

The Relational Value of Time in Digital Work: The Challenge of Forming Relationships for Digital Nomads

Paper Development Workshop

Julian Prester, The University of Sydney Business School, julian.prester@sydney.edu.au

Dubravka Cecez-Kecmanovic, UNSW Business School, dubravka@unsw.edu.au

Daniel Schlagwein, The University of Sydney Business School, schlagwein@sydney.edu.au

The evolving landscape of work, particularly the rise of digital and remote work, has become a growing stream of research in management and organization studies. We 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). Scholars such as Schlagwein & Jarrahi (2020), Abraham et al. (2021), and Rhymer (2022) have extensively documented the shift toward digital work practices that prioritize independence and flexibility, allowing individuals to work from any location, choose their collaborations, and set their own schedules. This literature has established a consensus that the digital workplace offers unprecedented freedom, reshaping traditional notions of work organization and employee autonomy.

However, by optimizing for spatial, professional, and temporal independence, digital workers are inadvertently creating social independence resulting in a highly individualistic work life. In other words, while digital workers gain unparalleled control over their time and work environment, this very independence raises questions about the social fabric of the workplace. Wang et al. (2020) suggest that digital work settings are ripe for alienation, as the individualist ethos may undermine the collective and relational aspects of work life. Thus, the question arises: *In a work setting optimized for individualistic freedom, how do workers form relationships, and how does that affect their sense of belonging at work?* Developing a better understanding of the potential for social isolation in digital work settings is crucial as it could have profound implications for worker well-being, organizational culture, and the overall sustainability of remote work models. As digital work practices continue to proliferate, it becomes increasingly important to address the social dynamics of these environments. Without this understanding, we risk perpetuating work environments that may be efficient in spatial and temporal terms but are socially impoverished and detrimental to the human need for connection and belonging.

To answer the question of how, in a work setting optimized for individualistic freedom, workers form relationships, and how that affects their sense of belonging at work, we draw on 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 (Aroles et al., 2023; Olga, 2020). The data sources for the multi-sited ethnography included 21 weeks of participant observations in physical locations, online observations, and 52 interviews. We used an abductive data analysis method as described by (Gioia et al., 2013). In particular, we combined qualitative data analysis techniques borrowed from grounded theory building with theoretical concepts grounded in a process-relational understanding of temporality (Bergson, 1911) and the sociology of time (Zerubavel, 1979).

The process-relational perspective is based in a thoroughgoing processual understanding of the world. Much of organisational research is grounded in classic conceptions of time as a resource (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002). This view suggests that time is a good with the implication that the more of it one controls the more valuable it is. 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). Here, time derives its value from within the unfolding of relationships over time. In other words, the more people time is shared with the more valuable it becomes.

The importance of shared time also features prominently in the sociology of time. That is because, in social processes, we seldom encounter temporal rhythms in isolation, but always as a correspondence of multiple, rhythmic trajectories (Ingold, 2017; Zerubavel, 1979). These temporal rhythms represent the "regularities of practice" (Steinhardt & Jackson, 2014, p. 134) that humans begin to structure their work and social life around. In other words, such recurrent temporal structures, crucial for socialisation processes, unfold in rhythmic rather than strictly linear order. The process-relational perspective and lens of temporal rhythms may provide an alternative explanation of creating or reducing a sense of belonging at work. Thus, in this paper, we explore how temporal rhythms and their rhythmic correspondence conditions the way in which relations are created or disrupted in a setting where work is remote and mediated by digital technology.

This work contributes to the conversation by challenging the prevailing view of time in digital work and offering an alternative framework that emphasizes the relational value of time. At the core of this framework is what we refer to as the "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. Importantly, these flows are not exclusively socio-temporal. Digital technologies matter deeply for this 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, relationships become formed and get disrupted in a setting that research suggests 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.

References

- Abraham, H., Jack, M., Mazmanian, M., Asante-Agyei, C., Erickson, I., & Hong, J. (2021). More than Temporal Control: Forms of Agency That Matter to High-Skilled Independent Workers. *Academy of Management Proceedings, 2021*, 16322.
- Aroles, J., Bonneau, C., & Bhankaraully, S. (2023). Conceptualising “Meta-Work” in the Context of Continuous, Global Mobility: The Case of Digital Nomadism. *Work, Employment and Society, 37*(5), 1261–1278.
- Aroles, J., Mitev, N., & Vaujany, F.-X. de. (2019). Mapping themes in the study of new work practices. *New Technology, Work and Employment, 34*(3), 285–299.
- Bergson, H. (1911). *Matter and memory*. Courier Corporation.
- Gioia, D. A., Corley, K. G., & Hamilton, A. L. (2013). Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research: Notes on the Gioia methodology. *Organizational Research Methods, 16*(1), 15–31.
- Ingold, T. (2017). On human correspondence. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, 23*(1), 9–27.
- Olga, H. (2020). In search of a digital nomad: Defining the phenomenon. *Information Technology & Tourism, 1–19*.
- Orlikowski, W. J., & Scott, S. V. (2016). Digital Work: A Research Agenda. In B. Czarniawska (Ed.), *A Research Agenda for Management and Organization Studies*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Orlikowski, W. J., & Yates, J. (2002). It’s about time: Temporal structuring in organizations. *Organization Science, 13*(6), 684–700.
- Rhymer, J. (2022). Location-Independent Organizations: Designing Collaboration Across Space and Time. *Administrative Science Quarterly*.
- Schlagwein, D., & Jarrahi, M. H. (2020). The Mobilities of Digital Work: The Case of Digital Nomadism. *European Conference on Information Systems*.
- Steinhardt, S. B., & Jackson, S. J. (2014). Reconciling rhythms: Plans and temporal alignment in collaborative scientific work. *Proceedings of the 17th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing*, 134–145.
- Wang, B., Schlagwein, D., Cecez-Kecmanovic, D., & Cahalane, M. C. (2020). Beyond the factory paradigm: Digital nomadism and the digital future (s) of knowledge work post-COVID-19. *Journal of the Association for Information Systems, 21*(6), 10.
- Zerubavel, E. (1979). *Patterns of Time in Hospital Life. A Sociological Perspective*. University of Chicago Press.