# Legitimation as the Correspondence of Practice: An Ethnography of Digital Nomad Work Practices

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## 1 Introduction

Information technologies (IT) are radically transforming the nature of work, engendering new work practices (Barley et al. 2017). Collectively, these new work practices are studied under the label of "digital work" (Baptista et al. 2020; Orlikowski and Scott 2016). While such digital work practices fundamentally reconfigure existing forms of work, they also create entirely new forms of work that did not exist "pre-digital." Sui generis new digital work forms that challenge conventional institutional structures include among others the work practices of social media influencers (Casaló et al. 2018), algorithmically coordinated gig workers (Möhlmann et al. 2020), and digitally nomadic professionals (Jarrahi et al. 2019). These new digital work practices are therefore calling into question our understanding of institutions and challenge what practices are being assumed as appropriate or legitimate in digital work.

To investigate the emergence and legitimation of new digital work practices, we focus on digital nomads, a group of high-skilled professionals who leverage IT to work remotely and live an independent and nomadic lifestyle (Nash et al. 2020; Schlagwein 2017). This growing professional trend—estimated to having been accelerated by several years during the COVID-19 pandemic (MBO Partners 2020)—undermines traditional perspectives of work and defies conventional affiliations with nation-states, and social and institutional structures (Aroles, Granter,

et al. 2019). Working as freelancers or self-employed entrepreneurs, they have developed a professional independence that allows them to live a lifestyle of ongoing international travel and expat living (Reichenberger 2017), referred to as “digital nomadism” (**Schlagwein2018b?**). As a result, digital nomads present an extreme case of digital work and provide a distinct opportunity to study how new, work practices become legitimate in digital work. Specifically, new questions arise as to how new work practices are being assumed or suggested as appropriate or legitimate and, how IT are implicated in such socio-technological processes. These questions demand theorizing that goes beyond the prior focus of the literature on human actors and their discursive, judgmental, and ideational actions in introducing new work practices (De Vaujany 2019).

How organizational practices gain and maintain legitimacy in complex and changing institutional contexts has been a significant topic in organization studies (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Suchman 1995; Suddaby and Greenwood 2005). Organizational legitimacy is concerned with “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman 1995, p. 574). More recently, there has been a shift from the static state or perception of legitimacy to the dynamic and developmental aspects of legitimation as a process (Johnson et al. 2006). Although this stream of research has made important contributions, it remains largely focused on human actors and their actions in what has been primarily conceptualized as a discursive, judgmental and ideational process. With IT permeating almost every aspect of new digital work practices, scholars have called for research to investigate the role of material technologies in legitimation processes (De Vaujany 2019). Furthermore, studies have tended to theorize legitimation processes without paying particular attention to temporality as more than just the linear and universal marker for when legitimacy claims are produced. In the case of digital work and entirely new work practices, a focus on exclusively human doings and sayings impedes our ability to understand the constitutive role of IT and the legitimation of new work practices over

time. A new theoretical perspective is needed that foregrounds the temporal and material qualities of ongoing processes of legitimation and the mundane and often unintended ways in which IT permeate these processes.

Given the challenge that new forms of digital work pose to how work practices become legitimate and the difficulty to make sense of materiality and temporality in this process with existing theories of legitimation, we ask: *How do digital nomad work practices become legitimate and how does IT matter for such processes?*

To answer our research question, we report on a multi-site ethnographic study of digital nomads. Because of the pervasive digital context and dynamic lifestyle, exploring legitimation processes among digital nomads offers a unique opportunity for answering these questions. We conducted ethnographic fieldwork across physical and digital sites following digital nomads' work practices as they were unfolding in situ. By adopting qualitative data analysis techniques and abductive theorizing grounded in rich empirical data (Charmaz 2006), we detail how the ongoing (re)presentation of work in the flow of practice was consequential for how digital nomad work practices became legitimate over time. Our theorizing of the findings of legitimation processes in digital nomad work practices is based on a performative process perspective (Cecez-Kecmanovic 2016; Mousavi Baygi et al. 2021) drawing specifically from Tim Ingold's theory of correspondence (Ingold 2017).

Engaging Ingold's theory, we explain how legitimation can be explained as a process of correspondence between digital nomad and conventional work practices. These flows of practice answer to one another over time conditioned by three temporal and material qualities of correspondence: *attuning*, *commoning*, and *unfolding*, each actualizing possibilities for legitimation of the work practice. By foregrounding the flows of practice, and the temporal correspondence and intermeshing of these flows, our performative process theory of legitimation

explains ongoing, contingent processes along which digital work practices become legitimate and the ways IT are intimately and consequentially implicated in them.

Our paper contributes in three ways to the literature. First, it provides an in-depth understanding of digital nomad work practices and how these practices become accepted and perceived as legitimate. Second, our study contributes a dynamic understanding of the ways in which digital work is (re)presented in and with digital technologies in practice. Third, it contributes to the wider literature on legitimation and its temporal and material qualities by proposing a performative process theory of legitimation that emphasizes ongoing legitimation and goes beyond discursive processes of human actors.

# 2 Literature Review

## 2.1 Digital Work Practices and Legitimacy

Digital work is an emerging phenomenon in the broader discussion of the changing nature of work (Baptista et al. 2020). We refer to digital work as work done entirely through digital means, either fundamentally reconfigured from conventional work forms (Orlikowski and Scott 2016) or sui generis new digital work forms that did not exist predigital (Aroles, Mitev, et al. 2019). Digital work is often conducted beyond the traditional boundaries of a fixed workplace and “9-to-5” working hours. Research has explored implications of digital work for organizations and individual workers such as increasing work complexity, detachment of organizational structures, and the importance of individual self-management (Baptista et al. 2020; Davison and Ou 2017). Because new digital work forms are fundamentally different from other forms of work, scholars have suggested that conventional theories of the nature and meaning of work need to be reinterpreted for the digital age (see e.g., Burton-Jones et al. 2021).

Digital work forms are often at odds with social norms and taken-for-granted understandings of what work is, and when, where, and how it should be performed. Legitimacy—defined as a

“generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed systems of norms, values, beliefs and definitions” (Suchman 1995, p. 574)—is thus crucial for new digital work forms. It increases their attractiveness to new workers and their acceptance in existing organizational contexts. For example, workers are more likely to adopt and clients are more likely to collaborate with legitimate work forms because they consider them valid and conforming with their cultural framework (Johnson et al. 2006). Thus, establishing and maintaining legitimacy is critical for the emergence and success of new digital work forms.

Research on digital work has focused on the legitimacy of digitally reconfigured, but conventional, work practices in organizational settings (Davison and Ou 2017). While in-depth studies of digital work are still rare, research indicates that, key organizational actors in leadership roles can establish and legitimize digital work in organizations (Baptista et al. 2020). For example, Tumbas et al. (2018) show how Chief Digital Officers develop a new logic of action and contrast it with existing institutionalized roles to integrate this nascent role into the pre-existing organizational context. Similarly, in a library setting, top managers sought to redefine the mission and rules of their institutional community by adopting an open strategy approach as a shift toward digital strategy work (Morton et al. 2020). Because of this seemingly increasing importance of individuals’ actions and agency, extant research has primarily focused on the digital work of key organizational actors.

Yet digital work also entails sui generis new work forms that did not exist predigital (Aroles, Mitev, et al. 2019). For example, how did “YouTubers” turn casual social media use into a legitimate job category that engages large audiences and earns them remarkable salaries? Such new digital work forms are often contingent, flexible, and emerge outside of the traditional boundaries of organizations (Baptista et al. 2020). They are seldom organized in hierarchies with clear roles that could lend them legitimacy (Prester et al. 2020). Thus, extant research neither adequately

explains how entirely new digital work forms such as “YouTuber” or “digital nomad” become legitimate, nor do they theorize how legitimacy is accomplished without key organizational actors. In the following section, we address these limitations by reviewing the wider literature on legitimation and proposing a perspective that can help understand how new digital work forms become legitimate.

## 2.2 Legitimation: From a Social to a Performative Process

Legitimation is the process by which “institutions are linked to a broader cultural framework of beliefs” that are presumed to be consensually accepted (Johnson et al. 2006, p. 56). Conceptualized as a social process, legitimation of a new work practice occurs through the social construction of that practice as *consonant* with the norms, values, and beliefs that are more widely shared in existing work practices. Legitimation may be prompted by external stakeholders who endorse the validity of a new work practice and its appropriateness to efficiently address the designated objectives (Drori et al. 2009). More recently, research has started to explore internal legitimation as a micro-level accomplishment and accumulation of individual actions (Essén and Värlander 2019; Raviola and Norbäck 2013).

IS research has consequently focused on individual actors and their actions that are aimed at legitimating new IT-enabled business models and organizational forms. Especially the institutional entrepreneurship perspective has advanced our understanding of legitimation on a local level. Institutional entrepreneurship is concerned with “the activities of actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones” (Maguire et al. 2004, p. 657). Research has studied how institutional entrepreneurs seek to legitimate a new set of digital innovation trajectories through trajectory shifts (Henfridsson and Yoo 2014) or how entrepreneurial actions concerned with theorization

and evangelization of open-source services legitimated a new market opportunity (Marsan et al. 2020).

Although this focus on actors and institutional entrepreneurs has generated important insights, it has led to the neglect of the deeper situatedness of the actors involved in legitimation processes. Importantly, such actors are embedded in material practices that are constituted by particular IT enactments. A perspective on legitimation processes as being influenced by primarily intentional human actions marginalizes or disregards the role of IT for legitimation and becomes increasingly inadequate to explain how digital work practices become legitimate (Essén and Värlander 2019). Scholars have highlighted the potential value of attending to a more relational and material view of legitimation (Introna 2019; Raviola and Norbäck 2013), for example by integrating institutional logics with affordance (Essén and Värlander 2019) and sociomaterial approaches (Hultin and Mähring 2014). While offering some of the most sophisticated treatments of the human-technology relationship, this work tends to pay less attention to ongoing processes of legitimation and the temporal relationality between social and material actors, which is the focus of our paper.

Against this background, we conceptualize legitimation as a performative rather than exclusively social process. A performative approach offers a perspective for studying legitimation of digital work practices that is decentred from intentional human actors. The core assumption is based on a process perspective which looks at how social and material phenomena are brought into being in every moment in everyday activities and interactions. A performative process perspective is useful to theorize legitimation because it emphasizes the active involvement of technologies in the materially situated legitimation of new digital work practices. To conceptualize such a performative process perspective of legitimation, we draw from Tim Ingold's (2017) theoretical vocabulary, which has recently gained interest in IS research (Mousavi Baygi et al. 2021). Specifically, Ingold's concept of *correspondence*—defined as "the process by which beings or things literally answer to one another over time"—resonates well with Johnson's (2006) original

definition of legitimation as the *consonance* between practices. Specifically, we expand on Ingold's idea of correspondence as the correspondence of digital work practices with existing work practices to answer the question: how digital nomad work practices become legitimate and how IT matters for such processes. Below, we outline the research method we applied to attend to these dynamic flows of practice.

# 3 Research Method

## 3.1 Research Setting

We studied the legitimation of digital work practices through institutional entrepreneurship in the research setting of digitally nomadic work. The selection of this setting is motivated by the relevance of digital nomads for understanding how digital work practices become legitimate. Digital nomadism also provides a sui generis new form of digital work and an opportunity to better understand how emerging digital work practices become legitimated outside conventional organizations, complementing prior studies' focus on the institutional work of organizational actors in adopting new work practices.

Digital nomads are a cohort of nomadically living, digitally working professionals (Schlagwein 2017). Although the COVID-19 pandemic has brought international travel to a halt, the population of digital nomads in the U.S. rose by 49% in 2020 to 10.9 million American workers (MBO Partners 2020). This trend is projected to increase even more post-COVID-19 due to the much wider acceptance of remote working. While digital nomads have been working remotely for several years (Schlagwein 2018), this way of working has only recently started to emerge from its niche to gain legitimacy and become a mainstream digital work phenomenon (Aroles, Granter, et al. 2019).

Digital nomadism is an extreme case of digital work. It is a new form of work that was not possible prior to the development of mobile IT, the Internet, and cloud computing. Digital nomads have

established new digital work practices that allow them to work from anywhere in the world. While sharing many characteristics with other types of remote digital workers, digital nomads are unique in the sense that they combine their professional independence with a lifestyle of extreme mobility.

## 3.2 Data Collection

We launched the ethnographic fieldwork and data collection for this study in 2016 as part of a wider research program on digital nomadism. Due to the mobile and multi-modal nature of the phenomenon, we adopted a multi-site ethnographic research design (Marcus 1995). Multi-sited ethnography is a promising research method to study contemporary work conducted both online and offline, as well as outside and within the spatial and temporal boundaries of traditional organizations (Akemu and Abdelnour 2020). With this research design, we were able to follow flows of digital work practices as they become seen legitimate by workers and clients (Mousavi Baygi et al. 2021). Table 1 summarizes the types of data collected.

**Table 1: Data Collection**

| Type | Details | Focus of Inquiry |
|---|---|---|
| Participant observations | • 24 weeks in Bangkok, Thailand<br>• 6 weeks in Chiang Mai, Thailand<br>• 6 weeks in Bali, Indonesia | • Nature of work<br>• Work-related interactions<br>• Changes in work practices<br>• Use of technologies at work |
| Online fieldwork | • 400 pages of online forum discussions on popular social media groups for digital nomads<br>• 4 weeks of online interactions between digital nomads on their biggest community Slack channel | • Wider digital nomad discourse<br>• Perception by external stakeholders<br>• Digitally mediated interactions<br>• Presentation of the digital nomad lifestyle |
| Semi-structured interviews | • 46 formal interviews with digital nomads<br>• Several 100s informal conversations | • Structure of a typical workday<br>• Perception of technology<br>• Personal trajectory and key events<br>• Relationship with colleagues and clients |

First, consistent with a multi-site ethnographic research design, the primary data source was participant observation. We visited multiple workspaces of digital nomads to observe and participate in the work practices and develop an in-depth understanding of their actions and

interactions at work *in situ*. Observations implied careful notetaking during full working days in the digital nomads' native environments at co-working spaces, cafés, and public libraries. The field trips also allowed us to work alongside digital nomads and take part in their professional and private social activities, such as workshops, meetups, and social events. This participation helped us gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon, for example what work means for digital nomads, how they interact in professional and social relations, and present their way of working to clients and the community.

Second, to expand fieldwork beyond physical sites, we collected data about online activities such as digital work, community discourses, and interactions of digital nomads. We followed actors and their actions across digital platforms, social media, and online communities. Additionally, we were following a large chat group on Slack used by many digital nomads to organize meetups and social events. These digitally mediated interactions proved instrumental for making sense of the different technologies used at work and that are entailed in the digital nomad phenomenon. These online encounters amounted to 400 pages of online discussions on social media and 80 hours following online interactions on Slack.

Third, we conducted a total of 52 interviews with digital nomads and other stakeholders related to the phenomenon. During interviews, we initially asked participants to describe their typical workday, stories about how they became digital nomads and how their work has changed, and significant events they experienced, among other topics. The interviews were supplemented with hundreds of informal, naturally emerging exchanges with digital nomads at co-working spaces, over lunch, or in chat rooms that often lead to formal interviews.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

We analysed the data following the basic tenets of abductive theorizing grounded in rich field data (Locke 2011). We used qualitative data analysis methods, including memo writing, coding, and

abstracting from the data (Charmaz 2006). We started analysing while still collecting data, which resulted in writing multiple analytical memos about emerging questions, reflections, and ideas that we shared among each other. Aiming to understand the contingent conditions and opportunities that made digital nomads' work practices become appropriate and legitimate, the data were analysed in three phases.

In the first phase, by analysing interviews and field notes, we collected a set of work practices that are key to the digital nomads' way of working. We documented significant events and actions entailed in these work practices, such as points of friction, conditions for action, reactions, and experiences that mattered to how the new digital work practices were performed. Instead of studying actors and their intentional actions, we focused our analysis on mundane, seemingly obvious actions as they unfolded in practice. Already in this phase, we observed how actions that (re)present work in a certain way, such as in video calls and on social media profiles, were central to the remote and asynchronous nature of the digital nomad work practices.

Second, as we were considering these actions of work (re)presentation more, we then undertook open coding, identifying emergent codes related to the actions implicated in different work practices. Codes covered actions such as bidding for jobs on platforms, planning schedules, convincing clients, keeping a low profile, and juggling multiple jobs. Throughout this process of analysing and coding the data, we were able to merge key actions into four broader and more refined work (re)presentations that were common across different work practices: revolutionizing work, adapting work, partially revealing work, and concealing work. Like most qualitative data analyses, our coding was highly iterative, and entailed us moving back and forth to revise our codes as our analysis progressed (Miles and Huberman 1994). Our coding also came to include how the conditions for and (re)presentations of digital nomad work practices changed over time in their interactions with clients, colleagues, and employers.

Third, to make sense of how these work (re)presentations unfolded over time we were inspired by Tim Ingold's concept of *correspondence*, in the sense of answering to one another over time beyond momentary interactions. Ingold's conceptual vocabulary allowed us to account for the ongoing legitimation as an ongoing flow of past action into the present, and conditioning possibilities for future action. Informed by Ingold's work, we aggregated our coding into broader theoretical dimensions that were relevant to our research question, including the correspondence of digital work practices and the key qualities on which correspondence operates. Using abductive reasoning, moving analytically between theoretical concepts, first- and second-order codes, accounts of work practices, and memos, we developed theoretical explanations of how digital nomad work practices become legitimate along a performative process of correspondence.

# 4 Findings

## 4.1 Frictions between Digital Nomad and Conventional Work Practices

The unique differences between digital nomad work practices and conventional working arrangements lead to frictions between digital nomads and their clients, colleagues, and employers. Especially the digital nomads' independent and nomadic way of working is often at odds with the standards and beliefs of the modern corporate workplace. Digital nomads work remotely and, more importantly, change the location from where they get their work done frequently. Taylor, one of the digital nomads we observed and interviewed, described:

> It was also challenging for me because as a salesperson I have to be on calls a lot. I have to be able to be on video calls or web calls and sometimes it is less flexible. I can not go to just any café because it might be loud. And so, then I have to move and so that starts to get really frustrating.

While the spatial distance from co-workers and clients itself creates challenges for digital nomads, frequent travels across continents creates a second friction point that is temporal in nature. Digital

nomads are constantly changing the time zone from which they work while their employers' and clients' time zones typically remain stable. Working as a digital nomad thus implies ongoing navigation of frequently changing time differences at work. The digital nomad Colleen explained her struggles:

> I get to kind of create my own hours, but it is still a sales job, which still means I have to be able to make calls during US business hours. So, when we were in Asia for three months, I was working night shift for three months, and by the end of that third month I was really depressed. And the position was not even good. It paid for my travel, but that was about it. So, I was feeling really frustrated.

Conventional organizations are seldom prepared to accommodate the digital nomads' way of working anywhere and at any time. Thus, workers often quit their 9-to-5 corporate job to gain professional independence from their employer. Digital nomads often choose to work independently by performing freelance jobs or developing their own start-up company. Jarrett, a digital nomad, described this incompatibility between his professional aspirations and his previous company:

> Working a normal corporate job remotely was definitely never an option for me because with everything that was going on in my company, I want to make my own choices. So, that left either freelancing or my own company and I am doing a combination of both because starting your own company is hard and freelancing gives me just a little stable income to survive.

These three unique points of friction characterize what the digital nomad work practices have become as they are enacted in everyday interactions between digital nomads and their clients, colleagues, and employers. Below we trace the conditioning flow of two important digital nomad work practices: the *job seeking practice* and the *performing work practice*. We present these work

practices by composing stories from the workdays of many digital nomads, sensitive to the doings not only by digital nomads themselves but also by numerous technologies that permeate their life and work. Specifically, we show how these practices are represented along different rhythms in practice.

## 4.2 Rhythms of the Job Seeking Practice

Seeking new job opportunities is an ongoing activity for digital nomads. Because most digital nomads work independently of conventional organizations, work is never guaranteed and much of their time is dedicated to finding new clients or experimenting with new sources of income. Even the digital nomads that have a stable remote work job with an organization often work as contractors on side projects or grow their own business to support the nomadic lifestyle.

Colleen is one digital nomad who is often struggling to find work in part because of her nomadic way of working. She works as a copy writer who writes short articles for online travel blogs and lifestyle websites. She has been living in Montenegro for the last three weeks and will be flying to Bali next week. Although she prefers to work on bigger projects with a few select clients to write entire series of articles, more often than not she is running out of such high-profile jobs. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic many of her trusted clients couldn't offer her any work. She then must search for new work opportunities, which for her involves a staged job search process. When she cannot find work with existing clients, she looks for remote work on online job boards:

> The best remote jobs are not posted on remote job boards, they are posted on regular job boards and do not mention that remote work is ok. Sometimes you can tell them that you are working nomadically, and they are fine with it. Sometimes you can sense that they would not accept that and then you need to decide whether you take the job, but you never know.

She looks through some of the job boards that specialize on copy writing and translation work. While most of the jobs are remote, most clients require workers to be at least located in the same time zone to make coordination easier. This time she is out of luck. There are no jobs that she can do from Bali. When she cannot find work on her job boards, she moves to her “last resort” which are digital platforms such as Upwork and Fiverr:

> If I cannot find work within my network, I try “forhire” [job board]. I use Upwork only as a last resort because they charge crazy fees (I think it was 20% or more).

Although digital platforms might appear as ideal places to find remote work, Colleen uses them only if she cannot find work any other way. She cannot compete with many of the other workers on the platform. In our interview she explains:

> Mostly my competitors are from India and the Philippines. And normally they charge half the price. If I want to be competitive on Freelancing websites I basically have to work for ridiculously low prices, or even worse work for free in contests and hope my work gets picked out among hundreds of others.

Colleen uses a particular strategy to still find work on digital platforms. She curates an expert profile on the platform that conditions the matching algorithm in a way that her profile only appears to a few specialized searches. She enters a rate that is significantly above the average price for copy writing work. In her profile, she does not emphasize that she is working as a digital nomad but highlights her travel experience.

> If you want to find good work on here, you need to be excessively picky. Act like you are in the top 0.1% on the site. I mean you probably are anyways.

She is representing her profile in a way that makes her most attractive for the client segment she is targeting. While Colleen is hiding her the frequent changes of location from her clients, the

digital platforms disclose more details than she would like. Upwork displays an indicator of whether she is currently active on the platform or not. Even though she can do most of the writing work asynchronously, Colleen usually tries to be online on Upwork during working hours of her clients to a similar time zone. For her travels in Bali next week that means she needs to adjust her sleep schedule again. Because even on digital platforms most clients are not used to the digital nomad way of working, she tries to work with few clients that are looking for high quality articles and that are willing to pay an appropriate rate. Today, Colleen is lucky. She finds a job to write an article about medieval towns in the Balkan area. The job does not pay her as much as what some of her usual clients would have paid, but it is enough to give her time to find a new job during her upcoming four week stay in Bali.

Some digital nomads are fortunate to have a permanent remote work position; however, these jobs come with their own set of challenges for digital nomads. Taylor works as a sales agent for a US-based company. She used to work from her office in the US, but for two years she is doing the job remotely. The sales job earns her a stable income that she uses to fund her travels. Because she does not enjoy the job, she develops her own yoga training and lifestyle coaching business on the side both to earn some extra money now and to potentially quit her sales job in the future. She has been a yoga teacher when she was living in the US and was looking for a way to stay in contact with her students while she is travelling, she explained.

> So, I launched a blog because I had a bunch of students back at home that were upset I was leaving. So, I was like, “Well, I will do a blog. You guys can keep up with me on the road.” So, I have got that blog and then there’s social media which takes up a ton of time”

Taylor did not plan to monetize her blog, but as she got more annoyed with her sales job, she started to investigate new business opportunities. She took a few courses teaching her how to take a business online. Four weeks later, Taylor is now working on setting up a digital, remote

yoga studio. During the day she works for her employer, but in the evening, she tries to develop her personal brand, one of the first concepts she learned at the course. In one of our interviews, she explains her process:

> I had to learn to self-market myself better. How to start promoting yourself as an independent entity, outside of a company or community. Meaning, I had to have a website that showcases my abilities to the max and gives a perception of a unique person with experience that cannot be found easily, including boatloads of testimonials and an exciting description of previous projects. This will make customers find you.

Taylor tries to occupy a niche in the yoga market by taking advantage of her digital nomad lifestyle. She started her online yoga studio with a simple offering but was not able to acquire many customers beyond the ones she already brought from her yoga studio in the US. Now she is trying to expand her offering and build a distinct online profile:

> I have an online membership for yoga classes now, I also do lifestyle mindset workshops, and then I also host live calls where the group can get online with me once or twice a month and ask questions and kind of get to know each other as a community. I'm also writing a book like it's just all over the place.

All her business activities are aiming at presenting her online profile as "The Nomadic Yogi" and develop this persona across multiple different platforms. On social media, her profile describes her as "living the nomad life," "working 100% remotely," and "Current Location: The World." Although this branding could be confronting to some clients, it attractive to the yoga customers she is looking for as she explained in a conversation she had with an inexperienced digital nomad who asked about how she took her Yoga business online (Fieldnote Chiang Mai, Thailand):

> Like, create yourself the sense of authority and then from there spin-off different digital products and do the eBooks and the video courses and all of that. So that was kind of

> the first line that kind of seemed to make sense to me. And then from there I tested all that out.

Since early 2019, Taylor quit her sales job and is now working full-time as a yoga teacher on “The Nomadic Yogi.” She has a significant cohort of monthly paying students and will continue travelling the world.

Being this open about their way of working and living is not an option for all digital nomads. Jarrett is a software developer specialized in a particular open-source enterprise resource planning technology. He has been working remotely as a digital nomad for more than five years. He is usually working full time as an independent contractor with one or two major clients that guarantee most of his income. For the last three months, Jarrett has been working for a small company in the Netherlands. He did not tell them that he is working as a digital nomad. In our interview he explained us why:

> I think it is interesting to see that in the Netherlands working from home is quite established but working as a digital nomad is definitely not established as yet. I keep it quiet from my clients. I had a freelance employer once and I told them that I am travelling because I said, “Well, I am going to do this so if you are giving me this assignment this is where I will be.” They turned me down because they were just like, “Well, for us that is too scary.”

His client knows that he is working remotely, but Jarrett tries to make it appear as if he was based in the US. He has a US phone number set up that forwards his calls to the local Thai number he is currently using during his time in Bangkok. Next month when he is going to Cambodia, he will redirect the calls to his new number; his client will not notice anything. For his salary he is using a borderless bank account on a Fintech platform so that he can get paid in US dollars. This way he appears as a remote worker from the US while in reality he is travelling to a different country

almost every four weeks. Jarrett usually keeps his nomadic lifestyle a secret in his negotiations with new clients. He is afraid that clients do not want to put up with potential time zone conflicts, insurance issues, or complications regarding taxation. Only time zones sometimes pose a challenge to his work, as he explains:

> The biggest issue I have in finding work is the time zone, but some clients do not care. I do not tell people I am travelling long term; I say that I am based out of the US, but I am currently abroad for a short stint. It resolves most of the legal, tax, and financial questions they have and explains it briefly.

Jarrett knows that it only resolves legal and tax issues on the client's side. He also knows that with his employment, taxation, and visa arrangements he is acting in a legal grey area:

> I think these are the parts where all digital nomads have their own technique to deal with these kinds of problems. So, currently, because I do not have residency status according to what I have read online, I do not have to declare my tax anywhere. So, it is a bit of a loophole basically because national laws are just not adapted to that new kind of work, but it is what it is. I do not live in the US anymore. I am not residing in other countries for long because I am travelling. So, I do not have to pay tax anywhere. It is a very, very gray area.

Keeping careful track of each day he spends in or travelling to the US, he spends less than 30 days per year in the country to avoid having to pay taxes in the US. Because he travels to most countries on a tourist visa, he is also not paying taxes in the countries he visits. While Jarrett's way of keeping his nomadic lifestyle a secret works for him to find work, he feels insecure about the legal situation:

> I am looking forward to the time when countries start to legislate a little bit more around that, because they will definitely make me feel more secure in whichever position I am in. But at the moment that is what it is.

The above vignettes show three very different rhythms in which digital nomads like Colleen, Taylor, and Jarrett seek jobs. They need to find a fine balance between directly showcasing their newly crafted lifestyle online to market a unique persona and at the same time not scaring potential clients off by being to open about their work and travels.

## 4.3 Rhythms of the Performing Work Practice

Not only seeking work, but also the way in which digital nomads perform work is radically different to conventional work practices. Although digital technologies enable digital nomads to work from anywhere, because they change locations frequently, the simple activity of finding a place to perform work is an ongoing challenge. Similarly, the freedom that the lifestyle affords to perform work whenever digital nomads find time or inspiration often does not align with the expectations of clients and employers. In the following, we follow the three digital nomads—Colleen, Taylor, and Jarrett—to see how they go after performing work nomadically and more importantly how their way of working becomes attuned to more conventional work practices.

Colleen has arrived in Bali. At the airport she orders a rideshare taxi on her phone to take her to Ubud, a small city closer the centre of Bali. She knows the Hubud co-working space there that she likes and wants to work from for the next few weeks. Colleen usually works from either co-working spaces or cafés. She enjoys the atmosphere at such places and prefers to have other people around. Colleen only needs a good Wi-Fi connection to get her work done, but she appreciates the amenities that co-working spaces provide. She likes the Hubud co-working space because it has an “exotic vibe” to it that makes her enjoy coming in to work. At the co-working space, Colleen quickly renews her membership and makes her way to the outside area with the

garden and coffee shop. The first thing she is going to do is update her social media profile with an iconic picture that shows her working with the laptop either with the rice field background or in hammock in the garden. While Colleen showcases the digital nomad lifestyle on her personal social media, she keeps it strictly separated from her professional profile. She explains that the term “digital nomad” often comes with a negative connotation with regards to the work one does:

> The digital nomad term kind of conveys the idea that you are not doing much apart from just traveling and being on a holiday. So, I prefer a more serious and professional term such as location-independent, especially to market myself out to companies and future clients and everything. If you say digital nomad, you are not going to be taken seriously, I think, which is a shame because I really do think that when you embrace this kind of lifestyle, you are definitely going to be more productive in your work.

The work she has planned for today consists of finishing and submitting the article for the Upwork client and starting with the new project she has received from one of her existing clients since then. She is fortunate that her work does not require her to be on video calls with clients a lot as she explains:

> I do not have to make loads of calls and conference calls with my clients. I do not have to go back and forth with them all the time. It is really just, I receive an email, I say yes or no, and that is it. I get on the work. I submit within the deadline and that is it.

For other digital nomads that need to be on video calls the co-working space offers so called “Zoom rooms.” While these private rooms allow digital nomads to conduct video calls and join virtual meetings without being disturbed by other co-workers, they also feature a surprisingly different interior design as illustrated in one of our fieldnotes that describes the environment at the Hubud co-working space:

> The interior of the co-working space is mostly made of bamboo giving the space a very exotic look. Sometimes monkeys from the nearby Ubud monkey forest jump on the roof and peak through the windows of the space often distracting the co-workers. The Zoom room on the upper level is painted completely in white and does not show any of the bamboo material. It does not have windows either. Instead, it has sound-proofing wall elements to offer digital nomads a quiet escape from the busyness of downstairs social space.

Compared to the often exotic interior of the main co-working space, the Zoom rooms appear as almost conventional office rooms. They mimic a “normal” office background for clients and colleagues to see on video calls.

Not only the places where work is performed, but also the times when and for how long it is performed are at odds with conventional work practices. Taylor is coming into her co-working space at 6 pm today. She slept until 3 pm and only bought some groceries before work. Taylor has completely adjusted her schedule to US business hours. She currently has a twelve-hour time difference with the head office. That means she will work until the early morning in Chiang Mai. She explains her work rhythm:

> I am always bound by my client’s time zone. Primarily because of calls, I can do the actual work whenever I want but because I am on calls a lot, I am bound by that time zone. So, I usually just work that time zone because I do not get to sleep anyways. So, for me, I am basically working like a vampire in most of the places.

Luckily for her, most co-working spaces in Chiang Mai cater to the digital nomads’ requirements and offer 24/7 access. Even at this late hour, the space is crowded with people.

Taylor’s first task, after setting up her desk and laptop, is opening her calendar. Although usually she is the one that makes the calls, some clients also call her directly. Taylor is using a digital

scheduling tool that integrates with her calendar so that clients can schedule calls with her and book them directly into her calendar. She also has a time zone converter plugin installed that helps her keep track of the multiple time zones that she is working from as well those of her head office, clients, and colleagues. This way Taylor can minimize clashes and the degree to which clients are exposed to her location and time zone issues.

Taylor wants to prove to her boss that she can be productive when working as a digital nomad. At the same time, she wants to be flexible enough to not work at all on some days to be able to go on trips or do sightseeing in Chiang Mai. Because of that she is often working long hours. Today she will work her sales job until 7 am the next morning. She might stay a bit longer at the co-working space though to work on her website for the nomadic Yoga business. In one interview, Taylor describes this mismatch between her colleagues' general perception of digital nomads and the reality of her workdays:

> I keep talking about how badly I want flexibility in my lifestyle, and how badly I want to be able to just decide I want to take a week off. A lot of people view digital nomads as if they are trying to get away with working less. There is this attitude that they are lazy that that is why they do not want to come into the office. But I find it to be totally the opposite. I mean I work full-time and have my business. I work really, really, really freaking hard.

Because Taylor is constantly on calls, she is working from either the "social area" in the co-working space where chatting is welcome or from one of the Skype booths for longer or sensitive calls. Because she has her noise-cancelling headphones on, she does not get distracted easily by the other workers that are still around at this time. While there are many discussions going on at the space during the day, few people are in the mood for conversations at this hour. Because of the limited distractions compared to when she was working at the head office in the US, Taylor does

not always have to work long hours, but can use her work hours more efficiently. She also tried to convince her manager of these productivity benefits when working nomadically:

> I had my manager on the phone, and he said, “Oh, I think you are working at least as much as what you were doing back at the office.” And I said, “Well, let us be honest, I am not always working as much, because I do not have as much work that you would just give me when coming to my office. But the way I can organize myself here, I am way more efficient. Of course, because no one is going to call me just for a little thing. My colleagues are not going to come to talk with me for an hour about their kids, so you are way more efficient.

Tonight, however is one of those days where Taylor is putting in a few extra hours to make her sales targets. She goes back to her apartment at 8am passing by the local market where people are just setting up their stalls. These night shifts will hopefully pay off when she will take two days off next week to go on a trip to Northern Thailand and the Laos border.

Jarrett is working from a coffee shop in Eastern Bangkok today. He does not know the area yet, so in the morning he used a Wi-Fi map app to look for coffee shops with a good Internet connection. Once he has selected a coffee shop with good ratings, he switched to the Grab ride share app on his phone to hail a taxi to the location. At the coffee shop he orders breakfast and asks for the Wi-Fi password. He pays using his borderless Fintech app that allows him to pay and get paid in more than 50 currencies with minimal fees. Jarrett is using apps and digital tools for almost every situation he encounters throughout his workday. While some tools are common for conventional, non-remote software developers, for the majority of tools Jarrett is an early adopter. He explained the differences in tool use between his job and personal projects:

> The tools for the developer job are pretty standard. It is using Zoom for meetings and then Slack. There are other tools but those are the major ones. But then personally and

> my side projects, there is always a million tools, right? So, I have apps that run my calendar for me. I have robots that run my social media for me. I have website popups, landing pages, and membership pages. There are a million different things. I think I probably have like 20 different tools for just the one project that I am currently working on.

As part of the work, clients and employers often require Jarrett to use specific tools which are at odds with his preferences. Today he is working on a large mobile development project for a client in Europe. He is part of a bigger team of developers. Because of the significant size of the project and the requirements to manage the different remote workers Jarrett must track the status of his tasks and work progress in a complex project management platform. Jarrett is reluctant to open the use the tool. Not because he does not want his work progress to be tracked, but because he thinks his development workflows are being disrupted by the reporting requirements of the tool. He explains:

> I have to work with a project management software tool that I don't normally use. I have a client that wants to use a tool called Rally and someone is using Pivotal Tracker and someone is using some other thing, and that is just not how I want to interface with my day. But then as the projects dictate, I will use whatever client software product they require me to use.

Although Jarrett would prefer other project management tools, because he is usually labelled as the individual that works outside of the normal office, he is the one that need to adapt to clients' and companies' preferences.

Jarrett only works until noon today. Now he takes a break and goes to the gym. He might go back to work later in the evening, but he could also just continue tomorrow. He will take some time in the afternoon to work on his side projects. Because his job is mostly asynchronous, he has the

flexibility to choose when to get the work done; however, sometimes this also leads to extra hours when he underestimates the workload. Jarrett explained these inconsistent work rhythms inherent in asynchronous, remote work:

> Sometimes I just have to estimate what my client is expecting. You get that with the daily stand-ups with the meetings. You can feel what they are expecting from you. So, I just base my output on that. Sometimes I just work a few hours a day. I mean they expect me to work eight hours a day but sometimes I do not do that because I can finish the work early. But then on other days I work very long hours like the entire day. Because sometimes I underestimate the work and I encounter problems that I did not foresee but I still have to deliver within the day or within a short time, so I have to work long hours.

Following the three digital nomads along a typical workday surfaces the different rhythms in which work is performed nomadically. The distinct ways of working suggest that consonance between digital nomads' work practices and the conventional work practices of their colleagues and clients is conditioned by the way in which work practices are represented in practice. This includes the way IT are both being used intentionally to represent and unintentionally representing these work practices. In the following, we analyse these different (re)presentations and explain how corresponding (re)presentations lead to legitimation of digital nomad work practices over time.

# 5 Theoretical Analysis

## 5.1 Dynamics of Work (Re)presentation in Digital Nomad Work Practices

In our analysis of how digital nomad work practices are performed, we trace the dynamics in which work is (re)presented in practice to cope with the friction inherent in the work. Taylor was constantly searching for workplaces that are suitable for her sales job. Paradoxically, for a location-independent digital nomad, the location of the workplace is becoming a major concern to

get work done. While digital nomads can generally work independently of a fixed location, they often had to work according to a particular time zone that was different from the one they were physically located in. For example, Colleen was going through times of frustration and depression when she was working night shifts, “like a vampire,” to meet her client’s expectations. Finally, the unique professional arrangements regarding multiple jobs, side gigs, and plural careers are perceived as another point of friction between digital nomads and conventional employers. These unique spatial, temporal, and professional points of friction challenge a direct negotiation of legitimacy between digital nomads and their clients, colleagues, and employers. Digital nomad work practices are entirely digitally mediated, which raises the importance of how work is presented and represented in practice. The dynamics of work (re)presentation capture how the doings of these digital nomad work practices change in the flow of action and specifically the flow of other work practices, most importantly the conventional work practices that the digital nomad work practice is intertwined with. They also implicate how the flow of the two work practices conditions the digital nomad way of working to be ultimately accepted and taken as legitimate. We identified four dynamics of work (re)presentation that stood out in our analysis of the digital nomad work practices. These four dynamics of work (re)presentation and their actions are summarized in Table 2 and discussed in detail below.

**Table 2: Dynamics of Work (Re)presentation in Digital Nomad Work Practices**

| **Work (re)presentation** | **Description and actions** | **Illustrative Quotations** |
|---|---|---|
| Revolutionising work | *Explicitly showcasing work practice as different to the conventional way of working and thereby challenging accepted way of working.*<br>• Proving it to colleagues<br>• Explicitly showcasing lifestyle on social media<br>• Crafting a new way of working | “So, my boss allowed me to work remotely. I was based in Hong Kong to test the waters. And then I told him that you know what? This job that I have I can do it wherever I am. Just let me prove it to you. So, I proved it to him. So, he allowed me to travel for six months, that is where we went to New Zealand, Fiji, Vanuatu, to the Pacific Islands. And then I proved it to him. The ROI was sky scraping like it was higher compared to when I was in the office.” |

| Work (re)presentation | Description and actions | Illustrative Quotations |
|---|---|---|
| | • Working hard again preconceptions<br>• Debunking stereotypes | |
| Adapting work | *Representing work practice as being the same as the conventional way of working and adjusting way of working to align with the representation.*<br>• Aligning work schedule<br>• Adjusting communication preferences<br>• Scheduling tools for client convenience<br>• Crafting workspace to fit others<br>• Fintech platforms remove currency issues | "Time zones are the hardest part. It depends on where you are nomading. Obviously, here [Thailand] there is a full half day difference. So, for me to get a hold of people in the morning, I need to call them at 9:00 PM, 10:00 PM my time, which is a big deal for me. That is a couple of days each week where I cannot go out or make plans just so that I can make those calls." |
| Partially revealing work | *Representing only the accepted parts of the work practice and not emphasising parts that could challenge the accepted way of working.*<br>• Doing multiple side gigs in secrecy<br>• Not showing certain information on social media<br>• Being silent about current location<br>• "Skype rooms" in co-working spaces mimic conventional office space<br>• Scheduling tools conceal the true time zone | "I am calling people and companies and I tell them I work remotely but I am not telling them that I am actually in Chiang Mai. I do not know if that is a good idea, I just keep it quiet and low profile. I am also not screaming it out loud like on my Instagram you will not see that I am in Chiang Mai. It is not out in the open that I am a digital nomad." |
| Concealing work | *Actively hiding parts of work and circumventing rules that can even lead into legal grey areas.*<br>• Faking a location to find work<br>• Hiding work as a tourist<br>• Disguising workplace IT as personal tools<br>• Spoofing a location through digital tools | "The cool thing about living in a country for only a month at a time usually is that 30 days or 60 days visas on arrival are fine in most countries. And if not, you take a side trip over to Cambodia while you are in Thailand and you come back for another 30 days. You just kind of figure it out. But it can get a little complicated depending on what country you are from. For the US it is a little bit more flexible because I still show that I am a resident here even though I am never there. My mail goes to my parents' house. Just so that it looks like I live somewhere." |

The first dynamic of work (re)presentation is concerned with *revolutionizing work*. That is, the unequivocal promotion of the digital nomads work practices and the consequent challenge of

established organizations of work. Revolutionizing work explicitly showcased the digital nomad work practice as being radically different to the conventional way of working. Digital nomads proudly present their lifestyle and work practices as being fringe. Social media profiles and even professional work profiles on online labour platforms positioned workers as “living the nomad life” and “working 100% remotely.” Digital technologies played a particularly important role in framing the way of working in a particularly attractive way and showcasing their personal lifestyle. In so doing, it confronted digital nomads’ clients, colleagues, and employers with the new digital work practice. When allowed to work nomadically, they work extra hard to debunk common preconceptions of workers “on vacation paid by the company.” Specifically, some digital nomads forced this confrontation as they were testing their clients’ willingness to deal with digital nomads. Often that meant digital nomads were trying to convince their employers or clients of benefits that matter for their organization such as creativity, efficiency, and productivity. Because digital nomads are open to experiment with new digital tools, they often adopted time and other progress tracking technologies to make these benefits of nomadic working “visible” to their clients in the form of numbers. Ultimately, revolutionizing could lead to a challenge of the current, accepted way of working and potentially overthrowing it. Challenges of integrating digital nomads into existing workflows were presented as an opportunity for the organization. Although Colleen quit her company after the remote work experiment, it was generally considered a success and opened the possibility for more workers to go on remote work stints. Thus, revolutionizing work is about inventing and presenting a radically different way of working and, at the same time, trying to replace the established way of working.

The second dynamic of work (re)presentation is concerned with *adapting work*. That is, the adjustment of the digital nomad work practices to align with established working arrangements and ultimately appear like these conventional work practices. Adapting work staged the digital nomad work practice as being indistinguishable from the conventional way of working to not

impede a working relationship. Digital nomads aligned their work schedules to appear as being in the same time zone as their clients and employers. Depending on their current location, this meant working night shifts or long hours to appear as “available” on communication tools or online labour platforms. Digital technologies enabled even more extreme forms of adaptation by opening the digital nomads’ digital calendars to their clients through scheduling technologies. These tools display the digital nomad’s calendar in the client’s local time zone and thereby entirely hide time zone differences from the interaction. Another aspect, where remnants of nation state and citizenship might become visible to clients is during billing, when local and foreign currencies need to be handled. Again, digital nomads used digital tools such as borderless bank accounts based on Fintech platforms that offer multi-currency accounts to simplify the transaction with their clients and offer them payment options in their local currency. While adapting work often helped digital nomads win and keep clients and employers, they inadvertently submit to the institutionalized way of working. Paradoxically, by doing so they were giving up the autonomy that originally led one to choose the digital nomad way of working in the first place. For example, digital nomads chose their next travel destinations based on the time zone difference with their current client and thus avoided locations that would require them to work night shifts.

The third dynamic of work (re)presentation is concerned with *partially revealing work*. That is, the configuration of the digital nomad work practice in a way that the accepted aspects of the work practice become apparent, but less accepted aspects that could challenge conventional work practices were omitted. Partially revealing work carefully disclosed fragments of the work practice depending on the client’s or employer’s acceptance of new ways of working. For example, digital nomads deliberately crafted their online profiles and personal websites to emphasize certain aspects of their digital nomad way of working. Often that meant that working remotely was accepted, but digital nomads did not want to stretch their clients’ acceptance too much by revealing that they are not working remotely from a fixed location, but continuously travelling

across the world. Co-working spaces were often used as a refuge where digital nomads could present a degree of normalcy in their way of working. Especially the “Skype rooms” were used to mimic a conventional office space and contain potential questions about their locations from clients. When Skype rooms were not available digital tools could also be used to not give away obvious hints of exotic locations through virtual backgrounds. This (re)presentation of partially revealing also become apparent in the way that digital nomads organized their professional arrangements. When dealing with clients, who expected full commitment, digital nomads frame their work as focused exclusively on the one client. However, in reality, they were often working for multiple clients or at least working on side projects and their own businesses. Partially revealing made digital nomads appear as more conventional remote workers. They did not stage themselves as normal workers as in adapting work, but they also did not fully out themselves as digital nomads.

The fourth dynamic of work (re)presentation is concerned with *concealing work*. That is, the intentional or unintentional hiding of the digital nomad work practice potentially leading to circumvention of rules and policies in legal grey areas. Concealing work refers to how the digital nomad work practice conceals itself in terms of what is and how it is performed. Concealing the digital nomad work practice is often necessary when labour regulations and national laws lack behind the developments of new digital work practices. Nation states’ regulatory framework are seldom prepared to handle the digital nomads’ unique requirements regarding immigration, taxation, and insurance and to accept it as a legitimate form of work. Fortunately for digital nomads, entering a country with a laptop and other digital work equipment is now accepted by most countries, which allows digital nomads to masquerade their work equipment as personal devices. Digital nomads usually enter countries on tourist visas that are granted on arrival, even though they work in the country. Most digital nomads are aware of these legal issues and would prefer to be able to formally receive a work visa; however, few countries are prepared to offer a

visa that fits the requirements of digital nomads. Similarly, we saw how digital nomads often hide from clients and employers that they are working as digital nomads to simplify the taxation process for the organization. These omissions often come with tax savings taxes for the digital nomads as well. For example, Jarrett was carefully planning his visits to and days within the US to keep his tax-free status in the US.

## 5.2 Legitimation as the Correspondence of Work Practices

Our findings and analysis reveal how work practices are becoming digital nomad work practices conditioned by the ways in which work is (re)presented in practice. As summarized in Table 2, identified four dynamics of work (re)presentation in the digital nomads' job seeking and performing work practices: revolutionizing, adapting, partially revealing, and concealing.

Our analysis revealed how these work (re)presentations were not singular presentations of the work practice but implicated in an assemblage of work (re)presentations. Not every (re)presentation was always equally foregrounded but becoming significant in particular actions and interactions at work. Equally, they are also not static representations of what the digital nomad work practice is, but instead continuously changing the conditioning flow of action. The order in which these work (re)presentations unfold does not matter. Instead, it is the opportune timing of (re)presentations that allows the digital nomad and conventional work practices to attend to one another.

In the following, we will analyse the unwinding of this assemblage of work (re)presentations in what Ingold (2017) defines as a correspondence of lines. We analyse how this correspondence between the digital nomad work practice and conventional work practices unfolds as a performative process of legitimation. From the analysis, three correspondences are identified—*attuning*, *commoning*, and *unfolding*—and explained how these correspondences lead to the legitimation of the digital nomad work practice. In other words, the conditioning flow of work

(re)presentations answer to one another in practice with an inner consonance conditioning the possibilities to resolve the tensions in-between seemingly incompatible work practices and actualizing the legitimation of the digital nomad work practice. Figure 1 summarizes our analysis, showing how the digital nomad work practice is becoming legitimate along the three correspondences.

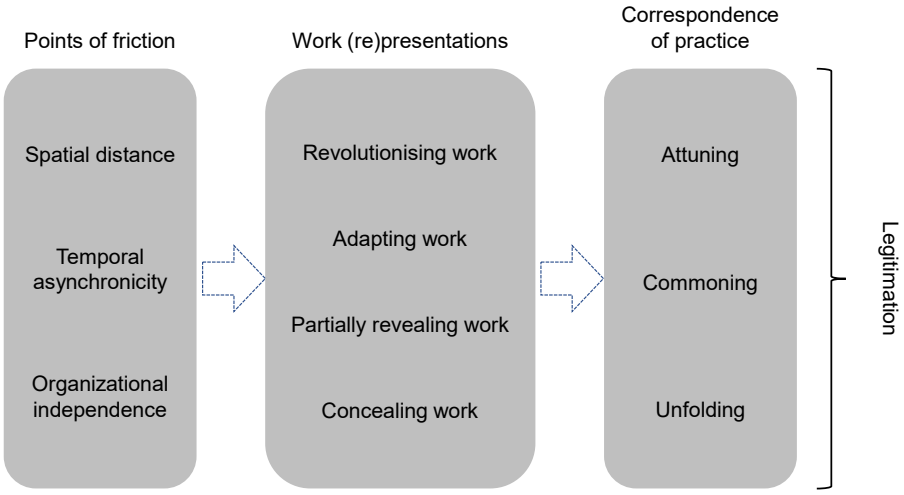


**Figure 1: Legitimation as the Correspondence of Digital Nomad Work Practices**

### 5.2.1 Attuning Correspondence

The first correspondence is a matter of exposure of the digital nomad work practice to a variety of other work practices of clients, colleagues, and employers until they become harmonious over time. We label this correspondence *attuning correspondence*. The attuning correspondence is attentional. The digital nomad work practice become attuned through its exposure to the many other work practices. Although working independently of a fixed location and often even independent of a traditional organization, digital nomads are nevertheless engaged with others. Arguably workers of new digital work practices require an immanent exposure to their clients and colleagues, as they are the marginalized group that needs to convince others of their legitimacy.

It is through continuous experimentation and fine-tuning of actions and interactions and attending to the counterpart's attentive reactions that work practices are becoming attuned.

Attuning is always skilful. That is, it requires responses that have been developed through experience in practice. For example, as an experienced digital nomad finding work has become a habitual practice for Taylor, she has templates set up of how she communicates with clients and, more importantly, she also knows what she should not mention in these interactions to not disturb the rhythms of her clients work practices. To get to that stage though she first had to make the painful experience of being rejected by clients because of her way of working. In this process of learning and skilful correspondence, the digital nomad work practice is becoming differently as it becomes more attuned to other work practices.

Attuning does not rely exclusively on the adapting work (re)presentation. Differences and complications are an intrinsic part of attuning. Because digital nomads attend to such disruptions of the flow of their work practices and are experienced to respond to them by changing the course of action. So, in the flow of practice, certain work (re)presentations might lead to disruptions sometimes, but even then, attuning is possible by being exposed to other flows of action.

### 5.2.2 Commoning Correspondence

The second correspondence between digital nomad and conventional work practices is concerned with how both practices flow along together and come to an understanding despite, or possibly because of, their apparent differences. Following Ingold (2017), we refer to this correspondence as the *commoning correspondence*. Treating "to common" as a verb, commoning is then about communicating in a participatory process of living together. We saw how communication with clients, colleagues, and employers is a major focus in the everyday work practices of digital nomads. The different work (re)presentations are part of how the digital nomad work practice is communicated and thus can "live" together with other digital and non-digital work

practices. It is in these ordinary actions of doing and organizing work as implicated participants immersed in the digital work practice that the digital nomad work practice is “made to work.”

Commoning is a sharing of experience. By working together, digital nomads as well as the people that they work with together make the experience of finding creative ways to make this new way of working possible. This sharing of experience is not only about past experiences but entails an imaginative stretch of possible future experiences. In commoning, people cast their experience forward to allow others to join them in experiencing new work practices together. For example, we saw how Colleen was writing a journal of her digital nomad work experience as part of her company’s remote work experiment. This journal included valuable learnings and potential issues of her working as a digital nomad for the company and was regularly shared in management meetings. Importantly, the journal did not only include experiences that Colleen has already made but was always written with an eye toward Colleen’s future as she wanted to continue working as a digital nomad even after the remote work experiment concluded.

Commoning requires variation. No growth or progress is possible in how digital nomad work practices become accepted in the sharing of experience unless there are differences in what each practice and participant bring to the correspondence. In other words, for the digital nomad work practice to become legitimate there must be differences in the digital nomad and conventional work practices. At the same time, it is in the correspondence that each practice comes into its own as a unique way of working with singular and recognizable doings and sayings. Thus, through the work (re)presentations the differences of the digital nomad work practice come into being and are made present to clients and colleagues. In Jarrett’s work practice the differences in preferences for digital tools between digital nomads and their clients came to the fore. But because of these differences they are able to bring their experiences with either technology or can develop a common ground from which they grow their working relationship. It is these

differences in the rhythms of the work practices that open the shared experience to its potential variation and that animate the digital nomad work practice.

### 5.2.3 Unfolding Correspondence

The third correspondence is a matter of growing out of the folds and frictions that initially exist in the interactions between the digital nomad work practice and the work practices of clients, colleagues, and employers. We label this correspondence *unfolding correspondence*. The unfolding correspondence has a dual meaning. On the one hand, its commonsensical meaning is about the development and growth of the relationship between work practices over time. On the other hand, its more literal meaning is about the disentangling of enmeshed and convoluted work practices. Following the work practices of digital nomads, we saw how they were coping with a set of spatial, temporal, and professional frictions that were inherent to their interactions at work. These frictions emerged as the work practices are folded in through new working relationships and are then unfolded in the ongoing actions and (re)presentations at work.

Unfolding is brought about from within. It thus requires an attentiveness to the inner rhythms as well as the temporal and material qualities of each practice. Correspondence then is brought about from the unfolding of relations from the inside in a continual flow. In other words, the digital nomad work practice is brought into being from within the meshwork of everyday work, in conjoint actions between digital nomads and other stakeholders. From within Colleen's interaction with her colleagues, who still work from the company's headquarter, but envy her in Zoom calls and meetings, her way of working is becoming the digital nomad work practice. Legitimation then is the developmental unfolding of the multitude of relations within which work practices emerge and are taken for granted.

Unfolding emphasizes the temporal flow of correspondence. This means temporal flow as duration: not a sequence of acts or events but the ongoing conditioning of ever-new possibilities

by previous flows of action. This subjective experience of temporal flows comes to the fore in Colleen's way of seeking work. Although her job seeking process could be presented as a series of steps, such an analysis would miss the temporal quality and precarious experience as Colleen is desperately trying to find jobs. Unfolding develops not in interactions between static entities, but in the process of going along together. In other words, unfolding is not conditioned by a single work (re)presentation or even an assemblage of such (re)presentations, but in the ongoing flow of (re)presentations. For example, Jarrett Thus to explain legitimation in this sense is to understand it forwards, in the unfolding of the processes and relations that give rise to the digital nomad work practice.

In summary, we develop a performative process theory of legitimation of digital nomad work practices. It articulates the ongoing (re)presentation of work when work is performed and organized independent of the spatial and temporal boundaries of conventional work practices. Legitimation, from a performative process perspective, is an emergent outcome of the correspondence of work practices—that is, their going along together and answering to one another. Therefore, we must think of the digital nomad work practice not as what it is (re)presented, but how it is continuously (re)presented in practice as it corresponds with other work practices. It is in this continuous correspondence between digital nomad and conventional work practices that the digital nomad work practice takes form and thus becomes legitimate. Only, in the correspondences—*attuning*, *commoning*, and *unfolding*—is the work practice becoming *the* digital nomad work practice.

# 6 Discussion

This study examined how digital nomad work practices are (re)presented in practice and, in the unfolding of these work (re)presentations, become legitimate. Above, we have presented a theory of legitimation of digital nomad work practices based on a performative process perspective. In

this section, we discuss the implications of this theory for understanding digital nomad work practices as well as studying the (re)presentation of work in digital and remote work contexts more generally. Finally, we examine the general implications of a performative process perspective on theorizing legitimation of digital work practices.

## 6.1 Implications for Understanding Digital Nomad Work Practices

This paper offers an in-depth study of digital nomad work practices. Our analysis traces the flow of two important everyday work practices and provides rich accounts of the actions and interactions that enact the digital nomad work practices. Based on this analysis, our theory explains how an unfolding of multiple work (re)presentations bring the work practices into being to become accepted and perceived as legitimate. Despite a growing appreciation of research with an empirical focus on practices, prior studies on digital nomadism have so far largely ignored this approach (Hensellek and Puchala 2021; Wang et al. 2018). Research has focused on the individual digital nomad and nomad communities exploring questions such as motivations, identity, and belonging (Prester et al. 2019; Thompson 2019) or emphasized specific aspects of the lifestyle such as travel (Reichenberger 2017) and digital infrastructure (Sutherland and Jarrahi 2017). Cook's -Cook (2020) analysis of disciplining practices for purposes of managing the boundaries between work and leisure is one exception that focuses on a particular type of practices. Our research extends existing research by offering an in-depth analysis of digital nomad work practices. Instead of focusing on practices as habitual, patterned actions, we trace how these practices unfold and are "worked" into being in the ongoing actions and interactions between digital nomads and their clients, colleagues, and employers. Our theory thus foregrounds the emergence of the digital nomad work practices in their open-ended becoming as something that is continuously reconfigured in the correspondence of practice.

A second implication for understanding the work of digital nomads concerns the resolution of tensions between digital nomad and conventional work practices. Despite the overwhelmingly positive image of the digital nomad lifestyle that is painted in the popular press, the literature on digital nomadism has repeatedly hinted at risks and challenges associated with digital nomadism (Hensellek and Puchala 2021). Research has looked at tensions related to the spatial, temporal, and professional independence that the digital nomad way of working offers, but little consideration has been paid to how these tensions are resolved in practice. By studying work as it unfolds in practice, we found how a set of work (re)presentations continuously reconfigured what the digital nomad work practice is and unfolded the initial frictions inherent to the work practices. This process of resolution, or legitimation, is explained by the three correspondences: attuning, commoning, and unfolding.

Our study also has implications for studying the relationship between independent digital nomads and the conventional world of work. Although institutionalization has led to the digital nomad phenomenon entering the professional mainstream (Aroles, Granter, et al. 2019), research at the intersection between digital nomad and conventional work practices is still in its infancy. Frick and Marx (2021), for example, have analyzed the paradoxical attitudes of managers towards integrating digital nomads into their organization as they advocate for flexible working arrangements but resist cultural change. Our findings complement this work; however, by emphasizing work (re)presentations in practice and the correspondence of work practices, our theory offers an explanation of how digital nomad work and corporate structures can become attuned over time.

## 6.2 Implications for Studying Work (Re)presentation in Digital Work

Our study also offers new insight to research on work (re)presentation in digital work. With the increasing digitalization of work, the ways in which work is (re)presented in and with digital

technologies is being recognized as important for understanding how work (re)presentation is entwined with the actual doing of work and how it can be organized (e.g., Burton-Jones 2014; Da Cunha and Carugati 2018). Work (re)presentations are particularly significant in the context of digital remote work, in which work cannot be observed directly due to spatial distance, temporal asynchronicity, and organizational independence. As Bailey et al. (2012) have shown, how digital simulations matter for the type of digital work that automobile engineers performed in practice and, more importantly, how these work practices can be organized. Our study recognizes the importance of a work (re)presentation-focused view on digital work practices. It offers an explanation of how an emergent unfolding of work (re)presentations in practice conditions the legitimation process of new digital work practices.

Previous literature on work (re)presentation with digital technologies has developed two distinct models. In her book, Zuboff (1988) conceptualized the informating property of technology and developed a model of work (re)presentation in which digital technologies automatically report and (re)present work. In contrast, in a study of sales agents and their managers, Da Cunha (2013) and Da Cunha and Carugati (2018) theorized a dramaturgical model of work (re)presentation for a context in which workers are able to report their work themselves. Our study complements this work by focusing on the digital work context in which work is partly (re)presented by digital technologies (e.g., social media algorithms and time tracking tools) and partly shaped by the workers themselves. Our theory extends this work in two directions. First, it explains how work (re)presentations condition the emergence and legitimation of nascent digital work practices beyond impression management purposes. Second, it offers a processual and relational account of the (re)presentation of work by showing how, in the correspondence of practice, actors other than the digital nomads themselves are implicated in the enactment of work (re)presentations.

A third implication of our work is concerned with the interplay of (re)presentations and practices. Even though Zuboff, in her seminal book (1988), has emphasized the importance and entwined

nature of the two, little IS research has considered their integration in explaining working and organizing. Practice scholars have even argued for an incommensurability of the two approaches and called for shifting "the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality (e.g., do they mirror nature or culture?) to matters of practices/doings/actions" (Barad 2003, p. 802). Our theory can help move beyond this gap by explaining work (re)presentations as open-ended accomplishments in practice. Based on Ingold's (2017) concept of correspondence in practice our model theorizes work (re)presentations not as static descriptions of a work practice that already exists out there, but rather living enactments of what a work practice is becoming in the flow of practice.

### 6.3 Implications for Theorizing Legitimation

Finally, our study contributes to legitimation theory more broadly by proposing a performative process theory of legitimation. Recent research on legitimation has problematized the relatively static nature of legitimation processes that are often theorized as one-off processes (De Vaujany 2019). In such a view, legitimation is triggered by institutional actors and after going through a sequence of stages reaches a stable state of legitimacy at which a new organizational form or practice has become legitimate. Our approach goes beyond an evolutionary process view of legitimation by theorizing ongoing legitimacy performances. Work practices are becoming legitimate as "moving targets." There are no fixed practices that are consonant with other practices. Legitimation is explained as a correspondence of practice rather than consonance of cultural frameworks. Mousavi Baygi et al. (2021) explain, "correspondence is not something that an actor does vis-à-vis another actor/entity thanks to her inherent agency. Rather, it is a creative (trans)formation a line goes through while being attuned, common, or following other flowing lines of action" (p. 433). A performative process perspective of legitimation thus sensitizes us to how new work practices that are becoming legitimate are not in any way pre-existing of the legitimation process. Instead, work practices are coming into being as they are performed as being legitimate.

In other words, work practices are enacted as what they are becoming through their ongoing legitimation; “they correspond to constitute each other’s possibility to be what they are, and to enact a meshwork in which certain ways of being and acting become taken as meaningful, obvious, and legitimate” (Hultin et al. 2020, p. 21).

Finally, our study offers a process-centric point of departure to approach the question of materiality in legitimation theory. By taking a performative approach toward theorizing legitimation processes our theory goes beyond an exclusively social process perspective (Johnson et al. 2006; Suchman 1995). Increasingly, scholars are concerned with questions of materiality in the study of legitimation and institutional processes (De Vaujany 2019). For example, research has developed sociomaterial and affordance-based perspectives of institutional logics (Faik et al. 2020; Hultin and Mähring 2014) or a theory of institutional work grounded in Callon’s concept of agencement (Raviola and Norbäck 2013) to account for non-human agency. Although this work made strong contributions to reaching closer to institutional theory that takes materiality seriously, they also tend to background certain aspects of the relationship between material technologies and legitimation processes. Matters of temporality and ongoing becoming are often backgrounded at the expense of concepts of non-human agency and habitual patterns in the legitimation process. Our performative process theory of legitimation shares with these perspectives that materials and digital technologies can produce comparisons and justifications, but it does so from a temporal point of departure. Our theory thus offers a view of legitimation that foregrounds the emergence of a specific socio-technological transformation, “a shared ‘here and now’ by a group of people, places and artifacts” (De Vaujany 2019, p. 346). Legitimation is the process which makes practices, things, and people emerge naturally in the flow of action.

# 7 Limitations and Conclusion

As one of few ethnographic, process-oriented explorations of legitimation of new digital work practices, our study has several limitations, opening up opportunities for future research. For example, although our access to digital nomads and their work practices was exceptionally comprehensive and we were able to observe interactions with digital nomads' clients and colleagues, participating in these practices from the clients' side would have yielded an even richer understanding. In addition, the exploratory nature of our study limited our capacity to propose specific conditions that lead to legitimation. Further comparative research is required to establish which work (re)presentations contribute to corresponsive or merely interactional work practices. Finally, our research focused on fairly narrow work practices of digital nomads and their clients and colleagues. There is need to broaden the performative process perspective of legitimation to people and societies at large who are crucial to enabling substantive transformations of work.

To conclude, our study pioneers the exploration of legitimation processes of new digital work practices. Based on an ethnographic study of digital nomad work practices, we analyzed the unfolding of a set of work (re)presentations, identified how digital workers and conventional organizational actors answer to one another in the flow of practice by drawing from Tim Ingold's concept of correspondence, and proposed key qualities on which correspondence of digital work practices operate. We also highlighted important implications of our findings for understanding digital nomad work practices, as well as theorizing work (re)presentations in digital remote work and legitimation of digital work practices more broadly.

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