



CATCHWORD

Digital Nomads

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“My day started early today. I am working with colleagues from Jakarta and Buenos Aires in a content creation project for a US company. As I am currently based in Paris, finding a time for our weekly call was a bit tricky... so it was 6am. After the call, I took a shower and grabbed breakfast. When I checked my emails, I saw there was only about a dozen new ones, since I went to bed at 11 pm... so I decided to answer them in the metro on the way to meet a potential client. I like Paris and think I will stay longer than the originally planned 3 months. The rents are expensive, but the atmosphere in the cafes I work from is great and there are also several co-working hubs with great infrastructure. Later in the morning, I had a scheduled video call with our clients in the US so I ducked into one of the quiet rooms out the back of my favourite co-working hub called ‘impact’. In the afternoon, I decided to go rollerblading with a friend so I made sure to empty

my inbox as much as possible before I headed out. Tonight, I have no calls scheduled so after this interview, my husband Janus and I will meet some colleagues from ‘impact’ and we will hang out.”

1 Introduction

This is how Mary, a digital nomad, spends a typical day. She worked as a media consultant for a major US-based content creating company, MMXP, before she decided to become a freelancer and to travel through Europe. Today, Mary still works closely with MMXP, which is now her biggest customer – but she has also started to engage in other projects with people she met during her travels. Her husband Janus travels with her. Janus feels that the organization he currently works for, YTU, recognizes his special set of skills and recognizes his productivity rather than where or when he accomplishes his work.

In today’s globalized, fast moving business world, organizations are under pressure to become more dynamic and flexible. As part of the transition towards a networked organization, they build clusters of efficient virtual teams (Ford et al. 2017). One way of responding to this challenge is by providing a conducive environment for their employees - one which allows work to be done mostly independent from time and location (Hanelt et al. 2015; Köffer 2015). Furthermore, companies are also increasingly aware that workers are capable of creating “work spaces” for themselves that enable a more dynamic way of working. Already in 2003, Brown and O’Hara’s (2003) work on mobile workers suggested that, given the opportunity, employees are able to effectively configure non-conventional spaces to be suitable for their work activities outside of the traditional workplace.

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A recent survey shows that between 2001 and 2012 across Europe and the United States the population of mobile knowledge workers grew from 15 to 29% of employees (Schadler et al. 2013). Moving from an organizational to an individual perspective, the rise of location-independent living and working styles such as freelancing has one reason in the desire to escape the “rat race” of modern life – a dream to live in such a way that provides a new work-life definition (Schlagwein 2017). This is facilitated by a combination of improved global access to information and information infrastructures, more flexible work arrangements, as well as the sense for adventure among the younger generation of knowledge workers (Dal Fiore et al. 2014). They want to work anytime and anywhere. These mobile knowledge workers are not restricted to information and communication technology (ICT) professionals, but span a wide range of professions, for example mathematicians, psychologists or engineers (de Carvalho et al. 2011).

As a result of the abovementioned trends – a combination of organizations’ need for efficiently working virtual teams and employees’ desire to work in a more flexible manner – we currently see the exponential growth of a group of workers: digital nomads.

Exhibit 1: Digital Nomads

Digital nomads operate outside of the classical organizational boundaries (Makimoto and Manners 1997) and can be considered as ‘contemporary entrepreneurs’ who bring disruptive business models into different industries (de Vaujany 2016) and have a different working culture and value different types of capital (e.g., reputation, information, symbolic) (Nash et al. 2018). Those who adhere to this style of life are redefining work life by pursuing employment that allows for global travel, flexibility in work hours, and a departure from the traditional office environment.

An essential component in facilitating digital nomadism is ICT. These social, media, mobile and smart devices have increasingly blurred the borders between the public and private spheres of our everyday life (Jarrahi and Sawyer 2013) and have facilitated what can be called “constant connectivity” (Dery et al. 2014). For example, many companies have created “bring your own device” policies, in which these ICT devices are simultaneously used for personal and professional purposes (Jarrahi and Thomson 2017). These new ways of virtual collaboration and digital work impact work practices in ways that we are far from understanding yet (Dery et al. 2017).

In this article, we explain the various developments that give rise to digital nomadism, discuss implications for organizations as well as individuals and frame digital nomads as relevant research topic for Information Systems research.

2 Developments Towards the Phenomenon of Digital Nomads

Studies from different disciplines show that human work is becoming increasingly flexible and ‘liquid’ (Bauman 2013; Patokorpi 2006; Appelbaum 2013). Online labor markets in which firms and freelancers match up for one-off projects are an integral part of this transition towards the sharing economy (Gandini 2014). A sharing economy is a system where people share underutilized resources in peer-to-peer networks (Cohen and Kietzmann 2014; Kathan et al. 2016), giving rise to more collaborative creation of goods and services (Pralhad and Ramaswamy 2004). New types of work, such as remote work lessens the cost of management, as organizations begin to understand that managing based on outcomes is more important than managing the physical presence of the workforce (Larsen and McInerney 2002). As a direct consequence, many organizations are taking measures to loosen their strict processes, rigid systems and long-established societal expectations, which in turn sees them gain loyalty and better performance from their employees.

This goes hand in hand with a shift in traditional thinking about how ‘work’ can be defined. The idea of work being restricted to what is done from 9 to 5 at the workplace, is increasingly being replaced by an understanding of work as a practice, i.e., of what is done – with less attention to the time and place where it happens (Hafermalz 2016; Handley et al. 2017). In this context, digital work means not only just offering new technologies, platforms, and related work concepts (e.g., open space offices), but also reconfiguring work practices both from an individual and an organizational perspective (Richter et al. 2018).

Traditionally the norm suggests that employees agree to be instructed and directed in return of a salary from an employer (Shirky 2009). What truly distinguishes digital nomads from the regular workforce is not only their desire but also their ability for self-management. Digital nomads can be described as digital workers (Orlikowski and Scott 2016) who embrace a more productive and less predefined way of life. Digital nomads are continually wired, plugged in and connected to digitally streaming information (Kuzheleva-Sagan and Nosova 2017; Jarrahi and Thomson 2017).

As briefly illustrated above, the development towards the phenomenon of digital nomads can be observed on individual and organizational level – facilitated by ICT. Figure 1 conceptualizes digital nomadism at the interface of individual preferences (e.g., more flexibility), organizational development¹ (e.g., more dynamic markets) and technological advances (e.g., broadband internet).

¹ We subsume law as part of the organizational environment.

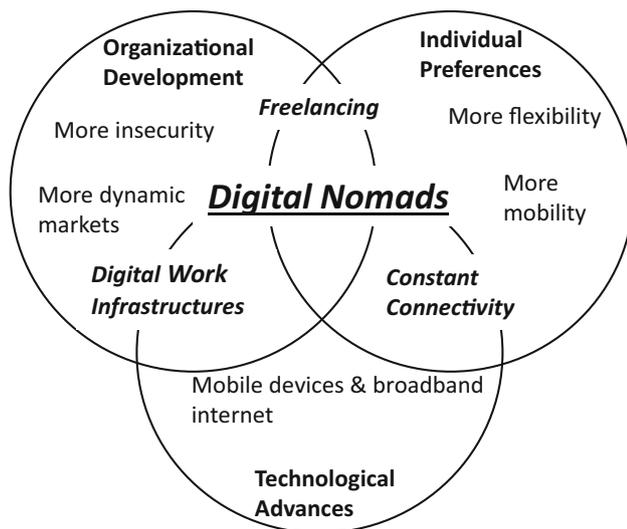


Fig. 1 Digital nomadism as the interface of individual preferences, organizational development and technological advances

The implications of this new phenomenon can be understood on an organizational level and an individual level; we discuss both in the next section.

3 Implications for Organizations and Individuals

From an organizational perspective, while the value and strategic advantage of creating a flexible digital work environment that leverages digital nomads has potential, its execution is not a straightforward exercise.

The successful establishment of any new ways of working requires an alignment with the prevailing organizational culture and leadership paradigm (Ingebrigtsen et al. 2014; Nguyen et al. 2017). Embracing the potential of digital work and the role that digital nomads can play within this new environment, suggests a shift from management (‘command and control’) to leadership (‘open and collaborative’) (Nguyen et al. 2017; Li 2010; Richter and Wagner 2014). Often digital nomads are goal-oriented individuals that have the innate ability to effectively self-manage. Having the flexibility to self-dependently reconfigure their own work practices (Richter et al. 2018), motivates them to work more efficiently and productively than in traditional corporate job settings. Leadership in this context requires a focus on outcomes rather than methods of work. Digital nomads value this type of easy-going work discipline, where the less control the better and where there is plenty of room for flexibility.

In order to facilitate this new style of leadership, organizations are increasingly allowing flexible scheduling and placing an emphasis on work-life balance (Erskine 2009). Digital work provides employees with more autonomy,

and, thus, with the possibility of a more holistic picture of work and life (Handley et al. 2017). For digital nomads, their personal or family life and their work life merge into one another.

However, from an individual perspective, ICT can act as a double-edged sword (Stich et al. 2015). Eventually, there is a maximum level of flexibility and productivity benefit that an employee can gain by using the ICT for digital work before drifting into information overload or technostress (Ayyagari et al. 2011; Mazmanian et al. 2013). While ICT can be seen as the backbone of facilitating digital work, employees feel that the increasing volume of ICT related communication they are required to engage with can often lead to increased ‘work’ overload (Ayyagari et al. 2011; Tarafdar et al. 2013) and consequently work-life conflict and job burnout (Stich et al. 2015). This has been referred to as an autonomy-paradox (Mazmanian et al. 2013).

While the level of flexibility and mobility promised by digital nomadism provides an attractive lifestyle for aspiring digital workers, this lifestyle also comes with certain challenges that demand a balance between freedom and stability.

Digital nomads can be seen as fiercely independent individuals who are crafting a lifestyle for themselves that enables them to live the life they want. The combination of gig work and digital platforms allows digital nomads to work in untethered, independent locations. Digital nomads often find themselves relying on gig work which allows them to work short term as independent contractors with flexible work arrangements on demand, but can leave them short of continuous work (De Stefano 2015). However, this situation comes with a downside. While on the one hand, employees can tailor their work to their individual and family circumstances, they also carry more entrepreneurial risks. The reliance on moving around from gig to gig on a project basis makes them more attractive to organizations who do not need to pay for health insurance, provide sick cover or allow for annual leave expenses. This may result in a precarious situation for nomads who do not have access to the wider safety net often provided by a business to their full-time employees (Nash et al. 2018).

Another challenge that is faced in the digital nomad’s lifestyle is one of constant movement, not only from country to country, but also from workspace to workspace. This presents the digital nomad with not only the problem of mobility, of moving between spaces and finding locations, but also the more complicated problem of nomadism, which requires the mobilization of resources, and the navigation of local infrastructures (Nash et al. 2018). On the one hand, there is the freedom to work anywhere, anytime provides independence from a “place of work”. On the other hand, this requires them to find or assemble their workspace themselves rather than relying on

the stable office environment provided by an organization (Jarrahi et al. 2017).

4 Summary

In summary, the above-mentioned implications give some direction to address challenges related to the phenomenon of digital nomads; however, there is still a range of questions that need to be addressed.

First, concerning a new leadership paradigm, leaders have to figure out efficient ways of coordinating workers in different roles. Modern ICT maximizes group awareness and can facilitate virtual teamwork. Nevertheless, with a high level of group awareness comes the risks of problems arising from constant connectivity and technostress: organizations and leadership have a high interest in protecting the digital workers and setting clear boundaries. Thus, even though leaders might be interested in being able to reach the team whenever, wherever, they should also be aware of their responsibility. Clearly communicated expectations about availability and social protocols concerning ways and means of communication can help to create a healthy balance. Here, the following questions are of interest to researchers in our field:

- How can ICT help to balance between awareness and technostress? How can organizations help digital workers to define their own work practices?
- How can organizations facilitate digital nomadicity with appropriate policies and in terms of ICT infrastructure?

From the individual workers perspective, it can be hard to work in a balanced way. Many of them are constantly exploring strategies that allow for maximum autonomy and equally reduce periods of peaks in work and non-work phases of life. ICT can support workers in this balancing act, by notifying them of their online time and breaks. Moreover, research could explore what healthy locations and work routines might look like for autonomous digital workers.

What is required now is to gain more insight into the lifestyle and worldviews of digital nomads in order to understand how their culture may be aligned with today's organizations. Furthermore, research is needed to provide insight for organizations on how to handle freelance culture, attract talent, maintain control and identify the priorities and imperatives of their future employees. More specifically, the following questions are of interest to researchers in our field:

- How does nomadicity influence the work that could be done within organizations? What are the potential

opportunities and pitfalls that exist when integrating digital nomads into an organization?

- How do digital nomads organize themselves in terms of work requirements, requisite infrastructure to achieve these and maintain regular contact with peers?

Altogether, these questions can shed light on how organizations and workers can move forward synchronously in redefining work practices. That is, where work becomes more about the outcomes rather than the process of getting there.

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