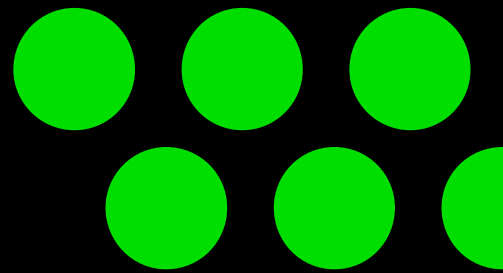


# RIDING THE NEW WAVE OF INNOVATION

Trends shaping business travel for Irish businesses





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Opportunities ahead for Irish business travel

**Trend 1:** AI meets human expertise

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# Opportunities ahead for Irish business travel

By Steve Norris, FCM Europe Leader



Ireland continues to be a thriving and highly competitive business hub. Whether it's expanding exports, domestic growth, or shaking up strategies, opportunities are waiting to be grabbed. The signs ahead look optimistic for those with vision, hustle and that trademark Irish pluck.

**Travel is a key part of growth strategy and how modern businesses find new customers and ideas, no matter the time zone.** This guide aims to uncover some key trends affecting business travel for Irish-based businesses.

Read on to learn how AI travel assistants are transforming the travel experience, how carbon-friendly planes are reducing environmental impact, and need-to-know airline and hotel developments.

We'll also uncover how service is still important in today's technology world, and how company culture is driving travel patterns.



# Trend 1:

## AI meets human expertise

Let's set the scene: It's a typical Monday in Dublin, and you're on your second cup of coffee, trying to tackle the week's business travel plans. Forget the old days of manual searches and guesswork. Artificial intelligence (AI) has stepped in to simplify all areas of work life, including travel.

Six in 10 Irish businesses are planning technological investments in 2026, according to the Grant Thornton International Business Report (IBR) (Oct 2025). The report adds that AI is becoming more embedded across the Irish economy. It's clear: Irish businesses are not just keeping up with AI; they're setting the pace.

Steve believes the future success of business travel and AI usage lies in striking the right balance between technological innovation and the irreplaceable value of the human touch. "For AI to be its most effective, it can be used to streamline processes, but must be complemented with strategic insights and the warmth and knowledge of travel teams. It's this synergy that will distinguish Irish SME travel in the years to come," he said.

**So, what does this blend of AI and human expertise mean for travel programmes and the travel experience? Here are some examples.**

	AI's role	Human touch
<b>Trip planning</b>	Whether chat-based or built-in, learns from preferences and past choices, and curates bespoke itineraries.	Steps in where requests become too complex. Understands bigger picture; you might choose suppliers due to memories or past bad experiences.
<b>Real-time support</b>	Monitors changes and disruptions which can trigger alerts, information and alternatives.	A calming voice on the end of the phone is priceless. They can handle rebooking and any complications.
<b>Efficiency</b>	Automates the mundane to free up everyone's time.	Leverage experience and industry connections to ensure AI's efficiency is matched with a keen eye for value and quality.
<b>Safety &amp; compliance</b>	Automated triggers for latest travel advisories and compliance regulations.	Interpret advisories and offer advice within context of specific trips, balancing safety with practicality.
<b>Data &amp; analytics</b>	Automates reports and dashboards, and finds answers in your data based on questions you ask it.	Delves more into the 'why' of the data and actions that can be taken off the back of knowing those numbers.
<b>Travel management services</b>	Embedded across all services and technology for seamless integration	There to help for strategic advice, complex planning and to elevate the entire programme.



## Trend 2: Offsites are still the new water cooler

**Ireland has the most  
hybrid job postings  
in Europe**

Source: LinkedIn

Companies are doubling down on 'culture' like never before, realising it's the essential glue binding together today's dispersed, hybrid workforces. Keeping far-flung staff connected in meaningful ways has become a priority.

While digital tools connect their daily workplace dots, and periodic team-building days help put names to faces; there's just no substitute for extended incentive trips or adventures when it comes to forging steel-strong bonds across distributed teams. In a survey by FCM Travel, 68% of participants said travel is mainly for conferences and events, some of which are internal, and 57% of travel was for internal meetings.

Corporate junkets range from luxury getaways for high achievers, to adventurous trips such as mountain biking across Norway and Survivor-style challenges in remote wildernesses. The goal of these trips vary, from celebrating and retaining top talent, to getting employees out of their daily routine and dropping all ego at the door. To force fresh thinking by escaping what's comfortable and familiar to spark fresh thinking and new perspectives.

And as hybrid arrangements cement themselves as the predominant model for many Irish businesses, how companies utilise business trip budgets is shifting too. Rather than sporadic, ill-defined travel, firms are becoming more deliberate in tying corporate trips to strategic objectives. They're asking - what do we want to achieve here? How can this experience sync up productivity or spark radical creativity? Does this trip strengthen our vision, ethos and camaraderie? Can it level up our innovation game?

**In answering those questions, leadership realises:**

- Travel is an investment, when it has an ROI attached. This sentiment correlates to our own survey data that finds domestic travel is shifting from monthly to less frequent, more consolidated trips. It's business travel with a purpose.
- Funding immersive offsite gatherings for hybrid teams leads to more invested, higher-performing crews.
- World-class talent could reside anywhere – from Kilkenny to Kansas – so travel budgets must expand to cover 'super commutes' to tap wider talent pools or keep non-local superstars happily on board.
- Allowing flexibility so travellers can extend their work trips will make them happier and promotes a better work-life balance. The Global Business Travel Association (GBTA) finds 43% of travel programmes now have defined policies for leisure travel tacked onto a work trip.

**Forward-looking businesses realise these costs are justified, given the exponential returns from even small boosts to innovation, loyalty, and alignment across a distributed workforce.**

# Trend 3:

## Sustainability takes flight

While on the ground, businesses face continued pressure to reduce their carbon footprint, the same thinking is being applied to the skies.

**“Sustainable travel isn’t a ‘nice-to-have’; it’s a business imperative. It’s about future-proofing our planet, and making better choices,”** said Steve.

### Expectations are shifting

According to the Grant Thornton International Business Report, the number of Ireland-based businesses planning to invest in sustainable initiatives has almost doubled over three quarters – from 33% in Q4 2024, to 56% in Q3 2025.

It’s largely because stakeholders expect more sustainable operations and reporting, and that then trickles down to the supply chain. Suppliers across every industry, including travel, are increasingly asked about their sustainability efforts and environmental information.

It also reflects the changing expectations of the workforce as a whole. Employees are vocal about their preference for environmentally responsible travel options. This shift in traveller sentiment underscores a broader cultural shift towards sustainability.

“Today’s workforce wants to see their values reflected in their company’s actions,” Steve notes. “Sustainable travel policies are becoming a key factor in attracting and retaining talent.”

### EU reporting regulations delayed

While the application of the reporting has been delayed, there’s no doubt the introduction of the EU’s Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) in 2024 has marked a significant shift.

The directive initially mandates large companies to disclose extensive sustainability data, including the carbon footprint of their business travel. Eventually, small and medium sized companies will be required to submit the reporting in 2029.

“CSRD isn’t changing anything in terms of the reporting itself,” says Juan Antonio Iglesias, Head of FCM Consulting EMEA. “It’s mostly the fact that more companies are now legally required to report on their emissions, and most importantly, that Scope 3 (which includes travel) is now also mandatory, and not voluntary as it has been in the past.”

The directive will impact thousands of companies across the EU, compelling Irish businesses to scrutinise and reduce their travel-related emissions.



For tips on how to prepare for CSRD, get the latest FCM Consulting Insights Report

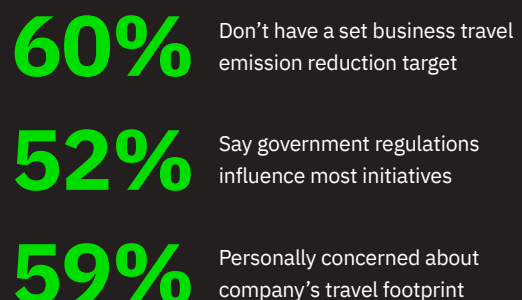
### Travel company services shift

A travel management company (TMC) becomes a crucial ally in this landscape, offering tools to track emissions, recommend greener transport options, and consolidate trips to reduce carbon footprints.

“Our role is evolving,” Steve adds. “We’re helping companies navigate the complexities of sustainable travel, whether it’s how to align with overarching business goals, strategic policy adjustments, adding new technology to their stack, or working with our airline, hotel and care hire partners to bring more sustainable options to our customers.”

### Sustainability views

Source: BTN Intelligence Business Travel Sustainability Report 2025 (released Sept 2025)



## Trend 4:

# Service remains supreme

Even with all the technology in the world, quality service partners will be hugely valuable for Irish firms sending staff overseas on business, or bringing hybrid teams together.

As you saw from the table in the AI trend, the personal touch is essential for strategic, more complex requirements that technology simply cannot handle.

But it's about more than that. Using a travel partner goes far beyond planning and booking trips, including:

**Disruption help, 24/7:** Airline and airport disruptions remain a thorn in the side for travellers, with flight disruption tech provider AirHelp reporting 26% of passengers were disrupted at Ireland airports between June and August 2025. When there's a delay, rebooking can take hours if you're on hold to the airline with thousands of others. Call your personal travel team, and you're done in minutes.

**Accessible travel needs:** From working with our larger multi-national organisations, we've made great strides in supporting travellers with accessibility needs. It's not always something that can be organised online, especially if the individual wants reassurance.

### **Country differences:**

Some nations are more technology-forward, while others value human-to-human service. If your company opens an office in another country, you'll need to consider what the preferences are in service.

**Letting an expert take over:** Travel is all we do, every day. You have other priorities. So whether you are deep in analytics, thinking about your future strategy or trying to book a trip, sometimes you just need to pass something to a professional and crack on with your day job.

**Proactive service is shaping into a prime need for Irish firms when managing corporate travel. Arming road warriors with reliable partners that can unravel disruptions in real time allows companies to feel confident unlocking the full business value from in-person meetings and conferences - despite travel complexity.**





# Airline sector trends

## 1. Turbulence continues

Airlines and airports continue to face challenges such as industrial action, severe weather, technical failures and staff shortages. It's causing more cancellations and delays than ever before. Aer Lingus ranked 53<sup>rd</sup> in the world for on-time performance in October 2025, with British Airways 90<sup>th</sup>, Lufthansa 97<sup>th</sup> and Ryanair 110<sup>th</sup>.

## 2. Are loyalty programmes more precious than miles?

Loyalty programmes are evolving into something akin to a currency in their own right, often outshining the value of the flights they're meant to promote. The focus is shifting from miles flown to euros spent, reflecting a broader change in how value is calculated and rewarded in travel. However, as loyalty become more lucrative, they compete with managed travel programmes. Luckily, there are ways that you can combine the two for a balanced approach.

## 3. Extra, extra!

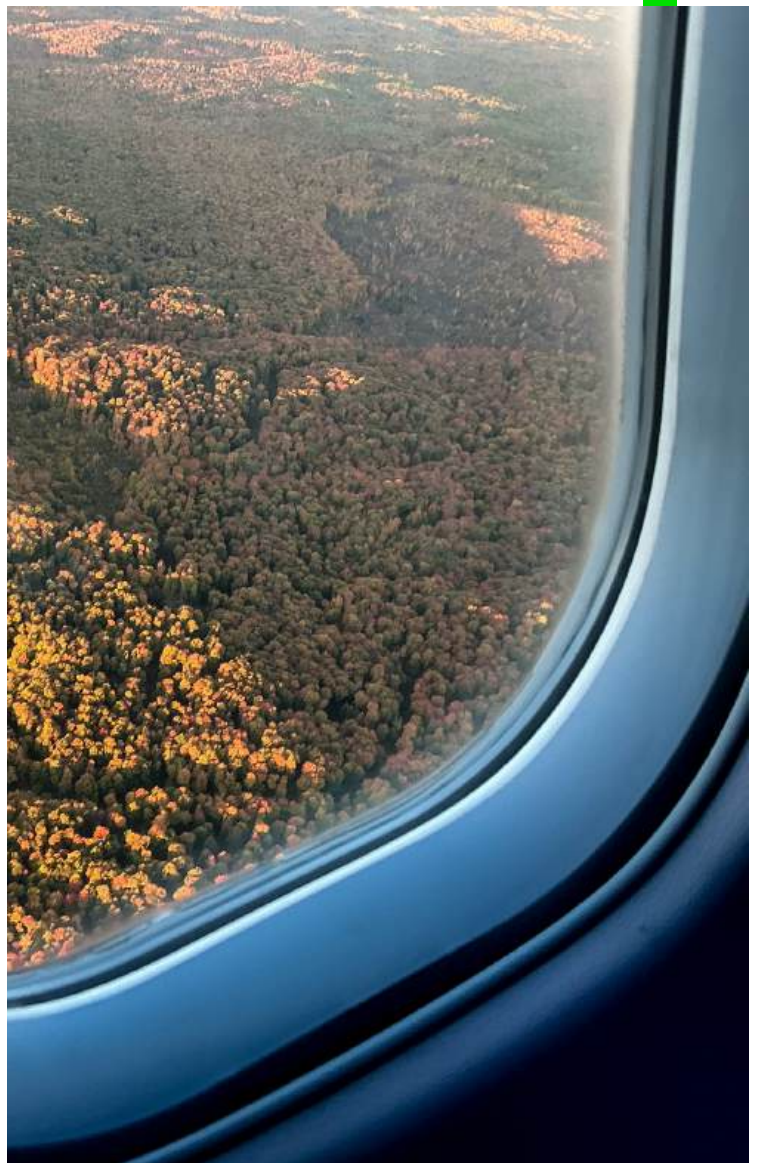
Ancillary spend such as luggage, seat selection and fast-track fees, are an enormous revenue stream for airlines. According to the latest FCM Consulting Insights Report, airlines made US\$150 billion in ancillaries in 2024, and that's only expected to grow. It's time to define what counts in your organisation, what is allowed to be expensed, and how your tools can enforce policy (psst, your business travel agency can help).

## 4. Greener pastures ahead

Airlines are increasingly using biofuels and Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) to decrease flight emissions. Will we see more companies purchase their own to use, how would that work in practice? Moreover, electric and hybrid planes are starting to take off, promising quieter, cleaner, and more cost-effective flights. As discussed in the sustainability chapter, there's different ways your organisation can bring reporting and action into a travel programme.

## 5. Distribution drama

Larger airlines, especially in Europe and the U.S., are experimenting with different sales strategies. This can affect what is displayed or can be booked through a business travel agency, for example, Ryanair requires workarounds that disrupt the usual smooth processes. The transition to New Distribution Capability (NDC) is expected to stay gradual in the next year, according to the [FCM Consulting Insights Report](#).







# Hotel sector trends

## 1. Revenue is under strain

With so much data and technology at their fingertips, hotels are looking to maximise their opportunity for every room. It means negotiations for fixed corporate rates are more difficult, but not impossible. Lean on travel professionals to lead these negotiations for you, they will know the best tactics and rate types for your travel patterns.

## 2. Can occupancy sustain?

In the second quarter of 2025, hotel rates had increased US\$31 compared to the first quarter. This was largely due to more conferences and trade shows, but also as hotels face higher operating costs. **FCM Consulting Insights Report's** says it's difficult to see high levels of occupancy continue in 2026, so it's also unclear if rates will increase.

## 3. Loyalty programmes get personal

Customisation and flexibility are at the heart of hotels' reward strategies. Take Hyatt's revamped programme, which lets you pick between perks like bonus points or spa credits. Meanwhile, Omni is letting you rack up elite status however you prefer - book pricey suites or drop tons on that perfect bottle of Merlot at the onsite restaurant. They want to analyse past bookings and spending (hello AI!), identify the high-rollers most worth keeping loyal, and then target similar guests.

## 4. Sustainability steps up

Hotel stays are increasingly likely to come with green credibility, as properties double down on sustainability efforts from composting food waste to renewable energy investments. Expect hotels to follow suit as the eco-conscious ethos continues to gain momentum in Ireland. Even a country house hotel stay might look a bit different with more plant-based menu options, biodegradable amenities, and environmental stewardship at the top of one's mind.

## 5. Wellness offerings go above and beyond

With wellness still trending up, hotels keep expanding programming once limited to bath products and fitness centres. Now, we're talking extensive lifestyle integration such as sleep aids, nutritionists, destressing therapies. Because helping guests feel their best is a 24/7 endeavour, encompassing state-of-the-art diagnostics to customised training and recovery.





## Navigate travel and workplaces changes with confidence

Travel is important when you're a growing business. So keeping ahead of potential change and challenges is key to an agile and resilient travel programme.

With FCM's corporate travel services, you'll not only have all your travel management needs in one place, but all the advice, expert tips and travel technology you need to empower your travellers and your programme.

Grow without getting left behind – use our technology and dedicated experts to power that journey.

Learn more at <https://www.fcmtravel.com/en-ie/travel-for-growing-businesses>

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