring system &amp; excellent data</li> <li>- Internal (and external) transparency &amp; communication</li> <li>- Exchange with other institutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of responsibility &amp; accountability</li> <li>- Mainly voluntary and few mandatory measures, not focusing on efficiency in reducing emissions</li> <li>- Limited or no transparency &amp; communication strategy</li> <li>- Insufficient monitoring</li> </ul>

### Discussion and recommendations

The results of the interview analysis highlight several issues that limit the effectiveness of current approaches to business travel reduction. Voluntary measures alone are insufficient, as they lack enforcement mechanisms and do not address the underlying travel incentives, that often link travel to personal visibility and professional success. Organisations that set narrow system boundaries by excluding flight emissions from their carbon accounting, obscure the true scale of these emissions and weaken organisational accountability. On the other hand, organisations that have made significant progress demonstrate the importance of combining leadership commitment, mandatory measures, robust data and transparency. In order to engage employees in the flight reduction process, it is essential, as shown by ambitious organisations, to setup participatory processes for developing and implementing suitable and acceptable measures. Carbon budgets and internal carbon taxes serve as effective tools by linking travel decisions to operational and financial consequences. Integrated emission monitoring systems enable reflection on travel patterns and support behavioural change. Strong narratives, along with internal and external communication, foster cultural shifts and enhance their acceptance, help reshape values and norms, and legitimise new practices regarding mobility and professional routines. While several findings apply to most interviewees, it is important to acknowledge that conditions differ between organisations and even more so between sectors. Participation of organisations in alliances and benchmarking initiatives enables mutual learning and can help reduce first-mover fears.

From an overarching perspective, this study shows that a successful transformation towards less air travel, which contributes to the net zero target, is feasible but requires major joint efforts and a much stronger **synchronisation across actors**. Political institutions, civil society, and organisations must jointly acknowledge **air travel reduction as a strategic priority on the way to net zero**. **Organisations** need to reduce business travel and **society** must address the even more challenging topic of reducing leisure flights if we want to stay in line with our democratically negotiated net zero targets. To support both organisations and society, it needs **policy makers** to set rules and regulations and thereby provide the necessary framework conditions for organisations and society. This should be supported by strong communication initiatives and applied research projects with selected organisations. Such initiatives serve as “proofs of concept”, enabling other organisations and society to learn from. To support scaling effects, carefully designed future projects should also encourage positive spillover effects from reduced business to reduced leisure flights and avoid unintended rebound effects.

Air travel reduction is clearly an excellent example or even a blueprint for the many complex transformation processes that are needed to reach net zero, because it requires an adaptation of underlying values and norms for a sustainable change in behaviour. When engaging in flight reduction, organisations as well as society are thus exercising their capacity to contribute to a broader transformation agenda, remain resilient and stay fit for the future. Although the issue is complex, it has the advantage of mobilizing individuals and the entire organisation, opening up specific areas for action and yielding measurable results by reducing financial costs and greenhouse gas emissions. In short, reducing air travel emissions is a challenging but worthwhile endeavour, which will become a distinguishing characteristic of ambitious organisations and societies in the near future.

This executive summary closes with a concise list of recommendations for organisations and policy makers, prioritized based upon the results of the 18 interviews.

#### Key recommendations for organisations

1. Their management recognizes business travel reduction
  - a. as an opportunity to show leadership in addressing all sustainability aspects
  - b. as a necessity to remain competitive in a future net-zero society
  - c. as a blueprint for other transformation topics
2. They question the currently established values and norms associated with frequent air travel and engage in a cultural change process by, e.g., framing less travel as a success, supported by targeted internal and external communication
3. They implement mandatory and impactful organisation-wide measures, developed in a participatory process, to incentivize reduced air travel.

#### Key recommendations for policy makers

1. They provide net-zero regulations that ensure comparable conditions for all organisations and thereby reduce fears of competitive disadvantage
2. They amplify organisational efforts by providing platforms for frontrunners and supporting willing organisations through guidance on processes, sharing of information and best practices, and setting up networks
3. They invest in analysing and quantifying spillover effects from business to leisure flights.

*The interviews were conducted as part of the study “Impact analysis flight reduction: from business flights to leisure flights”, mandated by the cantons of Basel-Stadt and Geneva and the city of Zurich to Dr. Susann Görlinger, iilo GmbH.*

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