5-15-2019

ISSUES IN DIGITAL NOMAD-CORPORATE WORK: AN INSTITUTIONAL THEORY PERSPECTIVE

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ISSUES IN DIGITAL NOMAD-CORPORATE WORK: AN INSTITUTIONAL THEORY PERSPECTIVE

Research paper

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Abstract

Digital nomads are individuals who use information and communication technologies (ICT) to work from remote locations while travelling for lifestyle reasons. A new type of digital nomad-corporate work relation emerges from the increasing number of digital nomads contracted to conduct work for corporations. However, the institutional logics – the socially-constructed patterns, beliefs, values and rules that provide meaning to traditional corporates and the often-millennial digital nomads – are substantially different between digital nomadism and corporate environments. The purpose of this paper is to understand what different institutional logics exist, which issues between digital nomads and corporates result from those differences, and how they are mitigated. These questions are answered based on an empirical study of digital nomads and corporate workers informed by institutional theory. The analysis of empirical findings allows us to propose a framework that explains how these conflicting institutional logics lead to issues and outlines mitigation methods employed to address them. The paper informs current and future digital nomads and corporate work relations by providing a better understanding of issues that occur and mitigation methods they may employ to resolve them.

Keywords: digital nomadism, digital nomads, corporations, institutional theory, institutional logics, digital work, issues, mitigation.

1 Introduction

Digital nomads are individuals who perform their work through digital means in combination with nomadic, mobile living (Schlagwein 2018). They are often individuals working in the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and related fields, who leverage ICT tools to achieve a work lifestyle that is distinctly different to the traditional nine to five corporate job. Common work includes technical jobs such as coding to more creative jobs such as design (e.g. Adobe Photoshop). Characterised by the media and self-run blogs, digital nomads appear to be young professionals who seek an alternate work lifestyle. Travelling is a defining trait of digital nomads, who engage with mobile technologies such as Wi-Fi (Wireless Fidelity) and the internet to remotely work from holiday locations such as Bali. This form of work and travelling is different from travelling for work (e.g. a consultant travelling to an overseas client). The digital nomad lifestyle is said to create a holistic sense of freedom (Reichenberger 2017) while involving less support from colleagues and higher stress levels compared to traditional corporate jobs (Haking 2018). With the continual improvement of ICT, a new ICT-enabled mobile work lifestyle is emerging – embraced predominantly by young professionals, labelled “nomads” (Richards 2015).
While some initial research on digital nomadism is available (e.g., Schlagwein 2018, Schlagwein 2017, Reichenberger 2017), we know little about how digital nomads work with corporates. There will be an increasing number of digital nomads and corporates working together in the future which is reflected by the very bold claim that there will be “1 billion digital nomads by 2035” (Levels 2015). A massive increase in digital nomadism is shown by the traffic on Nomad List (i.e. a website dedicated to determining the best locations for digital nomads) which amounts to 500,000 to 1,000,000 unique user visits each month (Nomad List 2018). Furthermore, 27% of the US workforce expressed interest in becoming a digital nomad within 3 years in the MBO Partners State of Independence research brief (MBO partners, 2018). Organisations are increasingly working with digital nomads (and other skilled remote freelancers) as they are generally cheaper than hiring a full-time staffer (Frey 2013). Additionally, organisations are engaging digital nomads as part of their project work (which is becoming prevalent in practice) that require highly specialized types of knowledge. Digital nomads are often millennials, who will comprise 75% of the US workforce by 2025 (Deloitte 2014). The changing worker demographics cause new challenges organisations will have to face as digital nomads become a part of their workforce. As a result, a new type of nomad-corporate work relations emerges that are unresearched and poorly understood. Of importance appears to be the different institutional logics (Thornton et al. 2015) – the socially-constructed patterns, beliefs, values and rules that provide meaning and enable shared experiences – that characterize digital nomadism vs. traditional corporate cultures. Consequently, when engaging digital nomads to perform work, corporate clients may face conflicting institutional logics which is concerning for work performance and their mutual relations. This new phenomenon of conflicting institutional logics between corporates and digital nomads is of increasing practical relevance for organisations and of interest to IS researchers seeking to understand new forms of working that is different to well-studied research areas such as virtual work.

The purpose of the research presented in this paper was to understand the (i) different institutional logics between digital nomads and their corporate clients, (ii) the resulting issues and (iii) how these issues are address (so to make these different logics work effectively together). We therefore ask the following research questions: What are the differences between institutional logics of digital nomadism vs. corporate cultures? What issues exist between digital nomads and corporates they are working for? And: How do digital nomads and corporates mitigate issues between them?

To answer these questions, the study draws on institutional theory, in particular the institutional logics perspective (ILP) as the theoretical lens (Thornton et al. 2015). We used this lens to analysis the root causes (in logics) and the issues occurring in work relations between the digital nomads and their corporate client. We conducted 18 semi-structured interviews comprised of twelve digital nomads and six corporate employees to better understand logics, issues and mitigation strategies. The interpretation of the findings led to the development of a preliminary theoretical framework, which will be discussed later in this paper as its central contribution.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Related research domains

Research literature on digital nomadism has been described as “missing” (Müller 2016). The little work that exists has primarily focused on either the digital nomad lifestyle (Haking 2018; Reichenberger 2017), relation to freelancing marketplaces (Sutherland and Jarrahi 2017) and corporate design principles to integrate digital nomads into the workforce (Leitner 2016). There are more studies available on related phenomena such as on freelancers and (solo-)entrepreneurs.

The literature has pointed out similarities and differences of digital nomad lifestyles and those of freelancers and solo-entrepreneurs. Similarities lay in the level of autonomy and the usage of ICT for remote work (Messenger and Gschwind 2016). The key difference is the degree of spatial freedom (Reichenberger 2017). In relation to this difference, the motivation behind adopting the digital nomadic lifestyle is to achieve professional freedom (i.e. motivation to seek their own work-related
tasks), spatial freedom (i.e. motivation to work in a variety of locations to foster learning) and personal freedom (i.e. seeking higher levels of productivity, creativity and self-development) (Reichenberger 2017). Descriptions of digital nomads represent them as mainly “millenials” (Llyod 2018), the “generation Y” born in the early 1980s till the early 2000s (Nielsen 2014). The motivation to seek a digital nomadic lifestyle is especially present in millennials because they have desire to steer the direction of their work as opposed to having corporates determine their pathway (Frey 2013). As a consequence of working outside the corporate world, reports suggest the digital nomad lifestyle may involve less support from colleagues, less security and high stress levels (Haking 2018).

The literature has linked the emergence of digital nomadism to the increasing prevalence of electronic marketplaces such as Upwork. This is because many freelancer marketplaces explicitly advertise their service as enabling users’ adoption of mobile lifestyle and becoming digital nomads (Schmidt 2017). As digital nomads travel to new cities and countries, the workstyle inherently includes uncertainty in work availability and living conditions (Sutherland and Jarrahi 2017). Freelance marketplaces ensure continual access to potential clients for digital nomads as they travel abroad (Brown 2009). Gig economy services such as Airbnb provide digital nomads with access to reasonably priced short to mid-term accommodation in convenient locations which is sometimes preferable to hotels as they are restricted to local zoning requirements (Zervas et al. 2017).

There is some work in the literature on corporate design principles to ease the integration of digital nomads to the workforce. This integration involves aspects of corporate culture, career planning, governance, performance measurement and tools (i.e. travel, work and communication tools) (Leitner 2016). For example, an organisations governance can incorporate a rotational program where digital nomad can move across multiple sites in the world to fulfil their desire of travelling to attain freedom (Leitner 2016). While some of the writings assume issues between digital nomad values, norms and logics in relation to the corporate world, there is no research on this topic.

Values important for similar non-conventional workers such as freelancers have been studied as they are well known alternative work arrangements understood by those who hire them (Katz and Krueger 2016). Reputation in the gig economy is vital for freelancers as it is used as a trust-enabler to gain work (Gandini 2016; De Stefano 2015; Hong and Pavlou 2013). Autonomy is an enabler of satisfaction for freelancers and solo entrepreneurs (Cueto and Pruneda 2017; Hytti et al. 2013; Lange 2012) Furthermore, freelancer’s need to be continually available for work to maintain good relations with clients (Gold and Mustafa 2013). The importance of effective communication has been raised for both companies and their teleworkers in order to avoid misunderstandings and the breaking of trust in telecommuting (Laine 2017).Related studies on millennials which is the primary demographic of digital nomads highlight that the need for challenge, personal growth and making a positive impact as important factors behind their purpose in work (Holt, Marques and Way, 2012). (Holt, Marques, & Way, 2012)

Similarly, the issues non-conventional workers face has also been studied. Teleworkers face the challenge of reduced social support and interaction with their colleagues due to working in different physical locations (Sardeshmukh et al. 2012). Freelancers experience the blurring of work life boundaries due to the continual connection to MCTs (Mobile communication technologies) (Gold and Mustafa 2013; Sayah 2013; Dempsey and Sanders 2010). The lacking performance of teleworkers by organisations has also been raised (Vartiainen and Hyrkkänen 2010). Issues of low payments and unstable job security are experienced by gig workers when their client does not pay enough or provide more work (Simula 2013; Deng and Joshi 2013).

Furthermore, mitigation methods for issues in non-conventional work arrangements has also been studied. Effective communication beforehand is a mitigation method employed by teleworkers which includes determining availability for subsequent face-to-face meetings, expectations and progress on work (Greer and Payne 2014). To minimise issues, a freelancer should aim to transition from a ‘technician’ role to a ‘professional’ role by upskilling and increasing their expertise (Tremblay and Genin 2010). To overcome the problems of self-employment, a freelancer should utilise strategies such as information gathering, seeking advice and seeking social support (Patzelt and Shepherd 2011).
2.2 The Institutional Logics Perspective (ILP)

ILP is a framework for analysing the interrelationships between individuals, institutions, and organisations in society (Thornton et al. 2015). The framework is comprised of two main concepts: institutional logics and institutional orders. Institutional logics are defined as the socially constructed patterns, beliefs, values and rules by which individuals and organisations provide meaning within their lives and experiences (Thornton et al. 2015). Institutional orders include the core institutions within society comprised of the capitalist market, the bureaucratic state, families, democracy and religion (Friedland and Alford 1991). Each institutional order has a central logic that guides its principles and provides individuals motives and an identity (e.g. Christianity/the institution of religion). The ILP was further developed to include community and profession as institutional orders and the disassociation of logics from institutional orders (i.e. different types of logics can co-exist within organisations) (Thornton et al. 2012).

An advantage of the ILP (compared to other types of theoretical approaches) as a theoretical lens is the capacity to apply the framework at multiple levels of analysis from the societal level, the industry, organisational or individual level (Friedland and Alford 1991). Other potential frameworks such as the competing values framework is more useful to analyse the values at an organization level. The ILP suits our study as it allows the analysis of the logics between a digital nomad and corporate client at an individual level, which is influenced by the logics at the organisational and industry level. Institutional logics are locally instantiated, reshaped and customised at the organisational level and derived from the institutional orders (Thornton and Ocasio 2008). Another important concept within the ILP is logic multiplicity which refers to the existence of multiple institutional logics at the organisation or individual level.

ILP has been used as the theoretical lens in IS literature, contributing to conceptual understanding of a range of phenomena (Schmidt et al., 2016; Besharov and Smith, 2014; Reay and Hinings, 2009; Currie and Guah, 2007). ILP has been used to explain how past institutional logics can conflict with new ones through the changing organisational fields of healthcare from private sector ethos in the 1970s to patient centred ethos in the 90s (Currie and Guah 2007).

Our understanding of the relation between conflict and institutional logics has been extended through the identification of two critical dimensions for logic multiplicity at the organisational field level; logic compatibility (i.e. the level of consistent organisational actions from multiple logics) and logic centrality (i.e. the extent to which these logics appear in features that are central to organisation functioning) (Besharov and Smith 2014). Conflict occurs when there is a lack of logic compatibility and centrality. Our understanding of conflicting institutional logics was further extended by Berente and Yoo (2012) proposed framework that identifies the four dimensions of an institutional logic. According to that study, the four dimensions are Principle (the principle behind the logic), Assumption (i.e. cause and effect of the logic), Identity (i.e. identity of actors when a logic is being used) and Domain (i.e. time and place the institutional logics is applied). Furthermore, Pache and Santos (2013) identified that poor adherence levels to institutional logics will result in logic defiance or ignorance which potentially lead to conflict.

In this paper, we are using ILP as the theoretical lens to understand the issues between digital nomads and their corporate client because of the ability to analyse logics at the individual level and the previous usage in IS literature to understand emerging issues. In particular, we use the ILP framing to ask (and answer): What are the differences between institutional logics of digital nomadism vs. corporate cultures? What issues exist between digital nomads and corporates they are working for? And: How do digital nomads and corporates mitigate issues between them? To answer these questions empirically (rather than purely conceptually), we engaged in field research, which is explained next.
3 Research Method

We adopted an interpretivist epistemological approach but have organized the coding of the data according to grounded theory standards. The interpretivist paradigm assumes that “social reality exists as part of the human experience and is socially constructed” (Cecez-Kecmanovic and Kennan, 2013, p. 121). As a result, understanding reality and specific work or life situations are simultaneously subjective and inter-subjective interpretations (Cecez-Kecmanovic and Kennan 2013). The interpretivist paradigm suits our study because we aim to develop an interpretive understanding of the complex social phenomena of digital nomadism through the rich descriptions of work practices and issues emerging when corporates hire digital nomads (Klein and Myers 1999; Sofaer 1999).

To answer our research questions, we conducted field interviews with digital nomads and corporate clients that have experiences in working with digital nomads. Digital nomads were selected based on Schlagwein (2018)’s definition of digital nomads from coworking spaces where they typically work (Spinuzzi 2012). 12 digital nomads were interviewed in co-working spaces in Sydney, Australia and Bali, Indonesia. In Sydney, this was primarily from the Sydney Startup Hub which brings together start-ups, accelerators and investors to cultivate diversity within the NSW start-up community (NSW Government 2018). From there, subsequent digital nomad interviewees were selected based on relationships we established from the first interviewee and leveraging our personal network. For the second field study in Bali, three coworking spaces were visited – Hubud, Dojo and Outpost, well known amongst digital nomads (Freelancer 2018). We also interviewed 6 corporate clients initially sourced from our personal and University networks and latter through referrals from the earlier interviewees. They were selected based on their experiences in engaging remote workers (e.g. digital nomads, freelancers). We selected corporate clients working or having worked in companies with more than 250 staff. The companies ranged from the financial to technology industry. Our interviews focused on the nature of work relationships between digital nomads and corporate clients and the underlying institutional logics.

Semi-structured interviewing was chosen as the primary data collection technique. This is because it is the most suitable interviewing format for our interpretivist study (Gubrium and Holstein 2002). Compared to structured interviews, semi-structured interviews make better use of knowledge-producing discussion as it allows follow-up questions on topics important to the interviewee (Brinkmann 2014). Compared to an unstructured interview, the interviewer has more control over the conversation to ensure it continues to relate to the research objective and questions (Brinkmann 2014). As such, semi-structured interviews allowed us to gain descriptions of the ‘lifeworld’ of the interviewees which was important to understand their meanings and interpretation of work relationships and situations (Brinkman and Kvale 2015). We used different interview guide for digital nomads and for corporate clients, which both were adapted to each participant’s unique situation (Turner III 2010).

Data analysis started early on allowing the improvement of the interview guide based on the data analysis of preceding interviews. Data analysis use software-supported coding. All interviews were transcribed through the assistance of an online software named Spext. Quality of the transcriptions from Spext differed based on contextual factors (e.g. music in background) where the recording took place, hence manual editing of every transcription was required. The final transcriptions were then imported into NVivo - a qualitative data analysis software. Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis following Corley and Gioia (2004). First, open coding was conducted to identify all relevant and interesting ideas in the data. Open codes were then compared and rationalised, so that similar and duplicate codes were eliminated. This resulted in the total of 28 open codes. This was followed by further analysis to group the open codes into higher level codes which became the 1st order concepts. The theoretical lens of institutional logics was also used during thematic analysis to identify the beliefs, values and rules within the data. This data analysis process was iterative which allowed revisions of open codes and their aggregation into 1st order concepts. Finally, 1st order concepts were then grouped into 2nd order themes or aggregate dimensions (Corley and Gioia 2004).
4 Empirical Findings

4.1 Different Values/Norms/Logics in Digital Nomad-Corporate Work

The shared experience of perpetual travelling amongst most digital nomads has resulted in a common set of values. This level of travelling significantly exposes digital nomads to different contexts comprised of different environments, people and workstyles. The variance in context encourages digital nomads to become more accepting of differences which results in them highly valuing diversity. John, a recent corporate worker turned digital nomad said “you need to have a healthy curiosity [...] interested and curious about other people to be able to build a broad understanding of the wider world [...] the nomadic lifestyle is very varied, which is good for exposing you to new and different things which might be beneficial for you elsewhere in your role”. Valuing diversity is especially important for digital nomads working in different cultures which is demonstrated by respecting local culture and also sometimes by adapting to it. In extreme cases, the belief that certain cultures are superior and the associated negative attitudes (e.g. being disrespectful to local staff) have repercussions such as being removed from coworking spaces (Harry, a founder of a coworking space in Bali).

However, sometimes these contexts are unfavourable to digital nomads arising from incompatible environments, people or workstyles. For example, a common situation for digital nomads is not knowing what comes next due to the abrupt termination or completion of short-term engagements. Hence, many digital nomads value resilience which helps to deal with unexpected situations. Richard, a digital nomad since graduating from university, stated that “you need to be resilient to focus on the task at hand and you need that resilience to be able to say when this is over, I will find something else to do”. Amy, who works for herself, stated that in extreme cases the loss of work occurs when clients choose someone else to do the work (e.g. losing due to price competition).

To mitigate these unfavourable situations, digital nomads seek to establish and maintain a strong network of clients and other digital nomads. This is because a broad network allows the digital nomad to more easily navigate across global markets and be set up with local infrastructure and work. Matthew, the founder of an online school, that helps people try new careers anywhere (e.g. digital nomadism) said “It's really important to build a network outside of your local market because at the end of the day, you meet everyone that you need to meet in University if your city is small [...] but now it's very easy for me to navigate markets very quickly because I already have contacts in different regions”. Additionally, a broad network allows a digital nomad to know who can help with certain work which is beneficial when digital nomads find themselves requiring additional expertise to complete the work successfully (Amy). Furthermore, a broad network allows digital nomads to mitigate the consequences of loss of work by supplying a steady stream of potential work opportunities. This is because a lot of work for digital nomads come through referrals and recommendations from clients who advocate the digital nomads good work (Richard).

Consequently, digital nomads highly value trust because establishing a strong basis of trust with their corporate client is often advantageous in short term engagements where they are at the mercy of the hiring organisation. For example, Sarah stated it is important to “build trust and provide assurance that you can still get the same work done over the phone or video call”. This is particularly important because the digital nomad workstyle means the client often cannot physically observe the production of work. Hence to establish a strong level of trust between the client and digital nomad, the ideal digital nomad should embody certain work values.

The first is holding yourself accountable because the comfortable ‘holiday’ environments digital nomads often work from induces temptations to engage in recreational behaviour. Digital nomads highlighted that accountability often means having to accommodate to the client’s time zone which can require “waking up at 3 o’clock in the morning” if “your client wants an 11 am meeting in Sydney”. Sarah highlighted that accountability should be maintained towards the team you work for by “hitting your deadlines, [...] sharing an update when you’re supposed to because that keeps the
trust and positive morale going between everyone and that’s what keeps the engine going”. However, the client’s inability to observe the production of work by the digital nomad has resulted in the stigma that if you’re not physically in the office you are likely to be slacking off (John, Andrew). To combat against this stigma, many digital nomads stated they would selectively work with teams that were strongly outcomes-focused instead of relying on line-of-sight management (as emphasised by many digital nomads, including John, Richard, and Benjamin).

Hence alongside team selectiveness, to eliminate this stigma digital nomads also value transparency and over-communication. The need to be upfront with work progress and over-communication is largely due to not being able to meet face-to-face and working across changing time zones due to travelling (Richard, Sarah, Benjamin). High levels of transparency and clarity on initial communication increases efficiency and eliminates confusion by reducing the need for unnecessary meetings. Interestingly, Benjamin, a digital nomad who previously worked in a large bank for 6 years, highlighted that communication with corporate clients often requires being as detailed as possible with communication, especially with global teams. Global teams mean everyone has different work hours and work styles (e.g. night owls, early risers) which increases the importance of establishing and maintaining a common communication channel. All interviewed digital nomads emphasised the importance of a strong communication channel as their unpredictable work hours require them to quickly enter forum chats and understand what was done hours ago in another time zone. All digital nomads stated the use of communication tools such as Slack (i.e. cloud-based collaboration tool) and Calendly (i.e. scheduling software) as their “bread and butter” for collaboration with clients.

The values and logics for a corporate worker varied with the set of values encompassing their respective corporate culture. However, a common set of values and beliefs were revealed amongst the corporate interviewees from their similar yet unique experiences with remote workers (e.g. digital nomads, freelancers).

The first is the importance of collaboration and communication in working with remote workers (mentioned by corporate clients Andrew and James). Many of the corporate interviewees were in leadership positions which required them to encourage open communication from everyone to ensure the inclusion of ideas. The underlining principle behind the importance of collaboration and communication is not knowing “one person that has all the answers” (Andrew). Andrew, a project manager in a large bank, stated that he employed video interviews due to preference of face-to-face communication “because you can still connect with the person and still see that they are human”. James highlighted that due to leading an agile team, the value of collaboration and communication is adhered too as part of the “agile manifesto”. He also stated the belief in having low levels of documentation whilst relying on overcommunication for knowledge transfer instead.

Many corporate workers emphasised the importance of mutual expectations with the externally hired remote worker. Michael, who was in the hiring position, stated the expectation of having “high quality both ways, I like to give and receive expert domain knowledge”. Robert, a corporate worker with vast IT experience, expressed the view that external contractors “[should] represent our visions and goals” and are hired to add value to them (i.e. the hiring company). In extreme cases, the failure to do so resulted in the termination of their work whilst in lesser cases this meant not being hired again by the company.

Whilst working with remote workers, both the corporate workers and digital nomads highly valued trust and transparency. From a management perspective, trust in the remote workers allows “everyone to go off and do their own thing and I don’t have to stand over their shoulder and watch” (Andrew). For this high level of trust to exist between the corporate client and remote worker, the remote worker should be “setting realistic expectations” and aim to “under-promise and over-deliver” as opposed to “getting in a situation where you over-promised and under-delivered” (Michael).
4.2 Issues in Digital Nomad-Corporate Work

Our empirical data reveal that digital nomad-corporate work issues largely stemmed from a misalignment of expectations and values. The motives behind the adoption of the non-traditional digital nomadic lifestyle was inherently different to big corporates that are historically designed with profits in mind (Benjamin). This issue of misaligned expectations also stems from many digital nomads having little interaction and understanding of the client’s company (e.g. internal company values and culture, ways of working). For example, lack of understanding can come from not understanding “how the politics is played within the organisation [which can result in] not seeing the situation for what it is” (Richard). This is because digital nomads “come from the outside” (Richard) and hence have little interaction and understanding with their client’s company. The lack of understanding of the differences between the corporate and digital nomadic workstyle has led to the issue of misaligned expectations.

An issue stated by the corporate workers is that digital nomad work is often low quality (Michael) and they do not have the relevant skill set to deal with corporate clients such as stakeholder management (Benjamin). Benjamin alluded that the concern of low-quality work is unlikely from experienced digital nomads because they “know how to talk to corporates ... the kind of mannerisms ... the infrastructure to work around ... [which allows them to] understand and talk to them”. Furthermore, low quality work from digital nomads can be attributed to them being in short-term engagements due to the preference for stable sources of income in a lifestyle that revolves around high levels of travel. Hence, many digital nomads desire “more work” and the inability to provide that from a hiring perspective demotivates them to provide the “high quality” work the corporate clients expect.

Another issue from the digital nomad perspective is corporates not providing them workplace flexibility. Since flexibility is a major incentive for individuals to pursue the digital nomadic lifestyle, the restriction of work flexibility is another major issue. This issue largely stemmed from corporates traditionally being accustomed to a “leadership style that demands physical presence and is very much line-of-sight management [...] and it’s not an outcomes-based culture”. This is another factor that contributes to the issue of low-quality work from digital nomads. However, large corporates are making a “big effort to show the world” they highly value flexibility amongst their employees such as “allowing people to work from home”. Since many big corporates traditionally utilise line of sight management, the inability to do so with digital nomads has often resulted in setting larger demands for the digital nomads. The issue of demanding clients has been raised by some of the digital nomad interviewees (e.g. Amy). Large demands cause missed deadlines which is another issue that occurs in digital nomad-corporate work (James). This issue is further escalated when all the interviewees stated that communication is “one of their biggest issues”. From the corporate perspective, the lack of communication from remote workers cause major delays in their pipeline. Michael stated that “communication was a problem because I think she was in Europe and because of time zones obviously everything was a day delayed - I don't know what her day to day schedule was but sometimes she would be out of contact for a few days”. From the digital nomad perspective, ambiguity on client requirements arise when you “lose body language and eye contact” which results in problems described above. This becomes more of an issue when many big corporates do not have the processes and approvals in place for them to connect with a global workforce as they “could only use Office Link which was internal” whilst digital nomads are using newer tools like Zoom (i.e. remote conferencing service available via cloud computing).

4.3 Mitigation Methods for Digital Nomad-Corporate Work Issues

The first proposed mitigation method is pre-communication occurring before the digital nomads begin work for the corporate client. The purpose of pre-communication is to understand the expectations from each other and set up quality standards such as defining what “success looks like” and asking for “MVPs [minimum viable products]” (Richard). This also includes establishing the balance between interpersonal and online interactions (e.g. video interviews), identity of major stakeholders, hierarchy,
structure and drivers of the client’s company (Richard). This pre-communication period should also include the relevant “shuffling of schedules” to increase the number of overlapped hours of work and establish an “outcomes-focused culture” so it “doesn’t matter if they are ... in Bali or in India” (Andrew). If done correctly, one corporate worker stated that this will eliminate “unnecessary meetings in the future” around issues like expectations.

However, some digital nomads have highlighted that if negotiations on the appropriate communication channels fail the digital nomad should adopt the client’s proposed communication channel. This is due to unchangeable factors such as corporates being risk adverse (e.g. Benjamin). James who worked in an agile team stated that ‘pre-communication’ took the form of a project kick-off. The project kick-off was “4-6 hours of constant communication with remote developers where I will communicate the requirements in a way that allow the developers to not only think about the project as lines of code but solving a customer problem. With that mindset, it really helps with setting expectations”.

However, to resolve issues around miscommunication, there are cases where the digital nomad should advocate the client to adopt their technology. The first is establishing a strong value proposition as from one digital nomads experience “they [i.e. the client] will generally adapt to the technology or adapt to the way you communicate” if you have this. Furthermore, to convince the client to adopt technology relies on strong trust between the digital nomad and client. One method to establish trust with the client is to show the client the available digital tools, resources and providing case studies to back its usage and efficiency. Sarah “found case studies are very effective as it provides assurance” by referring to other companies that have used the technology and benefited greatly. The adoption of communication and collaborative technology is based on a digital nomad’s understanding of which technology is most suitable given the client’s context (e.g. Slack/Skype). In the cases where a digital nomad is not knowledgeable in this area, it is paramount for them to understand and use the “right tools” to “always stay online and have that digital presence and connection with the people they work with”. However, in many cases, digital nomads rely on trust being established with the client before they start doing work.

To establish trust prior to engaging in work, digital nomads should have a strong social identity because digital nomad work can come through recommendations. Benjamin stated that by building up a strong social media profile it allows people to “understand who you are as a person, who you represent and then makes it easier for you to engage with people you’ve never met before”. This can be accomplished with strong LinkedIn profiles, personal websites/blogs as many digital nomads on popular platforms like Freelancer.com do not have a strong social presence. Establishing a strong social identity ties into the importance of networking. Many issues described above can be mitigated if the digital nomad engaged in prior networking to connect with other digital nomads that can potentially help them in the future (e.g. when they have overpromised on delivery).

However, many of the issues in digital nomad-corporate work can be solved by being selective from both the digital nomad and corporate hirer’s perspective. For digital nomads, this involves networking with organisations such as Expert360 that can “help identify where there’s a good fit regarding what you have to offer and where the demand is for your services”. This will increase the likelihood of a good cultural, skillset fit and expectations between the digital nomad and corporate client. In turn, this can reduce digital nomads being “pushy for more work” where the inability to provide more work can potentially lead the engagement to end on a “sour note” (Michael). Furthermore, the digital nomad should understand their own personal limits and avoid work opportunities they don’t have the resources for. Amy highlighted that if “I don’t feel as a sole practitioner that I have the resources to do that, [...] I don’t take it on”. From the corporate perspective, this revolves around choosing the right platform for the right work. For example, if corporates are looking “for the cheapest freelancers” to do work of “critical importance then they’re going to get disappointed” from popular platforms like Freelancer.com. Hence, it is vital for corporates to outsource project functions that are suitable for a digital nomad which is often “small, quantifiable units of work like one article or design of a page”.

Many of the digital nomads interviewed were engaged in these smaller engagements ranging from creative work (e.g. design) to technical work (e.g. coding).
## Discussion

The findings reveal the different values that underpin digital nomads’ and their corporate clients’ work relations and the resulting issues during their engagement. The findings also reveal the mechanisms digital nomads and their corporate clients adopt to address these different logics to work effectively together. It is important to note that the corporate perspective came from interviewees from Australian companies which incorporates more western values in their corporate culture. However, from our interviews with digital nomads in Bali it became apparent that many also worked for international companies with cultures that are different to Australian companies. Hence the following theoretical framework is based upon interviewees from a western-centric corporate culture which means there is a gap of understanding around how this may potentially differ with international cultures. Based on the findings we propose a preliminary theoretical framework that explains the dynamics between the different values (institutional logics) underpinning digital nomads and corporate clients work relations and the emerging issues. Furthermore, the framework, illustrated in Figure 1 below, explains how these issues are mitigated in practice. In this section, we discuss the framework and provide further evidence to illustrate how the values lead to issues and in turn how these issues are potentially resolved using various mitigation methods.

### 5.1 Institutional Logics

Digital nomadism institutional logics has not been studied to our knowledge, hence all the values presented in this paper are the first for digital nomad-corporate relations. However, the values important for similar non-conventional workers such as freelancers have been studied. For example, a motive for a digital nomad to be trustworthy in gaining referrals parallels the importance of reputation in the gig economy for freelancers as a trust-enabler to gain work (Gandini 2016; De Stefano 2015; Hong and Pavlou 2013). Autonomy as an enabler of satisfaction for freelancers and solo entrepreneurs (Cueto and Pruneda 2017; Hytti et al. 2013; Lange 2012) is comparable to a digital nomad’s value in workplace flexibility which comprises the ‘holistic freedom’ they desire to achieve (Reichenberger 2017). Furthermore, a digital nomad’s value in being disciplined and accountable towards the client is comparable to a freelancer’s need to be continually available for work to maintain good relations with clients (Gold and Mustafa 2013). Similar to freelancers, digital nomads need to work with clients outside the standard nine to five work which leads to the blurring of work life boundaries by MCTs (Mobile communication technologies) (Gold and Mustafa 2013; Sayah 2013; Dempsey and Sanders 2010). Furthermore, the corporate values uncovered in this paper are similar to the values important for clients working with other forms of remote working such as teleworking. For example, the importance of timely communication with digital nomads is reflected in the need for effective communication to avoid misunderstandings and the breaking of trust in telecommuting (Laine 2017).

A 1:1 pairing between opposing values could not be conclusively drawn from our data. Instead we interpret that this ‘opposition’ of values comes from the way they are prioritised for the individual. For example, a digital nomad who values travelling as being the most important would likely clash with a corporate worker who values timely and quality work from an outsourced worker. Hence the prioritisation of these values for the individual and a lack of understanding of digital nomad and corporate values cause these issues in digital nomad-corporate relations. Drawing from the literature we conclude that the specific digital nomad’s institutional logics and that of their corporate clients identified in this paper are fairly new. Likewise, the proposed framework shown below explains how different values lead to issues and how these are then resolved by mitigating methods is also new.
5.2 Issues

A 1:1 relationship was not identified between the values and conflict as our data hints more to a 1:M relationship as indicated in the proposed framework above. From the empirical findings, three reasons emerged explaining how digital nomadism and corporate values can cause issues. The first is the lack of understanding of digital nomadism values by the corporate worker and conversely corporate values by the digital nomad. For example, Amy stated the corporate client’s lack of understanding of the importance of flexibility for digital nomads leads to issues such as clients being too demanding with work.

Another example includes digital nomads not understanding the rigid factors that prevent a client from adopting alternative communication tools. This includes the client working for a company that is risk averse or has internal processes that prevent the quick adoption of a new technology. The notion of issues resulting from lack of understanding is consistent with existing institutional logics theory whereby an individual ignores or defies the competing logic (i.e. digital nomadism values for a corporate worker) if they have novice understanding of the other logic (Pache and Santos 2013).

The second is that poor implementation or adherence to their respective institutional logics is another cause for issues. For example, Michael revealed his experience of a digital nomad being out of contact for a few days and was unable to gain information on her daily schedule. As a result, Michael’s own work was delayed, and he was reliant on the digital nomad to reach out to him. Hence, despite digital nomads valuing transparency and communicating well with clients, this was not the case based on Michael’s experience. This alludes to the possibility that many issues in digital nomad-relations are caused by inexperienced digital nomads like the one from Michael’s experience. In comparison, more experienced digital nomads cause less issues as alluded to by Benjamin from skillsets developed over time or having worked in corporate environments. Poor implementation of one’s own values can be attributed to a poor understanding of the institutional logics specific to one’s identity (e.g. digital nomad values).
nomadism values for a digital nomad). This is consistent with Pache and Santos (2013) model which identifies that an individual will ignore all logics if they have novice adherence levels to each logic.

Thirdly, misalignment between digital nomadism and corporate values can cause issues in digital nomad-corporate relations. For example, although both digital nomads and corporate workers stated they valued trust the underlying motivations are different. The motive to being trustworthy for a digital nomad is to gain referrals as highlighted by Richard whilst for a corporate worker trust means being time efficient without observing work production as alluded to by Andrew. When the underlying motivations behind values are not acknowledged in digital nomad-corporate relations this causes misalignment even for mutually similar values. This is consistent with existing institutional logics theory which identifies the underlying principle as one of four major dimensions of an institutional logic alongside assumption (i.e. cause and effect of the logic), identity (i.e. identity of actors when a logic is being used) and domain (i.e. time and place the institutional logics is applied) (Berente and Yoo 2012). Hence digital nomad values can misalign with corporate values when the dimensions of institutional logics are different.

The issues raised by digital nomads bear similarities to issues experienced by teleworkers and freelancers. The misalignment of expectations between digital nomads and corporate clients is the physical detachment from their client’s company which results in a lack of understanding. This is similar to a teleworker facing the challenge of reduced social support and interaction with their colleagues (Sardeshmukh et al. 2012). A lack of flexibility for a digital nomad due to corporates being used to line of sight management is comparable to lowered strategic and operational autonomy for a freelancer from the dissolution of work-life boundaries (Gold and Mustafa 2013; Fenwick 2012). However, unique to digital nomad-corporate relations is the issue of corporates having novice understanding of digital nomadism values. In comparison, acknowledgement of freelancing and teleworking as an alternative work arrangement is well understood by those who hire them (Katz and Krueger 2016). Likewise, the issues raised by corporate workers are similar to issues experienced by the organisations and clients that work with teleworkers and freelancers. Corporate workers complaining about the lacking skillsets of inexperienced digital nomads is comparable to the complaints on lacking performance of teleworkers by organisations (Vartiainen and Hyrkkänen 2010). A major misalignment of expectations and values in digital nomad-corporate relations is a digital nomad’s desire to get more work whilst a client is unwilling or unable to provide for more. This is similar to the issue of low payments and unstable job security gig workers face when their client does not pay enough or provide more work (Simula 2013; Deng and Joshi 2013).

5.3 Mitigation Methods

Similarly, a 1:1 relationship could not be conclusively drawn between the issues and mitigation methods as our data hints more to a 1:M relationship. This means that the issues listed in Figure 1 are potentially solved by one or multiple mitigation methods that emerged from the interviews. For example, the stigma of digital nomads not performing can be potentially solved by establishing an “outcomes-based culture” so it “doesn’t matter if they are ... in Bali or in India” (Andrew). However, if the issues in digital nomad-corporate relations are not resolved this will result in negative consequences such as engagement ending on a sour note as alluded to by Michael.

The mitigation methods uncovered in our findings can be seen as ‘conflict prevention’ practices/methods used to address early and non-escalatory stages of conflict as opposed to post-conflict (Ackermann 2003). Hence, our theoretical framework suggests that major digital nomad-corporate issues can be mitigated prior to work. It is important to note that all these mitigation methods have been utilised as methods to address conflict in teleworker-organisation and freelancer-client relations. However, our study highlights that although digital nomads are like teleworkers and freelancers, their lifestyle is much more unpredictable and non-conventional due to their higher frequency of travel. Hence the magnitude of their conflicts would be different to teleworkers who work for a large corporation or a freelancer who primarily works from home. Consequently, mitigation methods such as understanding the right technology would be more important for a digital nomad who
is constantly travelling and using an array of digital software in comparison to a teleworker who primarily uses company approved software.

For example, pre-communication for a digital nomad and corporate worker is similar to effective communication employed by teleworkers which include determining availability for subsequent face-to-face meetings, expectations and progress on work (Greer and Payne 2014). However, pre-communication for a digital nomad will also include establishing an outcomes-based culture. Since teleworkers work for a company, the inability to utilise line of sight management will be less of an issue for managers as they are united by the overall company’s values. Conversely, in many cases a corporate client is engaging with a ‘stranger’ in digital nomad-corporate work, hence establishing an outcomes-focused culture is especially important for digital nomads.

Another mitigation method is for digital nomad and corporate workers to understand the right technologies to use based on the work context (e.g. Slack or Skype). This will allow the digital nomad to understand when to adopt client technologies or be able to effectively advocate a more suitable technology. An inexperienced digital nomad learning what tools are relevant for collaboration/communication with clients is similar to a freelancer transitioning from a ‘technician’ role to a ‘professional’ role by upskilling and increasing their expertise (Tremblay and Genin 2010). Furthermore, engaging in networking to establish a broad network is especially vital for digital nomads because it provides important information whilst travelling around the world. The benefits and way digital nomads utilise their broad networks is similar to a freelancer using strategies such as information gathering, seeking advice and seeking social support to overcome the problems of self-employment (Patzelt and Shepherd 2011).

6 Conclusion

The paper reveals that issues in digital nomads-corporate work result from lack of understanding of each other’s values, poor implementation or adherence to their respective institutional logics and misalignment between digital nomadism and corporate values. The issues can be potentially solved by the mitigation methods presented in our framework. Overall, to practitioners (i.e. digital nomads, corporate clients), the framework offers eight potential mitigation methods for inexperienced digital nomads and corporate workers to employ to mitigate issues. Furthermore, the framework makes an important contribution to knowledge by emphasising that major digital nomad-corporate issues can be prevented by pre-emptive mitigation methods before the work engagement. However, when issues are not resolved negative consequences such as the dissolution of the digital nomad-corporate relation can occur. Hence, it is imperative for both digital nomads and corporate clients to consider the mitigation methods from the framework which can be done prior to work engagement.

However, there are several limitations to our study. The first is that the empirical findings are based on twelve interviews with digital nomads and six with corporate workers. Hence, to refine the framework provided in this paper, more interviews with corporate worker and digital nomad dyads is required to develop a deeper understanding of their values, issues and mitigation methods. Secondly, further studies should examine digital nomads from other cultural contexts (e.g. Asia) and different corporate cultures. This is because our research is very western-culture centric which means there is a gap of understanding around how the culture in international contexts impact the issues experienced in digital nomads-corporate work. Thirdly, our study was conducted with digital nomads and corporates after their engagement period. Hence there is missing detail on the digital nomad-corporate relation during the engagement period which we encourage future research in. Lastly from our interviews with digital nomads, it emerged that many engaged in work with start-ups. Hence future work on digital nomad and start-up relations is necessary to gain a holistic view of digital nomadism values, issues and mitigation methods.
References


