

Belonging on the Move: How Digital Nomads Synchronise Socio-Temporal Rhythms

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Introduction

New forms of mobile and remote work are rapidly changing how work is organised (Baptista et al., 2020). Digital workers are optimising for independence and freedom (Schlagwein & Jarrahi, 2020). Spatial independence to work from anywhere, professional independence to work with whom and on what they want, and temporal independence to work whenever they want. This individualist ethos has overwhelmed our traditional ways of organising and lead to a work setting that is ripe for alienation (Wang et al., 2020). In a work setting optimised for individualistic freedom, how do workers form relationships, and how does that affect their sense of belonging at work? This paper explores how those working in the socially isolated setting of the digital workplace organise their time to form relationships and develop a sense of belonging.

Much of Information Systems (IS) and organisation studies is grounded in classic conceptions of time as a resource (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002). Such an understanding of time struggles to explain digital workers' urge to control more of their time that simultaneously seems to impoverish their experience of work and estrange workers from co-workers, clients, and themselves. However, more flow-oriented conceptions that view time as subjective, lived, and qualitative highlight how time is relational (Bergson, 1911). In other words, time is experienced differently when it is shared with other people.

To answer the question of how, in a work setting optimised for individualistic freedom, workers form relationships, and how that affects their sense of belonging at work, I draw on a multi-sited ethnographic study of one extremely independent type of digital workers, digital nomads. In this setting of workers that exemplify the independent, remote, and individualistic nature of digital work, I find that work unfolds along several socio-temporal rhythms at different temporal scales. In what I call the *socio-temporal synchronisation dilemma*, the digital nomads' way of working and living corresponds (Ingold, 2017) to the socio-temporal rhythms of either the local environment of friends and fellow digital nomads or the remote environment of co-workers, clients, and family at home. Whereas each correspondence actualises particular relationships, the correspondences are associated with two adversarial implications for belonging: choosing local relationships that are set to get disrupted in a few weeks when one moves on to the next location or choosing remote relationships that are entirely digitally mediated.

Digital Work, Independence, and Temporal Rhythms

Digital Work and Optimisation for Independence

Digital work is a prominent area of interest in recent discussions of the changing nature of work (Baptista et al., 2020). I refer to digital work as work done entirely through digital means, either fundamentally reconfigured from conventional work forms (Orlikowski & Scott, 2016) or *sui generis* new, digital work forms that did not exist “pre-digital” (Aroles et al., 2019). Such digital work practices are calling into question our fundamental concepts of working and organising such as identity, relationships, and belonging.

Digital workers are striving for independence along multiple dimensions (Schlagwein & Jarrahi, 2020). They often start by seeking spatial independence from being bound to a particular location be it an office space or even a home (Aroles et al., 2019). Spatial independence often goes hand-in-hand with professional independence which allows digital workers to escape from corporations and instead work as entrepreneurs, freelancers, and independent workers (Orlikowski & Scott, 2016). Having achieved spatial and professional independence, digital workers often enjoy temporal independence manifested in flexible work hours (Baptista et al., 2020). By optimising for spatial, professional, and temporal independence, digital workers are inadvertently creating social independence resulting in a highly individualistic work life.

Theorising Socio-Temporal Rhythms from a Process-relational Perspective

Theorising grounded in a process-relational perspective opens up a new way of theorising digital work because such a perspective attends to the fluid and messy qualities of digital work. This perspective is based in a thoroughgoing processual understanding of the world. It assumes a more flow-oriented, processual understanding of time (Bergson, 1911). Accordingly, time is nonlinear, qualitatively determined, and inherent to processes rather than an autonomous category that is independent of events, processes, or phenomena. A flow-oriented understanding of time takes seriously the distinction between the concepts of *chronos* and *kairos*. While *chronos* refers to clock time, measured time, or the quantity of duration, *kairos* refers to event time, the temporal quality of the “right moment”, or “opportune timing”.

Organisational studies have engaged with this dichotomy between clock and event time to show how people, in recurrent practices, construct temporal structures (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002). Such recurrent temporal structures unfold in rhythmic rather than strictly linear order. Because temporal rhythms represent the “regularities of practice” (Steinhardt & Jackson, 2014, p. 134) that humans begin to structure their work and social life around, they are critical for socialisation processes. Further, in social processes, we seldom encounter temporal rhythms in isolation, but always as a correspondence of multiple, rhythmic trajectories (Zerubavel, 1979).

Overall, literature has emphasised relationships and socialisation practices as key for creating a sense of belonging at work. Little research has explored how a sense of belonging can be

created in work settings optimised for individualistic freedom. The process-relational perspective and lens of temporal rhythms may provide an alternative explanation of creating or reducing a sense of belonging at work. In this paper, I explore how temporal rhythms and their rhythmic correspondence condition the way in which relations are created or disrupted in digital work.

Research Setting, Data Collection, and Analysis

As part of a larger research program, I conducted a multi-sited ethnographic study of digital nomads. Digital nomads are one such group of workers that exemplify the independent, remote, and individualistic nature of digital work. They are highly skilled professionals who leverage digital technologies to work remotely and to lead an independent and nomadic lifestyle (Olga, 2020). The data sources for the multi-sited ethnography included 21 weeks of participant observations in physical locations, online observations, and 52 interviews.

I used an abductive data analysis method as described by (Gioia et al., 2013). In particular, I combined qualitative data analysis techniques borrowed from grounded theory building with theoretical reading of concepts from the sociology of time (Zerubavel, 1979) and the notion of correspondence of temporal flows (Ingold, 2017). I started by constructing stories of each digital nomad's workday and then these stories to identify recurrent practices and temporal rhythms in the lives of digital nomads. In the following, I first present the findings from my empirical fieldwork and then show how an analysis of rhythms may explain how a sense of belonging is created or reduced in digital nomad work.

Socio-Temporal Rhythms of Digital Nomad Work

I identified various socio-temporal rhythms in digital nomad work that unfolded at different temporal scales. Sometimes these socio-temporal rhythms were attuned to one another, but sometimes this attunement broke down and disturbed the relations between the flows of workers, tools, clients, local environment, and digital infrastructures.

Some temporal rhythms were large-scale. They flow, for example, along the month-long cycles of the seasons. Because digital nomads have the freedom to work from anywhere they often choose to work from warmer climates. This includes adjusting their travels accordingly as a SEO specialist from Japan told me in an interview in Bangkok:

“So, I’m trying to go with the seasons. The idea is basically if some country is superhot I just escape to a cooler country. And then if the country becomes winter I just escape to the hot or warmer country.”

Besides the natural rhythms of the seasons, there are other, socially constructed, but nevertheless large-scale rhythms that play an important role in digital nomads' lives. Because digital nomads usually enter countries on tourist visa, their duration dictates when they must leave a place. A software developer from the US explained how visa durations impact on his travel rhythm:

“Spending a month in each different place suits me really, really well. I did four months in Asia, four months in Europe, and four months in South America, but the four months in Europe I did one non-Schengen zone country because I still had the 90 days within the Schengen zone that you have to comply with.”

These large-scale rhythms clearly condition the travel patterns, career trajectories, and general flow of digital nomad life. Yet, how socio-temporal rhythms correspond to create as well as disturb relations comes most clearly to the fore in the small-scale rhythms of everyday life. One of the most crucial challenges for digital nomads is the attunement with time zones. Many digital nomads must work during the working hours of their remote employer or clients. A young IT consultant describes her experience in most countries:

“So, for me, I’m basically working like a vampire in most of the places. I won’t see other people oftentimes or it’s just a very tiring experience.”

Some digital nomads are able to manage these issues more effectively than others, for example by using calendar scheduling tools and time zone calculators. However, managing the dissonance between local and remote time zones remains a balancing act that ultimately requires digital nomads to choose between the local, personal and the remote, work-related rhythms. In an interview in Bali, a translation expert from France explains this dilemma:

“I really try to stick to normal working hours so that you can still socialize with people at the same time as them. If you have friends in your city who have a conventional job, you don’t really want to work weird hours and not be able to socialize with people at the same time as everyone does.”

While online digital nomad communities offer important resources and guidance, in particular for newcomers, they seldom result in long-term relationships. The temporal scale of social media time lines and the cadences of the algorithms that condition interactions on social media are even shorter and more accelerated than the digital nomads’ already fast-paced workdays. A digital marketer from the Philippines notes how social media makes it difficult for her to develop meaningful relationships:

“I think the most meaningful connections happen offline. And, I think, it provides a lot more motivation to really invest in these relationships. I mean, you meet someone in a hostel for two days, friends on Facebook, and you never speak to them again.”

These small-scale rhythms whose exposure to multiple flows and experiences in short amounts of time lead to many social encounters. At the same time, however, they make it difficult to develop and maintain social relations at work and thereby hinder a sense of belonging.

Toward a Theory of Socio-Temporal Belonging in Digital Work

I began this work by proposing a process-relational perspective that foregrounds socio-temporal rhythms and their conditioning effects on processes of socialisation in a highly individualistic

work setting. In the above, we saw how socio-temporal rhythms at different temporal scales unfold in the lives of digital nomads and how correspondence with these rhythms can create but also disrupt relationships at work.

At the core of this correspondence is what I refer to as a “socio-temporal synchronisation dilemma”. The flows of digital nomads may synchronise either with the local environment of friends and fellow digital nomads or the remote environment of co-workers, clients, and family at home. The flows of digital technologies matter deeply for these correspondences because the synchronisation dilemma has two adversarial implications: choosing local relationships that are set to get disrupted in a few weeks when one moves on to the next location or choosing remote relationships that are entirely digitally mediated. The preliminary analysis starts to unravel the puzzle of how, in digital nomad work, relations become formed and get disrupted in a setting that scholars theorise is ripe for social isolation. The identification of the socio-temporal synchronisation dilemma has implications for the literatures on belonging and relating at work, and relationships in digital work more broadly.

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