

Chapter 25

The Making of Nomadic Work: Understanding the Mediational Role of ICTs

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ABSTRACT

Computer technologies, especially ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies), have become ubiquitous in people's lives. Nowadays, mobile phones, PDAs, laptops and a constellation of software applications are more and more used for a variety of activities carried out in both personal and professional lives. Given the features that these technologies provide and are provided with, for example, connectivity and portability, it can be said that ICTs have the potential to support nomadic work practices which are seen as increasingly characteristic of the knowledge economy. This chapter presents a review of the concept of nomadic work and, based on a broad literature analysis, discusses the ways in which ICTs may empower people who are involved with nomadic work practices. It aims to give a starting point for those who intend to develop further research on technologically-mediated nomadic work practices in the knowledge economy.

KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY AND NOMADIC WORK

Workers in the knowledge economy who are physically mobile may have to develop their productive activities across several places (Lilischkis, 2003; Rossitto & Eklundh, 2007; Su & Mark, 2008).

They generate economic benefits by working on knowledge production and dissemination or using knowledge and knowledge-based tools to accomplish their work tasks (Kim & Mauborgne, 1999). Examples of *knowledge economy workers* would be mathematicians, psychologists, computer scientists, software engineers, economists and so forth. It is important to note that to be a

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knowledge economy worker does not necessarily mean being a nomadic worker and vice versa.

The nomadic aspect of the work undertaken by so-called nomadic workers is described in a variety of ways in the literature. For instance, Su and Mark (2008) argue that nomadic workers are people who are constantly on the move, usually travelling long distances, working wherever they happen to be and carrying their resources with them to set up workplaces on the move. Rossitto and Eklundh (2007) characterize these workers as people who lack a stable workplace where their work activities can be conducted. Lilischkis (2003) defines them as types of mobile workers who develop their work activities in more than two fixed locations, moving from one work location to another from time to time; work may be carried out in specific locations recurrently or not and the time period spent in each location may vary widely.

In this chapter, nomadic workers are defined as different kinds of people who use the strategy of moving their workplace to perform their productive activities across different locations (de Carvalho, 2009). The latter definition is based on the common assumption presented in the three former ones, i.e. that in order to be considered as a nomadic worker one must work in different locations. It differs from the other three in the sense that it makes explicit that the *mobility of the workplace* is a constitutive criterion that differentiates nomadic workers from other kinds of mobile workers (see Lilischkis (2003) for details about the several types of mobile workers). Here mobility of workplace means bringing along all those resources that allow one to transform a generic space, i.e. a physical structure, into a lived and experienced *place*, i.e. a space invested with human experience, values and meaning where work activities can be carried out (Ciolfi *et al.*, 2005; Rossitto, 2008). Adopting the actor-network approach, Su and Mark (2008) refer to these mobile assets as *actants*. Some examples of nomadic workers might be IT executives, academics, sales

representatives or diplomats (Lilischkis, 2003; Su & Mark, 2008).

In order to carry out their activities, these workers move their workplace with them to where they can find specific resources they need to perform their work. Like pastoral nomads move their households to places where they can find green pasture for their herd or water for their crops, knowledge economy nomadic workers move their workplace to locations where resources like time, space, privacy, silence or other people are available. This location may also be a transit space such as a train station or an airport through which they move to attend international meetings, conferences, the company head office or a subsidiary office. The mobility of workplace is dictated by the availability of resources and by specific work constraints. For instance, a looming deadline might push such workers to move their workplace to a train or to their home when and where time and space are suitably available. The meanings which nomadic workers invest a space with, such as e.g. privacy, quietness, expediency, etc. are relevant aspects of the relationship between activities and the locations where they are carried out (Rossitto, 2008).

When it comes to the mobile aspect of nomadicity, careful attention should be paid to what it means. That is because the concept of mobility itself is complex and can be used in different and conflicting manners (Andriessen & Vartiainen, 2006; Kristoffersen & Ljungberg, 1999; Perry & Brodie, 2006). Mobility as a concept can be considered a multi-layered notion comprised of different dimensions, such as spatial, temporal and contextual (Kakihara & Sørensen, 2001). Since nomadicity is based on the concept of mobility of the workplace, it can be argued that all three dimensions are embedded in it as well (Cousins & Robey, 2005). However, although in the literature on mobile and nomadic work special attention is paid to the spatial dimension of mobility, the temporal and contextual dimensions seem to be neglected. The possibility of being temporally

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