In my last two columns, I’ve been looking at the possible consequences of increased restrictions on cabin baggage on aircraft. I pointed out that business travelers would have to think more seriously about protecting their portable electronics against penetration, theft and loss and that the productivity costs of international or other long-distance meetings would have to be reevaluated.

Another question will arise if the US transportation security administration shifts towards the new UK cabin restrictions. Having every passenger check baggage will inevitably increase the total travel time, and the proportionate effect will be greater for short hops. There will be longer delays at the originating airport because everybody has to check bags; everyone will have to wait for checked baggage at the destination. Security delays might even be imposed at intermediate airports -- and most travelers won't have access to their computers even if there are long layovers. At that point, the balance may shift away from flying out of the nearest airport towards flying out of the nearest airport that allows a direct flight to the destination.

For example, I sometimes have to travel to Toronto from Vermont. Normally, my colleagues and I drive to Burlington airport -- about an hour for most of us. There, we normally need at most an hour before flight time because it's a small airport and everything goes pretty quickly. In all, our travel adds up to six hours from home to Toronto Airport: an hour drive, an hour wait, and four hours for two short flights (e.g., Burlington to Cleveland and Cleveland to Toronto). Now, we could drive to Montréal in about three hours and take the hourly shuttle from Dorval to Pearson; the total time might be about five hours. We choose the Burlington Route because it avoids uncertainty at the border and lets us read or work for a couple of extra hours that would otherwise be taken up driving. Put in a few more hours of travel time due to security delays at airports and the five hours starts to look more attractive. I suspect that we may see some significant reductions in short-haul flights if the security restrictions become more onerous for business travelers.

Finally, the restrictions on portable electronics and airplane cabins many lead to increased interest in thin client technology. Perhaps someday we will see business travelers renting fungible (I love that word) computers for their flights just as they can now rent DVD players for a flight. With wireless access in the air, a traveler might then be able to use her preferred software and access her business data from the corporate server using a VPN and save the results on the home system. At her destination, she could then use her own PC as a thin client to continue working with the same data. The Microsoft Exchange server for Outlook and e-mail includes a Web client for VPN access to e-mail, calendar, to-do list and so on even if the user is not physically connected to the corporate LAN. Perhaps this is an option that will become increasingly attractive as travel becomes more
onerous.

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