Forbes INSIGHTS

# The Future Of Travel And Expense Management: From Costly Fragmentation To Efficient Orchestration

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# Introduction

## Corporate travel and expense management is undergoing a structural shift.

Long viewed as a back-office function focused on cost control and compliance, T&E is now emerging as a source of strategic insight, employee delight and business value creation.

“Travel is a controllable cost, but in the AI age, it has the potential to become an investment lever rather than just a cost-control exercise,” says Fred Fredericks, general manager and chief product officer at SAP Concur.

To learn more about this change, American Express commissioned Forbes Insights in February 2026 to survey 500 executives at large U.S. organizations across industries about how they are rethinking their T&E operations. The data from the survey, The Future of T&E: Integration, Automation and Efficiency, shows a clear inflection point with a majority of surveyed executives (69%) — from managers to the C-suite — agreeing that, in their organization, T&E is viewed as a strategic capability that can make a meaningful contribution to the business.

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69% of surveyed executives envision T&E as a strategic capability that can make a meaningful contribution to the business

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Leading organizations are integrating travel, expense and payment systems by embedding AI across the T&E life cycle, redefining how employees experience travel and business outcomes.

“When T&E improves compliance, sharpens spend management and provides real-time visibility, travel teams can demonstrate measurable value to the business,” says Fredericks.

Yet, as the survey shows, many organizations remain constrained by fragmented systems, manual processes and limited data visibility.

**This report explores the T&E evolution and provides a road map for business leaders seeking to transform T&E management from an administrative burden into a cornerstone of compliance, efficiency and enhanced employee experience.**

# Integration Is The Foundation Of Modern T&E Management

## But for many organizations, fragmentation remains deeply entrenched.

While 81% of surveyed executives consider system integration critical to improvement, 35% identify data integration as one of their top three challenges.

When systems are unified, organizations gain real-time visibility across the entire T&E life cycle, enabling faster decision-making and more accurate forecasting. Integration also allows for automation of approvals and reconciliation, reducing manual effort and accelerating processing times. Just as important, it enables consistent policy enforcement at scale, ensuring compliance without adding friction for employees.

Yet despite these benefits, fragmentation remains a persistent limitation. In most enterprises, T&E processes span a complex ecosystem of travel booking tools, expense platforms, payment providers and third-party services. These systems are often disconnected, creating silos that limit both visibility and efficiency. While some progress has been made — 57% of surveyed executives report integrating booking tools and 50% integrating reporting and analytics — critical components remain isolated. Only 33% have connected HR systems, and 37% have integrated broader data sources.

Consequences of this fragmentation can be significant and, enterprise-wide, can directly impact performance outcomes. Seventy-one percent of surveyed executives aspire to faster turnaround times, yet only 37% achieve them — a 34-point gap. Similarly, 61% seek improved forecasting capabilities, yet just 40% report success. These disparities illustrate how the absence of integration constrains both operational efficiency and strategic insight.

FIGURE 1.

### Critical Actions To Strengthen The T&E Process

| | |
|---|---|
| 81% | Integrating systems together |
| 81% | Introducing real-time and agile processes |
| 77% | Unifying control and compliance enforcement |
| 74% | Consolidating the T&E process (including booking, expense and reimbursement) within a single platform |
| 70% | Involving employees in the change management of the T&E process |
| 68% | Implementing AI-powered automation solutions |

*Includes respondents who answered "critical" and "extremely critical."*

Integration challenges are not purely technical: They are rooted in organizational structure. Ownership of T&E is frequently distributed across finance, procurement, HR and IT functions, creating fragmented accountability.

"Many organizations still have travel and expense owned by completely different teams that don't talk to each other," Fredericks says. "Even when companies buy integrated systems, organizational silos can prevent them from realizing the full value."

The impact extends beyond internal operations to the employee experience, notes Fredericks, as disconnected systems introduce duplicate work and delays into everyday processes.

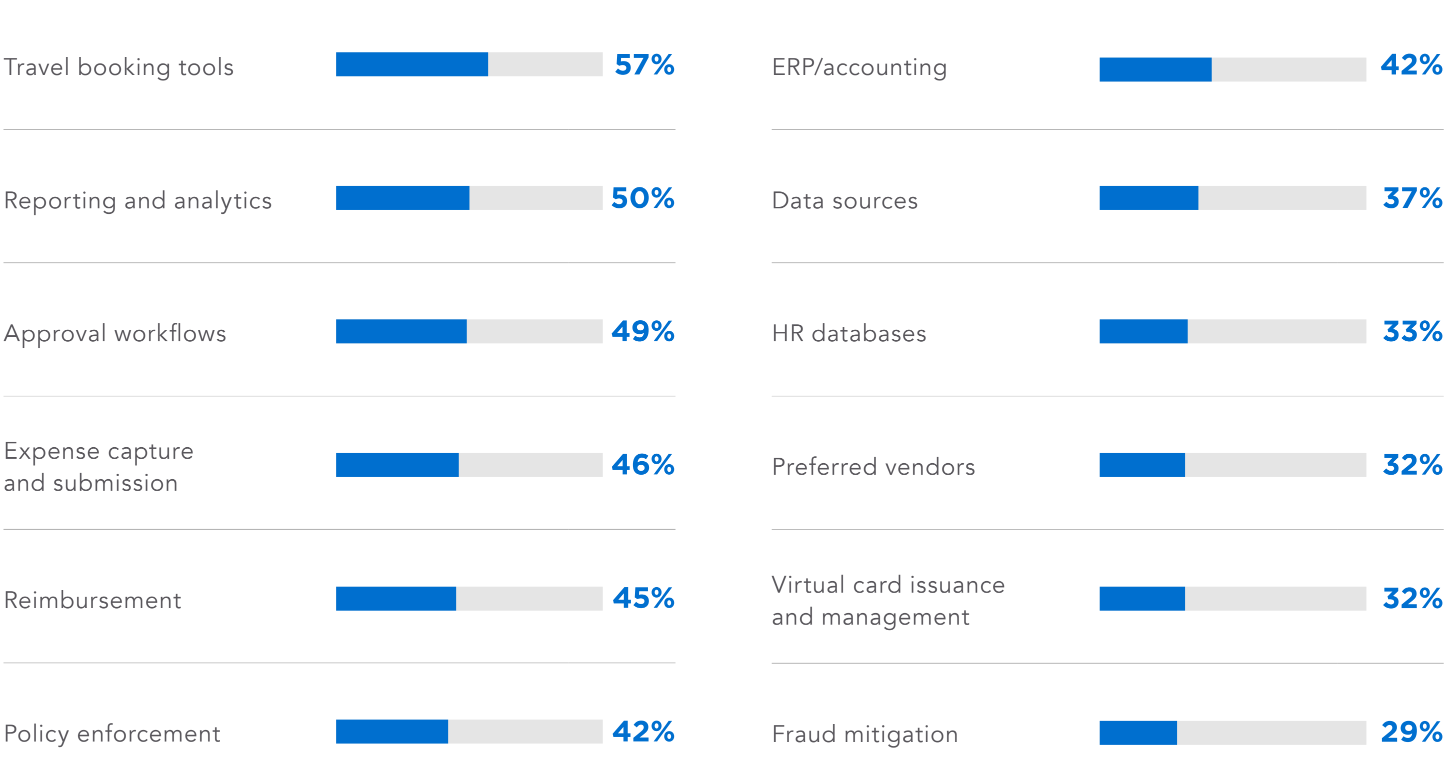
## Understanding The Hidden Costs Of Governance

At the same time, traditional T&E systems capture only a portion of the true cost of business travel.

"There are all these incremental costs to business travel — tax exposure, compliance requirements, administrative steps — that are often invisible to travel teams but materially increase the true cost of a trip," said Anne d'Arcy, principal at KPMG overseeing business travel risk. Without integration, these costs remain dispersed across the organization, obscuring the full financial picture.

FIGURE 2.

### T&E Components Integrated Within A Single Platform




*Respondents could select all that applied from the 12 choices above.*

This disconnect is particularly evident in risk management. Travel teams often manage spend, while tax and legal teams oversee regulatory exposure. In the absence of integrated systems, organizations lack a unified view of both cost and risk. As a result, governance is emerging as a critical lever for transformation, and integration provides a means to embed dynamic risk monitoring across the T&E life cycle.

However, current enforcement remains inconsistent. The highest number of respondents identified policy enforcement as the weakest in approval workflows (20%), followed by expense capture (18%) and reimbursement (18%), indicating breakdowns at multiple stages. To address this, leading organizations are designing systems for "silent running," explained d'Arcy, meaning compliance operates seamlessly in the background. The goal is to monitor risk continuously while minimizing disruption to employees. "The objective is to make processes easy so employees can focus on their work while still enabling the organization to remain compliant," said d'Arcy.

## Integrating Payments In The T&E Ecosystem

Payments are emerging as a critical integration layer within the broader T&E ecosystem. While 74% of organizations report satisfaction with payment platform integration, satisfaction drops to 66% for virtual card integration — highlighting both progress and untapped potential.

Virtual cards, in particular, offer a powerful mechanism for embedding control directly at the point of spend. They may enable organizations to reduce out-of-pocket expenses for employees, improve auditability and enforce policy in real time. "Virtual cards allow companies to control spend at the moment it happens — not after the fact in an expense report," says Fredericks.

As T&E systems continue to evolve, deeper integration between payments and expense platforms is expected to become a key differentiator, helping organizations move from fragmented processes to fully connected, intelligent ecosystems.

SECTION II

# Glimpsing A Future Of Low-Friction Travel And Expense

## There's been a decisive shift from static, retrospective reporting to real-time, intelligent systems.

What was once a backward-looking function focused on reconciliation and compliance is becoming a forward-looking capability that enables continuous decision-making.

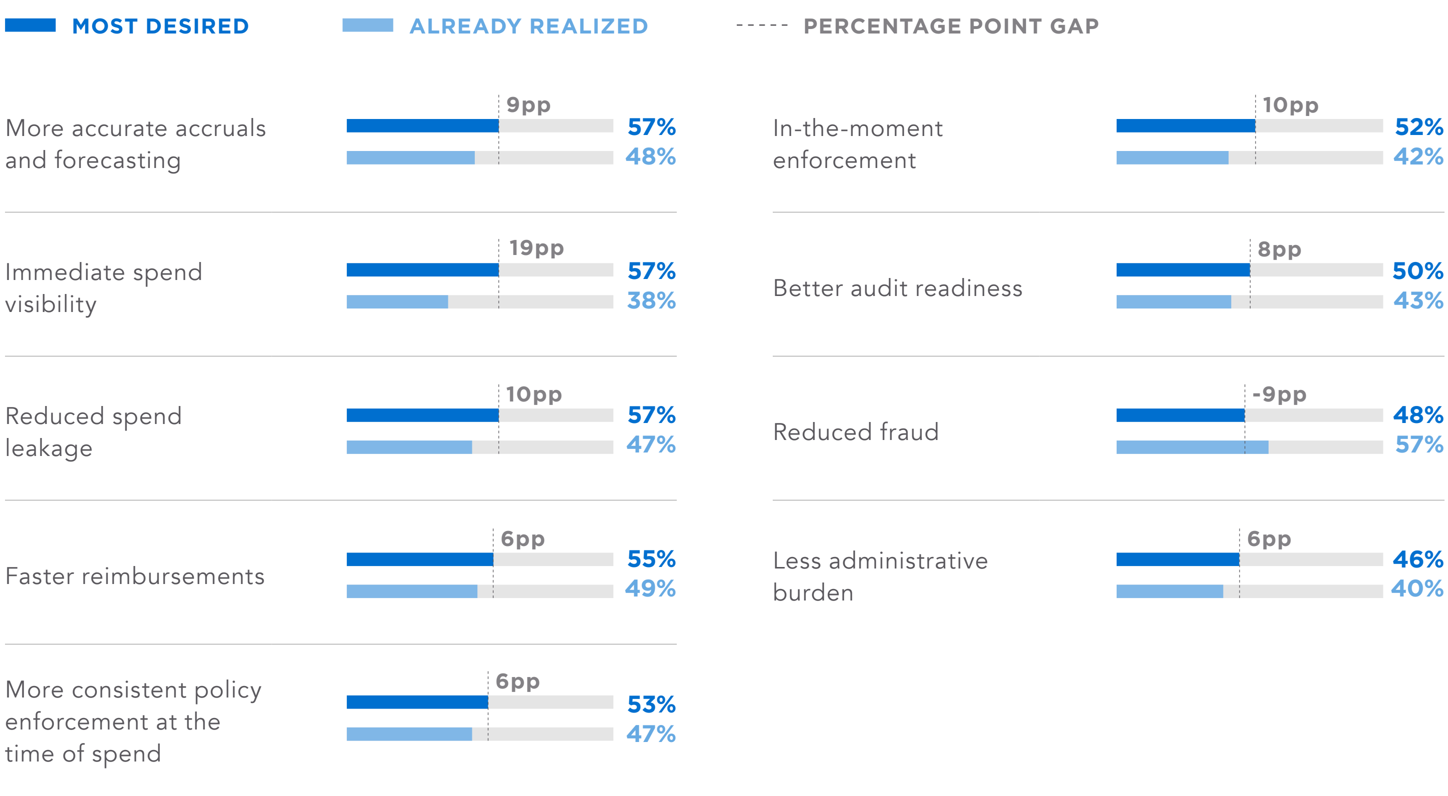
Today, 74% of surveyed executives report access to real-time data, and 73% say that data supports more active, in-the-moment decisions. This transition marks a foundational change: T&E is no longer just about tracking spend, but the potential to shape it as it happens.

The early benefits are already evident. Surveyed executives report reductions in fraud (57%) and faster reimbursement cycles (49%), demonstrating the immediate operational value of timely data.

However, the broader promise of real-time information remains only partially fulfilled. The largest gaps between expectation and reality lie in achieving immediate visibility into spending, in-the-moment enforcement and reduced spend leakage — suggesting that while many systems deliver faster data, faster actions don't always follow. "If you're operating in a fragmented ecosystem, marrying up your travel, accounting and ERP data can be impossible — even if you have access to real-time data," says Fredericks. Integration, once again, emerges as the critical enabler.

FIGURE 3.

## The Most Desired Benefits Of Real-Time Data And Expense Solutions




*Respondents could select all that applied from the nine choices above.*

Value is unlocked only when insight is embedded into workflows and decision processes. Real-time data enables continuous monitoring of spend, dynamic policy enforcement, early detection of anomalies and more informed travel decisions.

"Automation and integration allow us to monitor travel in real time, assess risk and trigger the right actions before an issue arises," says d'Arcy. These capabilities also enhance the employee experience, enabling faster processes and personalized recommendations.

## From Efficiency To AI-Based Intelligence

Automation is now central to this transformation. Nearly 7 in 10 organizations (68%) agree that their T&E systems are driven by automation, with artificial intelligence already embedded in key processes such as expense capture (44%), approvals (44%) and analytics (42%). Looking ahead, 60% of organizations identify AI implementation as a top priority, underscoring its strategic importance.

AI is accelerating the transition from efficiency to intelligence. "AI can help interpret documents, process data and move workflows forward far more efficiently than traditional systems," says d'Arcy. This capability is particularly valuable in handling unstructured data and reducing manual intervention, enabling faster, more accurate processing across the T&E life cycle.

As with real-time data, a gap remains between aspiration and execution. While 70% of organizations seek faster reimbursements, only 30% report achieving them — a striking 40-point differential. Similar disparities exist in audit readiness and the ability to deliver personalized policies. These shortfalls often stem from incomplete integration and inconsistent data quality, which limit the effectiveness of even the most advanced tools.

Despite significant technological progress, manual processes remain deeply embedded in T&E operations. Two-thirds of organizations (66%) still rely on manager approvals, introducing delays and variability into workflows. "Many organizations have simply layered modern tools on top of old workflows — so the underlying inefficiencies remain," says Fredericks.

## Heading Toward Autonomous T&E Ecosystems

Looking ahead, the trajectory is clear: T&E systems are evolving toward intelligent, self-regulating ecosystems powered by real-time data, predictive analytics and automated execution. More than half of surveyed executives (58%) identify AI-powered automation as one of the most influential forces shaping the future of T&E — outpacing even economic pressures and employee expectations.

Respondents report that today's AI applications are already delivering tangible value, including improved compliance, enhanced employee satisfaction and lower T&E costs. However, as Fredericks points out: "Today's AI use cases are valuable, but they'll quickly become table stakes."

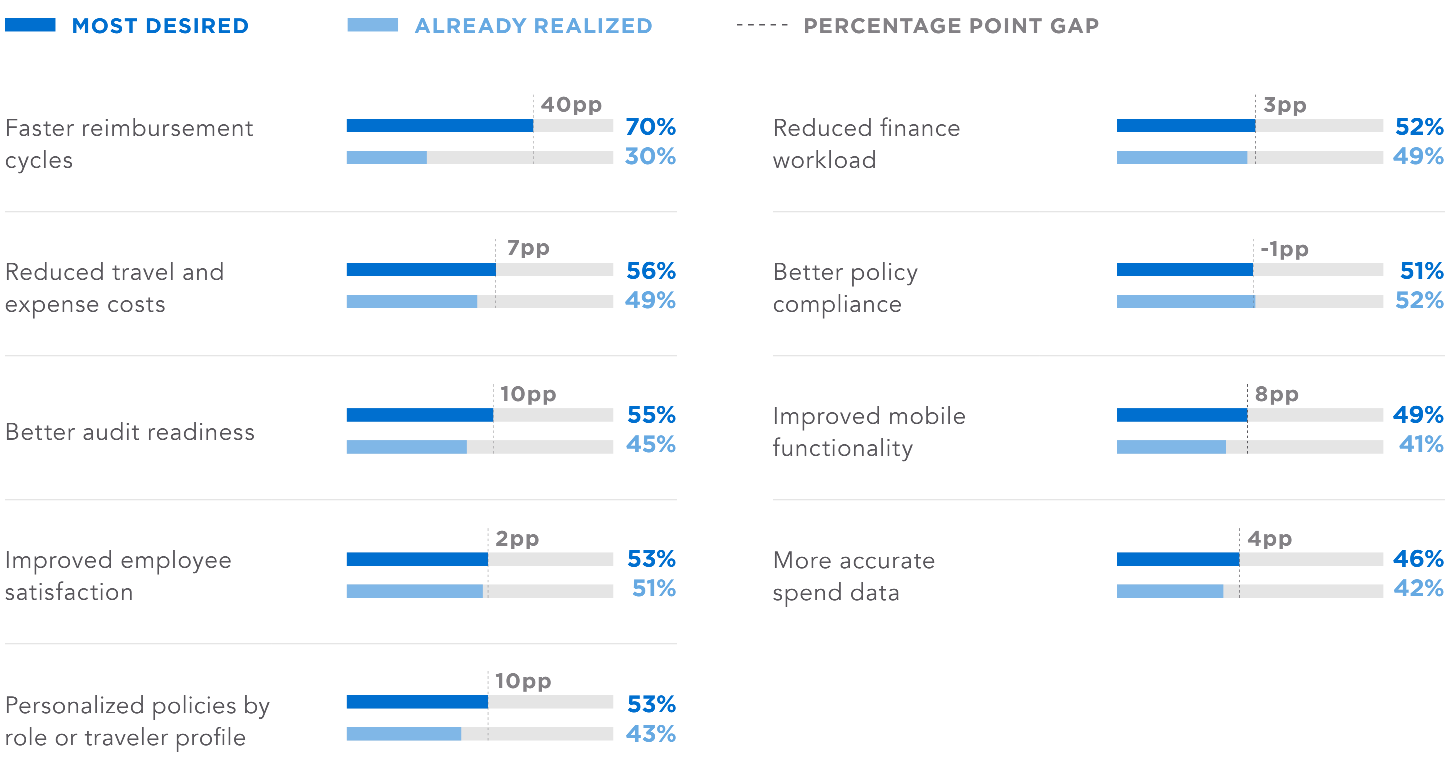
The next frontier is agentic AI — systems capable of acting autonomously on behalf of users. These technologies represent a step change in capability, moving from rules-based automation to autonomous action. "AI should be able to read your calendar and emails, recognize that you need to travel and proactively book the trip," says Fredericks. Beyond booking, agentic systems can capture and categorize expenses, perform real-time compliance checks and resolve exceptions with minimal human input.

Critically, agentic AI can interpret unstructured data — such as emails, policies and custom fields — in ways that traditional systems cannot. This could unlock a new level of flexibility and intelligence, enabling T&E processes to adapt dynamically to context. Over time, these capabilities will make T&E less of a separate process, embedding it directly into everyday tools and workflows, Fredericks predicts. "Travel software will do the important work in the background, and we'll see further integrations inside tools like Teams or Slack," he says.

Realizing this vision requires more than adopting new technologies. It demands sustained investment in data infrastructure, integration and governance. "Organizations shouldn't expect immediate cost savings. AI can help deliver value, but only after meaningful investment in infrastructure and integration," says d'Arcy.

FIGURE 4.

## The Most Desired Benefits Of AI-Powered Automation




*Respondents could select all that applied from the nine choices above.*

SECTION III

# Supporting The Workforce With T&E Technology

## Employee experience has emerged as a critical — yet consistently overlooked — dimension of T&E management.

Eight out of 10 executives surveyed recognize that T&E plays an integral role in shaping the overall employee experience. At the same time, more than two-thirds (68%) also believe the way policies impact employees is underestimated and only 32% of organizations actively prioritize employee experience.

This gap between awareness and action highlights a persistent imbalance: Companies acknowledge the importance of experience but continue to design systems primarily around control and compliance rather than usability and satisfaction.

For frequent travelers, the consequences can be tangible, reflected in fragmented booking processes, slow reimbursements and cumbersome reporting requirements. These inefficiencies not only reduce productivity but also erode satisfaction and engagement. More than half of surveyed executives (51%) report that expense policies create friction, while 59% believe that efforts to improve compliance frequently come at the expense of employee experience. “If the environment is disjointed, employees are the ones who suffer — repeating tasks, waiting for reimbursements and navigating unnecessary complexity,” says Fredericks.

This stands in contrast to employee expectations, which are increasingly shaped by consumer-grade digital experiences. Surveyed executives report that employees place the highest value on fast reimbursements (81%), real-time visibility into spend and reimbursement (80%) and user-friendly tools (80%).

“Better data and smarter systems don’t just help finance, they directly improve the traveler experience,” says Fredericks. In this context, investments in T&E technology are strategic decisions that shape how organizations support their workforce.

### Eliminating The Expense Report With Virtual Cards

By reducing manual inputs and eliminating redundant steps, automation may free up time so people can do the work they were hired to do. This is particularly important given that 79% of executives believe employees want to spend less time filing expense reports. The long-standing pain point of expense reporting is increasingly seen as unnecessary in a world where data can be captured and processed automatically.

One promising development in this space is the rise of virtual cards. These tools allow organizations to issue pre-funded, purpose-specific payment methods that can be used through digital wallets, online or to pay vendors directly for travel-related expenses such as meals, lodging and transportation. By embedding policy controls directly into the payment mechanism, virtual cards eliminate the need for employees to pay out of pocket and seek reimbursement later. “We’re approaching a point where the expense report practically manages itself,” says Fredericks.

FIGURE 5.

## What Companies Say Their Employees Value Most In T&E Management Systems

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 81% | Fast processing and reimbursement | 78% | Mobile tools |
| 80% | Real-time view of spend and reimbursement | 77% | Expense claims streamlined into one statement |
| 80% | User-friendly tools | 74% | Personalized travel experiences |
| 79% | Reducing time spent on expenses | 74% | Travel insurance and other benefits |
| 79% | Transparency around policies and spending limits | 74% | Built-in spending control and preferred vendors |
| 79% | Fraud mitigation | 73% | Global reach and reconciliation |
| 78% | Travel spending limits | 67% | Traveler work-life balance |

*Includes respondents who answered "important" and "extremely important."*

Virtual cards can improve the employee experience in several key ways: They may remove financial burden, simplify expense tracking and enable real-time policy compliance without additional effort from the user. However, despite their potential, adoption remains limited. Only 32% of organizations have integrated virtual cards into their T&E platforms, indicating a significant opportunity for further transformation.

## Invisible, Employee-Centric T&E

Leading organizations are beginning to rethink T&E through the lens of employee experience, adopting design principles more commonly associated with consumer technology. This means including features that are important for employees, like mobile interfaces that allow employees to manage travel and expenses on the go, transparent and flexible policies that reduce ambiguity and personalized travel options that reflect individual preferences.

These shifts align with broader trends in digital experience design, where ease of use, speed and personalization are no longer differentiators but expectations.

Advances in real-time data, automation and embedded payments are converging to create systems that anticipate needs, execute tasks autonomously and operate in the background of everyday workflows. In this model, employees no longer manage their expenses; the system does.

# Conclusion

## The future of T&E will be defined by integration, AI-powered intelligence and invisibility.

Organizations can position themselves for success by taking a holistic approach — connecting systems, unifying data and embedding AI across the entire life cycle.

"Travel is never the first-order business problem — it's always part of another business process," says Fredericks.

While most organizations still treat T&E as a cost center, a growing number are beginning to elevate it into a strategic advantage. When T&E data is integrated with broader enterprise systems — such as CRM, HR and ERP platforms — it becomes possible to link travel activity directly to business outcomes.

"With the right data, T&E leaders can go to the C-suite and show exactly where travel spend is driving revenue," says Fredericks. For example, connecting travel data to sales pipelines enables organizations to assess the impact of client visits on deal conversion. Similarly, linking travel to operational data can improve decision-making around site visits, supplier management and workforce deployment, notes Fredericks. As a result, the role of T&E leader has the potential to expand from policy enforcer to strategic adviser.

Firms that fail to act could find themselves at a competitive disadvantage. "If you maintain a clunky, fragmented process, you're not going to realize the operational efficiency or employee experience benefits that modern technology enables," d'Arcy points out.

**To remain competitive, executives should focus on three priorities:**

1. **Integrate the ecosystem:** Break down silos across booking, payments and expense systems to enable real-time visibility and control.
2. **Scale automation and AI:** Move beyond basic automation to create intelligent workflows that reduce manual intervention and improve outcomes.
3. **Reimagine the employee experience:** Design T&E systems that match consumer-grade expectations while embedding compliance seamlessly.

Organizations that act now can transform T&E from a source of friction into a driver of efficiency, insight and competitive advantage.

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# Methodology

The survey, The Future of T&E: Integration, Automation and Efficiency, was commissioned by American Express and conducted by Forbes Insights in February and March 2026 among a sample of 500 U.S.-based business leaders across the following sectors: technology & software, financial services, manufacturing & industrial chemicals, healthcare & pharmaceuticals, retail, automotive, construction, consulting & accounting, hospitality & travel, e-commerce, energy, oil & gas, entertainment & events, food & beverage, telecom, publishing & media, and nonprofit. Fifty percent of respondents were C-suite executives. All respondents represent organizations with at least $300 million in annual revenue, and 58% are from organizations with an annual revenue exceeding $1 billion. The interviews were conducted online, and results from the full survey have a margin of error of plus or minus 5 percentage points.