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Workplace Transformation: Exploring the Impact of Digital Nomad-Inspired Travel Experiences

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Abstract. This short research paper explores the experiences and transformations of employed remote workers who engage in remote work trips, a type of digital nomad-inspired travel where individuals combine work and leisure while traveling. The study aims to understand the meaning of these experiences and their impact on participants' work practices. The methodology employed in this study is Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology, which focuses on subjective interpretations of experiences. Data was collected between 2022 and 2023 through prolonged engagement with seven participants who have work flexibility but do not identify as digital nomads. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to empathize with the participants' experiences. The study highlights that remote work travel is not perceived as a typical vacation experience and differs from digital nomadism. The dimension of self-awareness at work emerged, revealing a range of feelings toward work arrangements in new environments. Some participants felt balanced and healthier, while others felt a lack of motivation. Overall, the experiences made participants more aware of their work style preferences that potentially benefits enterprises as well.

Keywords: digital nomads · transformative experiences · remote work

1 Introduction

The ability to use technology to stay mobile is a fundamental aspect of the digital nomad phenomenon [1, 2]. Digital nomads have the freedom to work remotely while continuously traveling and temporarily residing in various distant locations worldwide, without having a strong attachment to a specific home [3]. The phenomenon of digital nomad travel has developed over time. Since the establishment of digital nomad travel at the beginning of the century, it has evolved from a location-independent lifestyle to a distinct type of travel. A growing number of companies now allow employees to work remotely for a period of time, opening up opportunities for a more diverse group of people, including corporate workers, to experience travel while maintaining their work responsibilities [4]. Short-term digital nomad-like travel, previously referred to as remote work trips [5], offers a new and unique experience, even for seasoned leisure tourists, due to the additional component of 'work from anywhere.' However, it remains to be

determined how traditional workers are transformed by this experience in terms of how they perceive their work practices.

Digital nomad-inspired remote work travel experiences have a potential to influence psychological and social transformation of people through self-inquiry [6]. While travel experiences have been studied in the past from the perspective of how they transform life views and overall self-awareness [7], this study suggests examining remote work trip experiences as events that help individuals gain a deeper understanding of which work style suits them best. Specifically, it explores how traveling while working remotely provides a novel perspective and transforms the meaning of productivity, workplace attachment, work structure, and colleagues within personal work practices. Therefore, the research question is: “What does the experience of remote work trips mean to employed remote workers, and why?”.

2 Methodology

This study follows the Heidegger’s hermeneutical phenomenology [8], that focuses on interpretations on the experiences (“being in” the experience). This research paradigm helps to address the subjective interpretations of the experience and uncover its meaning. Data was collected throughout 2022–2023 through prolonged engagement with seven participants who do not identify as digital nomads but have work flexibility in their corporate jobs to engage in remote work trips. The concept of prolonged engagement stems from anthropological fieldwork, in which researchers spend extensive time with their participants to increase rapport, leading participants to be more open in their interactions with the researcher [9]. Participants were approached before and after their remote work trips to evaluate the extent of transformation towards their preferred work style. Semi-structured interviews were employed, focusing on empathizing with the meaning of the participants’ experiences.

3 Results

Participants of the study have experienced the nuances of remote work trips, as they had to experience work practices from a different environment. The dimension of nuance combined the feeling of imbalance about experiencing work from a vacation space and the difference from a vacation. These feelings demonstrate that participants did not perceive remote work travel as a vacation experience. Digital nomad literature suggests that digital nomads do not perceive themselves as tourists [2, 10]. While digital nomads are not tourists, employed workers that combine work and vacation also do not fall into the categorization of tourists as they are not vacationers.

The mix of vacation and work mode is new for the majority of employed workers. A sense of confusion due to cognitive disequilibrium of customary division of work and vacation spaces was found in some of the experiences. Participant 1 reported that he felt imbalanced about experiencing work from a vacation space,

I do not know. It felt weird. A bit work and not work. I was the first in my team to do that. To use the one-month policy. When I was on a call with them, they were “Oh, where are you now?” - “I am in Bali”. People were like “Wow”, as I was showing them

that I am in the resort here. They were happy for me. But it felt so weird. I am not even at work. It was imbalanced.

Remote knowledge workers that act as early adopters of travelling while working remotely movement evidently have mixed feelings about blending work and leisure in traditionally vacation settings. The vacations environment would prevent participant 4 from feeling motivated, as she reflected, that *“In Thailand it feels that no one is working, everyone is so relaxed. I start thinking different things and get in the zone where I walk around and cannot figure what to do (work)”*. The opposite feeling of work interfering with leisure was reported by participant 6, *“I am out cycling on a mountain somewhere in Spain, I am not relaxed and my mind thinks ‘Oh, that deployment could work slightly better if I would just tweak that system a little bit differently’”*.

Work and leisure are perceived as separated life domains in contemporary society [11]. Issues with work-life were observed in working from home literature [12], freelancers [13], corporate work [14]. Certainly, vacation environments have more novel and leisure attributes, but digital nomads advance in managing the boundaries between work and life [15]. Acceptance of lifestyle and treating work as serious leisure are among the elements that help digital nomads to blur the boundaries and embrace travelling lifestyle [3]. While travelling is just an occasional arrangement for hybrid digital nomads and they do not belong to a wide online community of digital nomads, they might go through their own learning curve.

After returning home, participants not only experienced a mix of emotions but also developed a heightened awareness of their preferred work style for productivity. One participant expressed the need for an office environment, stating, *“It was great to travel, but I do need an office to feel productive. My coffee and people around.”* On the other hand, some participants felt a strong attachment to the new work environment, with statements like, *“I love my work, I love what I do, and I can focus anywhere,”* or *“Believe it or not, but it is my most productive environment (by the pool).”* These reflections were embraced by the participants as positive self-discoveries facilitated by their novel remote work trip experiences.

4 Conclusion

The dimension of self-awareness at work reflected a range of feelings in regard to work arrangements in a new place. Some felt balanced, some felt healthier, and some felt a lack of motivation. Overall this experience made participants more aware of their work style preferences by showing them the other way of doing things. It is fair to suggest that remote work trip experiences transform the idea of work practices for participants. The transformative power of travel is a recognised phenomenon in tourism [16]. Meanwhile, digital nomadism as a lifestyle goes beyond individual transformations and is strongly connected with revolutionary changes in the norms of society. However, remote work trips did not evident the feeling of a fundamental change in the minds of participants in regards to life values overall.

This study provides an outlook on the growing lifestyle mobility of employed knowledge workers that got facilitated after the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Arguably this trend will remain due to a high demand of flexibility from the employee's side.

Nevertheless, the degree of development of the phenomenon may be different in a time of crisis, due to more expensive travel and increased power of employers' preferences in organizations. However, this study suggests that enabling employees to engage in remote work trips goes beyond simply increasing perceived employment benefits. It is an experience that allows employees to develop their awareness of productivity, which can ultimately benefit the enterprise as well.

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