Workforce Frontiers: Organizational Perspectives on Transitioning Remote Workers to Digital Nomads

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The COVID-19 pandemic has permanently altered the nature and usage of ‘remote work,’ where remote work is defined as work tasks completed outside a traditional office. Even organizations such as Microsoft, which were once opposed to remote work, had to embrace this alternative. In a post-pandemic world, some organizations may revert to pre-pandemic operations and recall their workers into physical offices. In contrast, others may leverage the opportunities afforded by a permanently remote workforce (or portion of their workforce), such as increased creativity and innovation, and global time zone coverage. But these opportunities can only be actualized if organizations procure the needed talent.

Organizations may find new sources of talent in an emerging population of remote workers who identify as digital nomads, individuals who use information and communication technology (ICT) to work beyond the constraint of location (Everson et al., 2021). While location-independent workers have long existed (e.g., writers, truck drivers), digital nomads are distinct in their intense reliance on ICTs to complete work tasks, and unlike peripatetic workers (e.g., military personnel), travel is not mandatory but part of the lifestyle choice. Recent innovations, such as co-working spaces, and ubiquitous global communication networks, have empowered this lifestyle, making it plausible, viable, and desired. This topic is particularly salient for IS researchers, because Everson et al. (2021, np) note that as digital nomads “rely on digital tools and the internet in their work, it’s not surprising that most of them are in high-demand, tech-oriented occupations.”

Before organizations fully embrace this workforce trend, they must weigh the benefits against the potential downsides of utilizing digital nomads, such as decreased mental health, diminished professional identity, and organizational culture clash (cf. Hensellek & Puchala, 2021). We explore the question - will well-established workforce theories anchored in traditional organizations and careers (e.g., performance, satisfaction, and identity) hold for digital nomads, and if so, what are the new context-specific theories? We propose answering these questions through an inductive, qualitative, theory-building study of remote workers. We expect our findings to guide organizations in the recruitment and retention of high-demand, tech-oriented talent.

References