

## **How to reduce airline travel – interview with Anja Leist, Associate Professor of Public Health and Aging at FHSE.**

**Thank you so much for honouring this interview, my name is Moses a student communications assistant working with Laurent Betry at the University of Luxembourg. Can you please introduce yourself and tell us a bit about you?**

Sure, my name is Anja Leist. I am an associate professor in public health and ageing here at the faculty of humanities, social sciences and educational sciences and I'm also holder of an ERC grant on cognitive aging with a focus on inequalities and risk reduction.

**Can you give us a brief background on why Sustainability issues are important to you and which ones are your basic priorities?**

I'm following the reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the carbon emissions projections over the next decades, and the associated global warming and extreme weather events that we will have, the floods, fires, droughts, the extreme heat waves. This is already having an impact on population health today, which is my research domain, and it is also already creating increasing inequalities, that is, unfair life opportunities that people have around the globe, another of my research interests. And the impact of climate change on health and inequalities will only get stronger over the next decades. So, for me it's quite natural to be interested in these predictions. Regarding my priorities, I'm a Rotary member and when we support a good cause we usually adopt an approach of effective altruism. So, what measure is most effective is something that is guiding us in our actions, and this question of effectiveness also guides me when I think about sustainability.

I was trying to understand what measures would have the most impact to reduce my individual carbon footprint. I'm really not advocating the individual approach, since systemic change is so much more effective. Still, I wanted to contribute and calculated my carbon footprint. Going to work by train instead of by car I can save around 1 ton a year and I'm doing that, but if I save on air travel, I can reduce my footprint by 3 - 5 tons a year, which is why I decided to fly less.

**It's nice that your priorities are what creates the most impact and that's why our readers would like to know the journey of the process to reduce air travel.**

The first thing was to look at the emissions per flight and you can have quite detailed emissions calculation on Google flights, depending on the distance, number of stops, type of aircraft etc. So, I was looking at the conferences I usually attend and their cost for value, cost being the carbon emissions, and decided which conferences to prioritise in the future.

**How did you make the switch and how did you make it work? What were the procedures that you took to make the switch from always going by flight and using trains and other alternatives?**

It helped to put these ideas down in written, as one of the environmental measures listed in my research group manual. The manual has a set of resources relevant for the careers of doctoral and postdoctoral researchers in my team and lays out expectations on the team members, and also on me as the PI, for example, we publish open science and so on. I also wanted to have a section on social and environmental responsibility, so we came up with a few measures on how to reduce impact of our travels. Air travel is still necessary in the team, so we do an assessment once a year and calculate the carbon emissions from the flights in the team in that year, and I compensate these with private funds through atmosfair, which invests in climate protection measures.

**What are the challenges that you faced in these decisions and how has it affected you in your professional and private life?**

The challenges were that not everybody is similarly kind of climate worried I will say. In the institution it would be great if there was support for example with a sustainability policy and consider sustainability issues in our daily routines. This would be so much more effective than relying on individual choices. So, I hope there will soon be a policy to support this.

**What are the best alternatives to air travel based on your personal experience?**

Best alternative in my view is the train, and we use the train a lot for the European meetings and conferences. We do a lot of Zoom and Teams meetings for example for paper collaborations and virtual presentations; it's usually only for the big projects and conferences that we need to travel by plane.

**If airplanes must be used, what other projects do you think should be included for such a trip. do you advice scheduling multiple trips like compressing your schedule for Inter-continental trips. how do you go about it?**

For the inter-continental flights, I usually try to get as much out of the trip as possible. It is small things like attending the full conference or schedule meetings with collaborators.

**Do you think the government, the private and the public organisations should incentivise alternative corporate travels and if yes why?**

As discussed earlier I said that I would not advocate the concept of an individual carbon footprint. Still, the individual footprint shows that I can only save a few tons per year as an individual by living sustainably, but organisations and the government can do the switch and save hundreds and thousands of tons per year. And here at UL we even have the expertise with the photovoltaics laboratory in-house and could help save a lot of emissions. With a sustainability policy we could implement measures in every domain, so that overall there is much more impact than by acting individually.

**Finally what advice would you give to those who are interested in travelling sustainably and how to limit their air travels?**

My first advice is to ask for support from the institution to act more sustainably. I see that in some universities there are already many climate action measures in place. As a University we are a hub of knowledge and I would like us to lead by example, so other organisations can follow the good example set by the University. And if you need to travel by airplane then you go to Google flights or another calculator and get the emissions and try to reduce the emissions as far as possible, and what I find is the best solution at this time is to offset the remaining carbon emissions, although it's not perfect.

**I think if there is something else that I did not ask that you feel is important to this discussion you can shed more light on?**

I wanted to say we have this discussion in the team that in some cases air travel is the only possible means of travel. We have many international students and employees at the University, and if they want to see their families they need to go by airplane. Plus, as researchers I haven't found a replacement for in-person conferences; the energy you have coming back from a conference, the synergies coming from discussing with other experts, and the networking is too important to really abstain from it. Ideally, we would have means to save emissions in other parts of our daily routines. So many small sustainability measures adding up to reduce our emissions considerably, and then we can have less climate guilt when we do our jobs as researchers.