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Context

CTS at UWE has been responsible for taking forward research into how individuals use their time when travelling and what meaning and value this has for them. Specifically, in relation to the HSR Inquiry, CTS has designed questions that have been included in the National (Rail) Passenger Survey in Autumn 2004 and Autumn 2010. Such questions have addressed: (i) what rail passengers do with their time on the train; (ii) how worthwhile they consider this time to be; (iii) how they equip themselves for using their time; and (iv) the extent to which they plan in advance how to use the time on the train. The research has not been oriented specifically towards an attempt to economically evaluate travel time and travel time savings. However, the empirical evidence *does* challenge the orthodox approach of economic appraisal (applied in the economic case for HS2) that assumes travel time during the working day to be *unproductive* such that *savings* in travel time convert unproductive time into productive use which has economic value.

Empirical evidence

For the comparative analysis of 2004 and 2010 response data, sample sizes were as follows: 2004 – 22,866; and 2010 – 19,715. These are very large sample sizes lending the findings a high degree of credibility. Results are weighted to be representative of rail services across Great Britain. A full write up of the analysis is available on request from Glenn.Lyons@uwe.ac.uk. Key findings are as follows:

1. 27% of all rail passengers spend *some* time working/studying on the train – this increases to 54% when considering business travellers. The figures are relatively stable between 2004 and 2010.
2. One third of business travellers (34%) indicate that the activity they spend *most* time on while on the train is working/studying.
3. Across all passengers, the incidence of working/studying as the *main* activity is greatest for journey times of 1-3 hours: ½ - 1 hour – 16%; 1-2 hours – 20%; 2-3 hours – 18%; and 3+ hours – 13%.
4. 43% of business travellers spend some time reading for leisure (25% spend most time on this); 46% window gaze/people watch (13% spend most time on this).
5. Technology use is apparent – 32% of business travellers spend some travel time on text messages / phone calls for work (up from 21% in 2004) and 31% spend some time checking emails.
6. Only 1% of business travellers spend most time being bored (the figure is 2% for all passengers).
7. Commuting in the UK is considered to be outside the working day. 27% of rail commuters spend some time on the train working/studying – 13% spend the most time on this.
8. 30% of all passengers consider they make very worthwhile use of their time on the train (up from 24% in 2004); 55% consider they make some use of their time; and 13% consider their time spent on the train as wasted (down from 19% in 2004). 91% of business travellers consider their time on the train to be very worthwhile or of some use.
9. For travellers for whom the activity they spend most time on is working/studying, 46% consider their time on the train very worthwhile (up from 40% in 2004). Only 3% consider it wasted time.
10. 8% of passengers plan *a lot* in advance how they will use their travel time on the train. 68% do not plan at all or plan very little because they always use their time in the same way. 64% of passengers who plan a lot in advance consider their time use very worthwhile; this compares to 21% who do not plan in advance at all.
11. The proportion of rail passengers having and using a laptop computer on the train has increased by two-thirds in the past six years. 54% of those who have a mobile phone with them are now using it on the train compared to 36% six years ago.

12. The proportion of passengers equipped for sound and those making use of this has more or less doubled in the last six years.

Earlier research

Earlier qualitative empirical work led by CTS has highlighted the different meanings and experiences of travel time to individuals. Travel time can be seen as a *gift* – important in social relations - to other people at a journey's destination – measured as the cost to the traveller of creating that co-presence. Travel time can also be a gift to oneself, with three intrinsic meanings: '*time out*' – escaping from the pressures and obligations of complex lifestyles, '*me time*'- time for personal self indulgence, and '*transition time*' – allowing space between the different demands of workplace and home, preparing for the activities at the destination. The distinction can also be made between *clock* time and *experienced* time. The latter can be stretched or compressed according to the traveller's state of mind and activity engagement. For example experimental work has shown how journeys can be made more acceptable or 'remedied' through assisted planning in advance of travel and by provision of suitable artefacts for use during the journey. In this way we can improve the perception of how travel time is used and experienced.

Implications for the Inquiry

In the 'Economic Case for HS2' report, the analysis and commentary is at pains to 'head off' the problem underlined by the empirical evidence above, namely that the core assumption in the orthodox approach to appraisal of travel time being unproductive is flawed. Significant proportions of travellers, particularly but not exclusively business travellers, work or study during their journey and assess this time as being very worthwhile. The implication is that the time being saved by faster journeys by HS2 is not as valuable as is being assumed – thus the benefits of HS2 may be less than assumed overall. The report rightly contends that if travel time use is to be considered in economic appraisal then account must *also* be taken of the positive impacts of reduced crowding (through greater capacity provision) and (potentially) greater time use productivity for individuals switching from road to rail. Its consideration concludes that the orthodox approach remains robust in terms of the outcome values. This *may* be true but this consideration itself makes its own assumptions about the nature and extent of 'positive utility' derived from travel time use on rail and alternative modes.

What is clear, across transport investment, is that it is not acceptable to treat travel as simply a disutility – a means to an end. It has, or can often have, positive value and this is irrefutably true of travel by rail. Our empirical findings tend to suggest that this value (economically and potentially socially) is increasing over time – the proportion of rail travellers who consider their travel time very worthwhile has gone up by a quarter in six years. As the information age further advances, how will this change over the 60 year time horizon considered in appraisal?

The overall research results given above reveal quite clearly that people get positive value from their rail travel time – although it will not be the same across all parts of the network and for different travelling conditions. A key question for rail investment is whether the priority is increasing capacity or speeding up journeys. Recognition that travel time use has a positive utility may undermine the value of the latter; meanwhile it may add substantially to the economic value of the former. Investing in getting more out of travel time may be as important to consider as investing in getting more travel time out of travel.

We do not wish to express a view either for or against high speed rail. However, given the critical importance of travel time valuation to the economic appraisal of the HS2 investment we are strongly of the view that further investigation of the economic and social values of travel time use by rail travellers and users of alternative modes is urgently needed before there can be sufficient confidence in the economic case. A rethink is long overdue.