

From backpacker to digital nomad – footpaths of a digital transformation

*De mochileiro a nómada digital – caminho de uma
transformação digital*

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Abstract

As globalization provided a more efficient path to mobility meanwhile facilitating the search for information, the urge to travel and seek new cultures became intense. People from around the world engaged in the act of traveling more deeply than what was known previously. The backpacker phenomenon evolved into a lifestyle, as being a tourist simply was not fulfilling for this new generation of travelers; an evolution of Cohen's "drifters". Backpacking culture has been growing exponentially over the years, becoming the answer for young, creative, and adventurous individuals to find freedom and life purpose. Through the creation of cowork spaces, the objective is to develop an environment of mutual help, embracing new connections and, above all, strengthen productivity. This article aims at analyzing digital nomadism in the context of digital transformation and present a case study - Selina -, as an example of innovation and creativity from the hospitality business. Our focus will be an approach to the organizational culture of the company which appropriates itself and encourages new behaviors (coworking) as a way to attract digital nomads for its business.

Keywords: digital transformation; digital nomadism; backpacking culture; identity; innovation; organizational culture; cowork.

Resumo

Como a globalização proporcionou um caminho mais eficiente para a mobilidade, ao mesmo tempo que facilitou a procura por informações, o desejo de viajar e conhecer novas culturas tornou-se intenso. Pessoas de todo o mundo aventuram-se no ato de viajar mais do que se conhecia anteriormente. O fenômeno do mochileiro evoluiu para um estilo de vida, já que ser turista não era satisfatório para essa nova geração de viajantes; uma evolução dos "drifters" de Cohen. A cultura do mochileiro tem crescido exponencialmente ao longo dos anos, tornando-se a resposta para indivíduos jovens, criativos e aventureiros encontrarem liberdade e um propósito de vida. Através da criação de espaços de *cowork*, pretende-se desenvolver um ambiente de mútua ajuda, abraçando novas ligações e, acima de tudo, potenciando a produtividade. Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar o nomadismo digital no contexto da transformação digital e apresentar um estudo de caso - Selina -, como exemplo de inovação e criatividade do setor hoteleiro. Nosso foco será uma abordagem da cultura organizacional da empresa que se apropria e incentiva novos comportamentos (*coworking*) como forma de atrair nômadas digitais para os seus negócios.

Palavras-chave: transformação digital; nomadismo digital; cultura da mochila; identidade; inovação; cultura organizacional; cowork.

1.Introdução

Digital nomadism has its roots in the facility for individuals to be in contact with any person from any part of the world, at the same time that collecting information is as simple as going online (Aroles et al., 2020). This evolution enhanced cheaper, long-distance, and real-time communications, helping freelancers, bloggers, YouTubers, and writers to establish their business both as a professional tool and lifestyle (Aroles et al., 2020).

The immense growth of travelers wishing to live an alternative lifestyle, in which home is considered a backpack (Kerry, 2013) led to the adaptation and innovation of the hospitality sector, having to correspond to the new demand. For these travelers, working while traveling could boost the opportunity for the trip to last longer, usually quite flexible jobs in terms of schedule and presence (e.g. technology IT, yoga instructor) (Cohen, 2011). With that in mind, the concept of Digital Nomadism (DN) arose from cultural

change and adaptations in the labor market, creating new work modalities, nimble management practices, as well as collaborative entrepreneurship (Aroles et al., 2020).

Consequently, due to the bigger demand from flexible workers, the coworking spaces came to life- reshaping the shared office concept. The main goal of the coworking environment is to transform the work process into a much more human connection (Orel, 2019), fighting against the feeling of isolation, the difficulty to balance work with leisure, the lack of creativity, and unproductiveness.

This article will be focused on this new context, where companies such as Selina, had to differentiate from other possible competitors in the hospitality sector (Da Camara et al., 2016), by recreating its offer and developing multiple coworking spaces around the globe, focused on the new main client: the digital nomad.

2.The emergence of backpacking culture as a lifestyle

The thematic of location-independent individuals is still to be explored more deeply in literature. However, due to the progression of the global nomad phenomenon, especially in western societies, there has been a significant rise in its studies (Cohen, 2011; Currie et al., 2011; Kannisto, 2016). It is hard to unify the backpackers as a whole. They do not conform to the society they grew up in, therefore will not conform either to stigma or premade definition of their identity, sometimes perceived as “a dropout

culture”. Overall, running away from labeling, concept, categories (Kannisto, 2016).

For a backpacker, it is liberating to escape from a globalized modern society in search of personal growth (Currie et al., 2011; Dayour et al., 2017). When it comes to backpackers, it is only fair that they share elements to separate themselves from other tourists (Currie et al., 2011; Dayour et al., 2017); Usually, traveling on a low budget, with no returning home date and

cheap sleeping/eating places (Currie et al., 2011), such as hostels for example. On a personal growth basis, it equals freedom and recognition among the backpacking culture. Additionally, the more adventurous, the better for recognition, as the share of stories within backpackers is quite common and leads sometimes to intense friendships (Currie et al., 2011).

By referring to themselves as “travelers”, the backpackers at a certain point end up rejecting other tourists (Cohen, 2011; Dayour et al., 2017; Kannisto, 2016). There are already stereotypes concerning the “regular” tourist, their symbols being the map or the camera holding from the neck. As Riley affirms, the symbolism behind the backpacker culture not only represents their identity to others but also has the goal to separate them from other types of tourists (Cohen, 2011).

The cultural shock experienced by backpackers at the new destination is also

followed by “reverse culture confusion” (Richards & Wilson, 2004) when returning home. Culture confusion happens when global nomads have to learn and adopt the rules or behaviors of the locals, different from their own. Sometimes these can create adversities along the way (food, climate, health, language issues) (Richards, 2015).

In modern society, lifestyle travel is a phenomenon that brings together daily life and tourist experiences (Cohen, 2011; Dayour et al., 2017). Backpacking is considered an alternative lifestyle, where both identity and life belong in a backpack (Kerry, 2013). The fact that backpackers will potentially become the new “regular tourist”, depends deeply on marketing strategies from destinations (O. Mtapuri, A. Giampiccoli, 2017; Richards & Wilson, 2004).

3. From backpacker to digital nomad

Digital Nomadism (DN) has its roots in the facility for individuals to be in contact with any person from any part of the world, at the same time that collecting information is as simple as going online (Aroles et al., 2020). This evolution enhanced cheaper, long-distance, and real-time communications, helping freelancers, bloggers, Youtubers, and writers to establish their business both as a professional tool and lifestyle (Aroles et al., 2020; Merkel, 2015).

Manuel Castells, whose professional endeavor is focused mostly on DN, analyzed the future of work, due to the rapid growth of artificial intelligence and change in economy, culture, and society

(Mouratidis, 2018). Deleuze and Guattari (1986) considered the opposition between state power and individual freedom, that is to say, the nomads; the State is characterized as a striated space while the nomad represents a smooth space (Aroles et al., 2020; Mouratidis, 2018). This last concept embodies revolutionary potential, the simplification of codes, and openness to new territories and possibilities, which is why it challenges the natural order of things (Mouratidis, 2018).

Posner (2003) focused his work on a cultural semiotic approach to digital nomadism, describing mentifacts (a term which relates “sociifact” and “artifact”) as segments that devise the mentality of a

society, its values, and ideas, as well as behavior and conventions. With that being said, artifacts and mentifacts together develop the very core values of a society, both being conveyors and producers of culture.

Therefore, as in any other community, there are symbols that unify the identity of digital nomads: portable gadgets such as laptops, smartphones, or tablets; the circulation of data; being able to work at any coffee shop that has WI-FI; cowork spaces (Mouratidis, 2018). When it comes to DN, there are no specific locations; the nomad is always changing places, never letting themselves become too comfortable. This leads to opposing notions: home/abroad, work/leisure, sedentary/mobile, isolation/sociability.

DN occurs on the search for a more authentic lifestyle, where one can be in charge of their schedule, itinerary, and free themselves from the office as a workspace (Mouratidis, 2018). Digital nomads look for a boost on their work/life balance, so they are characterized as “lifestyle migrants” (Benson & O’Reilly, 2009) since in this case to be mobile is an option and not an obligation. Thus traveling to touristic places, the digital nomad, just like the backpacker, tries to differentiate from regular tourists, due to the fact that they are more involved with the community (Merkel, 2015; Mouratidis, 2018). The search for authenticity is a real factor in both backpackers and digital nomads.

For backpackers, the longer the trip could be extended the better. With that being said, working while traveling could boost that opportunity. Usually, the chosen path would be quite flexible jobs in terms of schedule and presence (Cohen, 2011), as

expressed before. As technological development became more apparent, it created the possibility to engage in work outside the regular office and 9-5 hour schedule every day.

3.1. Concept and mannerism of the digital nomad

The digital nomad, just like the backpacker, tries to differentiate from regular tourists, due to the fact that they are more involved with the community (Mouratidis, 2018). The search for authenticity is a real factor in both backpackers and digital nomads. Due to its liberating and emancipatory nature, can be a romanticized lifestyle based on stereotypes alone (Aroles et al., 2020).

Some difficulties demean the individual’s potential to work and travel; digital nomads still respond to nationality, citizenship, passport, and, of course, a work routine (Mouratidis, 2018). However, there are more evident constraints that can be felt daily or on long-term observation. Regarding finances, it is a two-way street. On one hand, DN represents self-development and personal growth; on the other hand, there is wealth and income necessary to be successful working while traveling (Mouratidis, 2018).

Concerning a more personal level, even though the digital nomad is part of a community, the long run can be quite lonely at times, due to the constant moving (Mouratidis, 2018); cowork spaces, which will be considered upcoming, are a solution for this feeling of isolation. Even though the environment of operations and motivations are different, DN brings up similar problems to more traditional ways of working, such as financial matters, amount of experience, the importance of

regulations, fear of failure (Mouratidis, 2018).

3.2. Coworking environments: enclave spaces for digital nomads

The term coworking, defined as “working together as equals”, was first introduced in 1999 by Bernard deKoven (Brown, 2017). Due to the economic global crisis in 2007/2008, resulting in financial collapse, collective working spaces have started to grow in cities all over the world (Merkel, 2015).

The flexibility that these workers demonstrate at a creative level and the ability to perform any task successfully, in a short period of time, through a computer, is a personality trait that defines them (Merkel, 2015; Orel, 2019). As maintained by Forlano (2008), usually, the tendency is for digital nomads to look for an office outside their homes, such as a library or a coffee house.

Nevertheless, this flexibility of mind and geography can difficult the work/leisure balance (Orel, 2019), since it becomes harder to make a distinction between personal and professional life. Besides, human connections and communication are not done directly or profoundly, leading to isolation (Aroles et al., 2020; Orel, 2019) (as expressed before). Consequently, due to the bigger demand from flexible workers, the cowork spaces came to life – reshaping the shared office concept (Orel, 2019).

The main goal of the coworking environment is to transform the work process into a much more human connection (Orel, 2019) fighting against the feeling of isolation, the difficulty to balance work with leisure, the lack of

creativity, and unproductiveness (Brown, 2017). Over the years, these spaces have become well-liked, as in 2017 there were 1.27 million users, and around 15.500 settled cowork spaces all over the world (“Statista,” n.d.).

A backpacker enclave refers to the group of travelers who are culturally and ethnically distinct from the community they are in. These are meeting points in many shapes; it can be a big city or country field (Wilson & Richards, 2008). Even though these are places for backpackers to meet, locals can join as well, so it is not possible to distinguish two worlds that do not interact with each other, as they are not exclusive. As declared by Westerhausen (2002), enclaves are “cultural home away from home”, as these are quite safe spaces where the backpacker can control their level of involvement and socialize up to a certain point.

According to Reichenberger (2018), digital nomads follow this specific lifestyle to have a more improved life quality, in which work, leisure, and travel are merged. Furthermore, cowork spaces provide events and activities that can blossom into new job opportunities and networks for their users (Brown, 2017; Merkel, 2015; Orel, 2019).

For the user of the space, communication and interaction are the main reasons for choosing to work there. These workers value random opportunities and meetings, social interplay, plus the share of erudition and common experiences. Different strategies are held in order to promote interaction and sociability. For instance, the creation of events conflating dance and food, creative workshops, courses, or seminars (Merkel, 2015).

4.Selina: cowork spaces to attract digital nomads

Having its foundation in Latin America, more specifically in a surf town called Venao, in the year of 2014, Selina was born by the minds of Rafael Museri and Daniel Rudasevski (current CEO's) (Selina, n.d.-a). Previously running real estate businesses, to develop their own town and create a sense of community with locals and the travelers who came to visit, they both decided to revolutionize the hospitality field.

Selina is a concept which focuses on five main aspects: stay, explore, surf, cowork, and wellness. In the present time, it has developed into sixty new destinations worldwide. Independently from location, some specific traits can be found in all of them, mostly concerning design, upcycled materials, and locally-sourced artwork. Nevertheless, each location offers its own culture in different forms, such as in food, outdoor and indoor activities, music, and art.

The Latin American company is often depicted as an ecosystem for explorers, digital nomads, and travelers, reconceptualizing the meaning of work and travel. Selina is in itself a creative cluster, creating an environment for cultural life to be captured, city identity encouraged, and to explore the idea of being part of a community. Therefore, the company itself felt obliged to ambulate accordingly to the new trend, starting from the organizational culture of the corporation, transposing those same values and ideals to the outside: for freelancers, digital nomads, entrepreneurs, and local start-ups, through coworking spaces.

Since 2014, Selina has had a remarkable development in terms of the company's

size. From Latin America, just after eight years, the hospitality company can now be found in European, Asian and American continents: South America is the most fruitful region, with 29 different locations; Central America just a little behind, counting 20; the United States of America and Mexico with 14; last but not least, Europe accommodating 15 Selina's (Portugal being the dominating country in Europe with six of them) (Publituris, 2018; Selina, n.d.-c).

Going back to the year 2014, the founders of the company invested in coworking spaces, aiming at attracting digital nomads who were simply visiting for a few months or staying at the destination for a couple of years. In 2019, there was an increase in their budget (around US\$100 million) for finding new properties, with the goal set at 400 CS by 2023 (Davison, 2019).

The main goal of the coworking environment is to transform the work process into a much more human connection (Orel, 2019), fighting against the feeling of isolation, the difficulty to balance work with leisure, the lack of creativity, and unproductiveness. Coworking is as well an area of Selina's expertise. As working digitally in a nomadic way started to grow within society, pioneer companies started to benefit from that modernization of a nine-five job. Decidedly, there was a market need to create spaces where any person could rent a few hours for meetings or for working alone.

Independently from location, some specific traits can be found in all of the cowork spaces and Selina's hostels, mostly concerning design, upcycled materials, and locally sourced artwork. They aim their

efforts at freelancers, digital nomads, entrepreneurs, and local start-ups to outgrow themselves. These are areas influenced by the past and future, finding the work/fun balance in a well-equipped technological place. Each location offers

its own culture in different forms, such as in food, outdoor and indoor activities, music, and art, and directs its efforts towards freelancers, digital nomads, entrepreneurs, and local start-ups to outgrow themselves.

5. Conclusion

The phenomenal growth of digital nomadism and remote work has assembled a new working persona - the digital nomad - with the market focusing on their needs, posture, and willingness. This paper discussed the emergence of unequal lifestyles caused by both the digital transformation the economy and society are undergoing and the modifications in the insight of living, working, and personal realization. This new course of action promotes intercultural exchange, adaptability, creativity, and innovation, especially in the work field and in the work space.

This type of culture also leads to the transformation of organizational culture. As digital transformation takes over due to a market in need of change and innovation, the work regulation adapts itself to flexible schedules, remote work and begins to value change in organizational culture as a major factor inside each business. Moreover, as digital nomadism progresses it spreads a high concern from companies to extend their vision and include this profile as their workers.

The current Covid-19 crisis affecting the whole world came to emphasize the progress and evolution of remote work, as many businesses resorted to it as a

solution for the economic decline. Working from home has been a reality for quite some time, despite always being associated with traveling. Nowadays, there has been an increase in businesses created and developed digitally only, without a physical space. Thereby, cowork spaces function perfectly for what single owners, bosses, and employees or professional teams/groups are expecting from the labor market.

Selina is depicted here as an example. As a global company, the values of differentiation, adjustability, and prominence, while assembling artistry practices and past history influence hold extreme importance for Selina, with culture being the principal foundation, starting inside the firm. As evolution progressed, so did the company, ambulating accordingly to the new trend, transporting those same values and ideals to the outside: for backpackers, digital nomads, as well as locals.

As the future of work follows a new tendency, where remote digital jobs and flexible timetables prevail, it is highly expected that the community of the coworkers will continue to develop, grow and be innovative in itself.

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