

Digital Nomads: Who Are They?

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Abstract

The world has experienced many changes in the era post-COVID-19. Remote work arrangements have recently emerged as a working model in which professionals work outside the traditional office environment. The number of remote workers is expected to increase in the years to come in the post-pandemic era. With the growing trend of remote work arrangements, more people experienced leisure travel without detachment from work. Hence, this paper aims to provide a holistic definition of a digital nomad. In doing so, past articles from 2009 until 2023 have been reviewed, analysed, and the definition provided from past articles have been extracted and compiled. The paper concludes with a holistic definition of digital nomads and its implications for practitioners.

Introduction

The world has experienced many changes in the era post-COVID-19. Remote work arrangements have recently emerged as a working model in which professionals work outside the traditional office environment. The number of remote workers is expected to increase in the years to come in the post-pandemic era (Nagel, 2020). With the growing trend of remote work arrangements, more people experienced leisure travel without detachment from work.

For example, more employees booked a leisure trip as an extended stay in a hotel resort, with proper working facilities and an entertainment program for other family members (Verdon, 2021). Noting the lucrative impact these digital nomads can give on the country, it is important to focus on them. Hence, this paper aims to provide a holistic definition of a digital nomad.

Digital Nomad: Who Are They?

Digital nomads are freelancers who choose to work from different places of their choice than from a permanent company or office. To complete their work, they would rely on laptops and/or other portable devices, as well as a dependable internet connection. They can work

virtually anywhere such as in coffee shops, co-working spaces, public libraries, and even hotels.

The majority of digital nomads are self-employed freelancers who work in a variety of fields, including writing, blogging and vlogging, virtual assistant work, social media management, digital marketing, graphic design, and others. Additionally, a lot of businesses throughout the world are now actively offering remote employment, enabling ordinary employees to work outside the typical office environment.

According to statistics, there are 35 million digital nomads worldwide in 2021. Digital nomads also have been rising in the USA, as the number of digital nomads in the USA doubled over the past couple of years, mainly from 4.8 million in 2018 to more than 11 million in 2021. By 2025, 36.2 million Americans will be working remotely, which is an 87% increase from pre-pandemic numbers, according to Upwork's "Future Workforce Pulse Report."

Due to their reduced cost of living, ASEAN nations like Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam are popular with digital nomads. To compile a "digital nomads by city" index, PeoplePerHour, a UK-based online platform that connects businesses with independent contractors, undertook a global poll in 2017. According to the survey, Singapore came in at number twelve, followed by Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, at number eleven, and Bangkok, Thailand, at number seven. However, this list omitted several other Southeast Asian towns with sizable populations of digital nomads.

In terms of a place to stay, most digital nomads live in hotels (51%), then with friends/family (41%), Airbnb (36%), car/RV/van (21%), and hostels (16%). 80% of digital nomads stay in one place between 3 to 9 months and 66% stay in one place between 3 to 6 months. By looking at the demographics of the digital nomads, most of them are married (61%), and 39% are unmarried. The average digital nomad age is 32 years old and 70% of digital nomads work 40 hours per week or fewer.

Defining Digital Nomad

Digital nomads are also known as global nomads. They are people who work on their own, using their laptops or other devices such as iPad, without a specific location, wherever they have a good Wi-Fi connection. The term digital nomad comes from the word "digital" which means the use of computer technology and "nomad" which refers to members who travel from one place to another without limits (Mouratidis, 2018). By relating the digital nomad with the lifestyle mobility approach, Hannonen (2020) viewed the digital nomad as a person who is both a highly mobile professional and a lifestyle traveller.

Digital nomads differ from conventional work environments in several ways. The difference between neo-nomads and digital nomads is that the former engages in the trade of products and services while the latter work only online (Stickel, 2020). Travellers looking for fun who work in occupations that depend on their location are backpackers. Expats reside in the host nation and only travel for business purposes.

While remote work arrangements set themselves apart by being explicitly outlined in the job contract, freelancers and digital nomads differ in the degree of spatial flexibility they exercise (Olga, 2020). For business travellers, the engaging client or organisation would be responsible for covering the costs incurred, but this is not the case with digital nomads.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the proportion of digital natives with location-free lifestyles and employment practices (Müller, 2016). The rise of digital nomads has been ascribed in the popular press to a desire to escape the "rat race" of contemporary life and a desire to live a way that permits a respite from "9-to-5 obligations" 2017 (Forbes). By looking

for professions that allow for global travel, flexible work schedules, and a break from the conventional office environment, those who adhere to this lifestyle are "redefining...making a living" (Forbes, 2016).

First-generation digital nomads reside in their home country but travel to other places to gain experience working from various locations. The second kind of digital nomad enjoys visiting new places while still working for the same organisation. However, they both need infrastructure and help from technology to handle their work effectively. The main concept is to move about a lot while working. A digital nomad has been defined differently by numerous scholars and from a variety of points of view. The research on digital nomads is moving slowly, despite the growing mobility trend (Hannonen, 2020; Reichenberger, 2018; Thompson, 2018). Researchers in the past have used a variety of terminologies to describe digital nomads, but none of them has been able to offer a comprehensive explanation of this intriguing and popular concept.

This is a reflection of the incoherence in the definitions of digital nomads made by earlier studies due to their lack of comprehension of the term. Therefore, it is important to offer a comprehensive definition of a digital nomad.

The following section will provide different viewpoints covered by past researchers in an attempt to define digital nomads such as remote working, heavily dependent on digital devices, flexible working hours, a quest for holistic freedom in work and leisure, digital nomadicity, and working while travelling.

- Remote working

Digital nomads are young, work-oriented professionals (Cook, 2020) who embrace extreme forms of mobile work (Bonneau, Aroles & Estagnasié, 2023), and can work remotely (Mancinelli, 2020; Putra & Agirachman, 2016; Cook, 2023), using their laptops, from any location, which means that they can work from home or anywhere (Vagena, 2021) and live an independent nomadic lifestyle (Prester, Cecez-Kecmanovic & Schlagwein, 2019). They have rejected the idea of working in the conventional office (Mouratidis, 2018) to escape the 'rat race' of modern life (Nash, Jarrahi, Sutherland & Phillips, 2018). They are not required to show up in person to conduct their job (Thompson, 2018). They are usually young professionals whose ICT-based occupation allows them to work on location independently (Reichenberger, 2018) such as web design, programming or online marketing (Thompson, 2019). Their remote employment enables them to cut down costs of transportation, avoid office-based distractions and provide childcare-friendly scheduling (Thompson, 2019). Another study by Nash et al (2021) defined a digital nomad as someone who travels for work to meet with clients or other contacts. Other researchers asserted that digital nomads are those who frequently relocate their workplaces across borders, regardless of whether they ever return home (Al-Hadi & Al-Aufi, 2019).

- Heavily depends on digital devices

Digital nomads are those who take advantage of portable computer technologies and internet access (Mancinelli, 2020; Vagena, 2021; Cook, 2022; Thompson, 2018; Putra & Agirachman, 2016). They use mobile information system (Frick & Marx, 2021) that requires constant negotiation with digital services, protocols and algorithms (Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017). Their existence is dependent on three key resources: access to data collected by cloud computing,

intelligent mobile devices, and broadband and quick Internet connectivity that enables long-distance communication (Bartosik-Purgat, 2018). They require both physical (such as a power outlet, internet access, and workstation) and non-physical (such as quietness and privacy) resources to maintain a smooth working environment (Lee et al., 2019).

- Flexible working hours

Young professionals who disapproved of typical work hours make up the digital nomad population (Cook, 2020). According to Nash, Jarrahi, Sutherland, and Phillips (2018), they favour flexible work schedules. Brusseau (2022) also emphasised that it is challenging to live as a full digital nomad, especially for individuals who like retaining regular jobs back home with defined hours. This is because not everyone prefers flexible working hours.

- Quest for holistic freedom in work and leisure

People who combine work, play, and travel using digital technology are known as digital nomads (Cook, 2022; 2020; Mancinelli, 2020; Nash, Jarrahi, Sutherland & Phillips, 2018). They are millennial workers who left their mundane jobs to travel the globe and work from remote beaches on laptops (Cook, 2022). These young professionals can combine their desire to travel with the flexibility of remote work by becoming digital nomads (Bonneau, Aroles, & Estagnasié, 2023), retaining their lifestyles (Orel, 2019).

- Digital Nomadicity

Digital nomads are persons who take on work that can be accomplished using ICTs and therefore are not confined to a workplace (Müller, 2016). They use this opportunity to travel to exotic locations and essentially blur the boundaries between work, travel, and leisure (Reichenberger, 2018). Looking at a different angle, Nash et al (2018) defined digital nomads as those who fit into all four concepts of digital nomadicity namely gig work, nomadic work, digital work, and global adventure travel.

Looking at the concept of digital work, web development, digital marketing, virtual help, content creation, and graphic design are a few typical examples of digital work. Many digital employees are independent contractors or freelancers who work for numerous customers or platforms, while others could be employed by businesses that have remote work practices. Digital work is at the heart of digital nomadic work since it is intertwined with location-independent work practises and allows digital nomads to complete tasks while travelling to different cities and countries (Durward, et al., 2016). Digital nomads can travel light by using digital platforms to create a digital product. Due to the frequency with which digital nomads travel and the exotic destinations they choose to visit, they also lack access to machinery and supplies needed to produce a tangible product. Digital devices and software are the primary way by which digital nomads convert digital inputs into digital outputs, and this can be done virtually from anywhere with power and internet access.

The concept of gig work refers to short-term, freelance, or contract work that is typically done through online platforms or apps. The dependence on gig work is a crucial part of the professional condition of digital nomads. People can engage in gig work, which offers temporary independent contractor employment with adaptable working conditions, as needed (De Stefano, 2015). The potential to work on online freelance projects that may be completed using digital platforms and technologies remotely and untethered from specific

locales is made possible by the mix of gig and digital labour. In recent years, gig labour has grown in popularity as more people strive for flexible work schedules and companies search for talent acquisition strategies that are less expensive. Technology advancements have accelerated the growth of gig work by facilitating remote collaboration and client connections. Driving for ride-sharing businesses like Uber or Grab, delivering food for apps like FoodPanda, or working as a freelancer in industries like graphic design, writing, or programming are a few examples of prevalent gig jobs.

The concept of nomadic work relates to the ability to shift between workspaces continuously is a benefit of the digital nomad lifestyle. As a result, the digital nomad faces not only the challenge of mobility, that is moving between spaces and locating locations, but also the trickier challenge of nomadicity, which necessitates resource mobilization and knowledge of local infrastructure (Jarrahi et al., 2017). The flexibility to design a work-life balance that meets a person's needs is one of the main advantages of nomadic work. Digital nomads can choose their schedules and operate from any location as long as they fulfil their duties to their employers. This allows them to work during their preferred hours while taking time off to visit a new city or country. It also enables people to live in less expensive nations while receiving a wage in a nation with a higher standard of living, nomadic labour can also be a fantastic method to save money. Additionally, when people are exposed to diverse experiences, languages, and cultures, nomadic work can present opportunities for both personal and professional growth.

Finally, the concept of global adventure travel relates to digital nomadism. Digital nomadism and global adventure travel are two ideas that frequently overlap. Digital nomads are those with the freedom to work from anywhere and explore the world at the same time. When they are on the go, they frequently rely on digital technology and communication tools to stay in touch with clients or co-workers. As it enables individuals to seamlessly integrate work and travel, global adventure travel can be a natural fit for digital nomads. Due to their flexible work schedules, digital nomads can travel and experience new things while maintaining their productivity and meeting their deadlines. Digital nomads frequently opt to work from destinations like national parks, beaches, or mountains because they provide options for adventurous travel.

In their free time, they might also partake in adventure sports like snowboarding, surfing, or hiking. Global adventure travel can be a fantastic way for digital nomads to discover new cultures and places while still keeping up with their professional commitments. People can design a way of life that enables them to follow their hobbies and make the most of their travel time by accepting the flexibility and freedom that come with being a digital nomad.

- Working while travelling

Apart from that, these people are working while travelling (Nash et al., 2018) in a way that blends leisure and professional commitments, unlike genuine tourists who travel on specific holiday dates and only on specific occasions. Both professional and personal arrangements must give them the resources and flexibility required to afford endless travel. Some digital nomads even started owning/having a fixed place to live (a permanent home address) and engaging in minimalist travelling. Hence, it is a way to escape the traditional working structures that leave little time for leisure and relaxation.

Amongst the most prevalent types of digital nomads are backpackers, flashpackers and global nomads. Backpackers are defined as "individuals who travel independently, often on a limited budget, for an extended period, carrying a backpack and staying in budget accommodations" (Lengkeek, 2021). Backpackers can be seen as 'Tribal nomads', congregating in specific enclaves to share the stories that form the shared culture of the tribe (Noy, 2004).

In another, flashpackers are defined as a new type of traveller similar to backpackers, but with a higher budget and a desire for more comfort and convenience. They are recognized as being different from conventional tourists who tend to travel in large groups and follow pre-planned itineraries. The term "flashpacker" originated from the word "backpacker" and refers to a traveller who is tech-savvy, independent, and seeks authentic experiences. They are often young professionals who have more disposable income and are willing to spend more on travel experiences (Dayour, Kimbu, & Park, 2017; O'Regan, 2018). Flashpackers, with their love of communication devices (Jarvis and Peel, 2010) can be related to the Digital nomads described by Sørensen (2002).

On the other hand, global nomads as described by Kannisto (2014) are location-independent travellers who stay away from 'home' for long periods, and who generally reject the ideology of settled society. The term "global nomads" refers to individuals who have spent a significant part of their developmental years living in cultures different from their passport culture. Global nomads are individuals who have spent a significant part of their developmental years living in cultures different from their passport culture (Dillon & Ali, 2021).

Conclusion

A digital nomad can be defined as a person who works remotely, is heavily dependent on digital devices, has flexible working hours, has a quest for holistic freedom in work and leisure, is digital nomadism and works while travelling. Past researchers also believe that those who fulfil these four concepts are considered digital nomads. These four concepts are gig work, nomadic work, digital work, and global adventure travel. Besides, past literature also highlighted three types of digital nomads namely backpackers, flashpackers and global nomads.

Based on the above definition, concepts and classification types of digital nomads, it is worth noting that past researchers discovered that digital nomad workers may improve their quality of life, increase professional independence, and enjoy more freedom for individual lifestyle decisions. The benefits of employing digital nomad workers outweigh the drawbacks of employing them. Due to that, a successful connection between digital nomad work and corporate structures requires efforts on both ends. Lastly, the arrival of digital nomads into any part of the world especially Southeast Asia is certainly beneficial because digital nomads can also escalate the economic development of the country due to their travelling nature.

Implication to Practitioners

Around the world, the use of technology in organisational systems has grown in significance. Technological innovations frequently alter how companies run their business models, offer their goods and services, or carry out their marketing activities. However, digitization not only affects how money is spent on company processes, but it also influences how people organise their work (Richter, 2018).

Nevertheless, highly skilled information workers namely digital nomads who fully utilize digital tools currently make up the majority of many organisations' human resources. Professionals increasingly embrace digital nomadism, fusing digital work with lifestyle preferences, as knowledge work is almost always independent of time and place (Schlagwein, 2018).

Digital nomads are somewhat cut off, both practically and figuratively speaking. In contrast to employee-employer relationships, digital nomadism places a heavy emphasis on freelancing and the contractor-client connection between digital nomads and corporations.

However, the rise in digital nomads and the number of professionals that participate in such lifestyles have caused a growing divide between temporary employees like digital nomads and corporate structures (Schlagwein, 2018). Corporations must develop a new working environment that accommodates the integration of digital nomads to stay up with the personal preferences of highly competent employees. Experts suggested that the development of a new business environment to ensure the long-term viability of firms is very crucial, especially in times of crisis.

Therefore, corporations, digital nomads and information system researchers must understand how organizational development, individual preferences, and technological advances can more easily gravitate towards each other (Frick & Marx 2021). Apart from that, Frick and Marx (2021) further mentioned about the integration of digital nomads, counter-intuitively, does not fail because of the physical immobility of organizations. Instead, failure in the corporations is mainly due to the corporation's resistance towards cultural change, digital work and leadership training, as well as a legal and ethical discussion about digital nomad work.

Besides that, companies may face with the possibility of cost reductions by employing digital nomads workers. Both a desk and a chair, as well as a stable office job, are not necessities for digital nomads. Companies do not need to maintain huge office space, work equipment and other related office utilities because of the flexibility and mobility of digital nomad workers. Based on the idea of digital nomadism and identifying competitive advantages, employing digital nomad workers will result in more efficient completion of several jobs. When it comes to 24-hour customer support operations, digital nomads who are normally highly motivated and self-disciplined may be advantageous for some tasks, including the division of shifts within the department. This will lead to an increase in the company's productivity.

Besides, hiring digital nomad workers will give the company access to a wider talent pool. Companies can recruit and hire talent from anywhere in the world which increases the overall talent pool and diversity of the workforce.

Digital nomad workers are also believed to improve workers' quality of life. For instance, digital nomads have the freedom to work from anywhere in the globe and do not need to relocate for their jobs. They also do not need to commute each day to their places of employment. Digital nomad workers have more flexibility in their work schedule, which can lead to a better work-life balance and happier life.

Suggestion for Future Research

The definition of digital nomad provided in this paper will provide new insights to researchers in the area of organizational behaviour, work-life balance, tourism and the gig economy. For example, future researchers may consider investigating work-life balance among digital nomads and the impact of digital nomads towards a company's productivity.

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