

Saving the world by staying at your desk

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Captain, Brains and Cheek

First, let's tell the truth.

Are you old enough to remember the time when emails used to be printed off, and filed for posterity? It wasn't even that long ago – maybe 15 years? More recently, we've moved on to the virtue-signalling email footer that reads: "Only print this email if you really need to". When you add recycled paper and refillable printer cartridges, it suddenly feels as though everyone is doing their bit.

Cut to today though, and we have yet to experience any serious attempt at, or even a discussion of, decarbonising the business intelligence industry. Tokenistic feel-good gestures such as reusable cups aside, we are still guilty of gorging on jet fuel, car fuel, disposable plastics and wasteful resource management, without regard for the downstream consequences. If this were how we managed our financial resources, it would certainly be seen as a dereliction of duty. So why not have the same prudent approach when it comes to our one and only habitable planet?

Consider that everything has a calculable carbon footprint. Your flights, your hotel stays, your office party, your day working from home, your take-away lunch, the contents of your waste basket, and yes, even recycling has a carbon bill attached to it. Before we can take action, we need to acknowledge and accept that we are very much part of the problem.

To make progress, we first need to come clean about the fact that the measures so far do little more than appease and comfort. To assess the scale of the problem, our company has been monitoring our carbon emissions for the past 9 years. It appears that our average travelling exec is responsible for about 50 tons of work-related carbon emissions each year. Compare that to the 6.5 tons per year for the average UK resident, or less than 2 tons for the average Indian.

Then, let's take responsibility.

If you are a qualitative researcher like me, you're not going to like what comes next. And if you are a people person like me, you're not going to like it either. However, the uncomfortable truth is that the vast, VAST majority of our emissions as an industry comes from air travel. The main culprits are face-to-face meetings and qualitative fieldwork. Particular shout-outs go to long haul and business class flights.

Now, I've lost count of the number of times I've said the following words to our clients: "Yes, we will attend the fieldwork in person. It's the best way to ensure quality." And also these: "Yes, we'll fly over for the kick-off meeting, the debrief meeting, the workshop, the credentials meeting, the conference, etc. SURE. It's not a problem!"



These sentiments are nothing more than manifestations of the basic human instinct for personal interaction. Knowing the people you work with; seeing the interviews with your own eyes; briefing the moderators yourself; all of these are commendable and understandable intentions. Unfortunately, they go against the grain of another basic human instinct – that of our survival.

Something will have to change substantially. My view is that we can either initiate that change ourselves, or be forced by circumstance to change at a later date. History will judge these decades harshly as it is. Why not stay ahead of the curve, so that we can look future generations in the eye?

Before you get worried: I'm not suggesting for business intelligence to cease all commercial activity as an industry. However, business as usual will need to be transformed. While clients demand personal presence today, they may well be asking for sustainable projects in the near future. Therefore, we need to ask ourselves: can we deliver good research that is also beneficial, or at least neutral, for the environment?

Finally: let's implement solutions.

Many of our pharma clients are beginning to decouple profits from emissions (with varying success). As part of these initiatives, environmental credentials are starting to appear on procurement questionnaires, and clients are increasingly likely to look for climate neutral status from their partners or projects. You may wonder, how is it possible to achieve climate neutral status for a company, or for a project?

For the material bits, the time-tested maxim still holds true: reduce, reuse, recycle, upcycle. Don't print if you can look on a screen. Don't buy if you don't need to. Don't replace if it's still serviceable. Don't bring more packaging waste into the world. Dispose of waste responsibly. You already know all this.

For your travel however, you can only do two things: reduce or offset.

Reducing is tricky, and is likely to meet with resistance. When face-to-face is the best option, both colleagues and clients may feel that the immediate need to do a good job trumps the long-term environmental consequences. We are addicted to the efficiency and convenience of hopping on a plane, and relinquishing this benefit will require conscious effort from those of us who fly, and a change of mindset for those who request us to fly.

Carbon offsetting in comparison is cheap and easy. By buying an offset, we remove the same amount of warming effect from the global system that we've put into it by conducting our business. For our travelling exec above, we pay about £400 per year to offset all of their carbon emissions*.

However, this system only works as long as there are ethical offsets available and on the current trajectory, we will only be able to access quality offsets for the next decade or so. This is the timeframe in which we will need to wean ourselves off fossil fuels by coming up with ways to reduce our travel emissions to a bare minimum.

Try this.

As an exercise, I invite you to ponder: can you replace a flight with a train? Which of your trips could be swapped for video conferencing, teleconferencing or even plain emailing? Which partners or clients may be persuaded to give up some of the human connection, for the sake of human survival? Which bits of fieldwork would be 'good enough', if observed via video link?

I'm willing to wager that you could forgo 20% of your carbon emissions right now, without significant loss to productivity or quality. Try it, and let me know how you fare. I'd love to hear your story about stepping back from the climate precipice; as a person, as an organisation, and as an industry.

Remember, we don't need to save the planet from people. We need to save people from the planet. And we can do most of our bit by staying at our desks.

*For a socially and environmentally sustainable carbon offsetting scheme for your organisation, visit: www.myclimate.org
To join the climate movement, visit: <https://rebellion.earth>
Email me your story: bors@brainsandcheek.com

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