

Becoming a Digital Nomad: Decentered Identity Work Along Agentic Lines

Thematic Track

Julian Prester, UNSW Business School, j.prester@unsw.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 role of digital technologies in identity construction is emerging as a topic of concern in the context of information systems (IS) and organization studies research (Alvesson et al. 2008; Carter 2015; Hultin and Introna 2018; Thatcher and Zhu 2006). At the same time, these digital technologies are enabling new work practices and post-bureaucratic organizations (Colbert et al. 2016; Forman et al. 2014; Orlikowski and Scott 2016; Zammuto et al. 2007). Indeed, it is in part these flexible working arrangements and the fluid, ephemeral nature of contemporary organizations that challenge our understanding of work identities (Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Barley et al. 2017; Petriglieri et al. 2018).

Early research on the concept of identity has examined how human beings understand and position themselves in organizational contexts as distinctive, enduring entities (Albert and Whetten 1985; Ashforth and Mael 1989; Carter 2015). Although this literature, based on a substantialist view, has made important contributions to understanding identity construction and explaining organizational roles, values, and actions, it has been criticized for paying little attention to the ways in which identities are continuously being re-enacted in the fluid and fast-changing world that we live in (Alvesson et al. 2008; Gioia and Patvardhan 2012; Gioia et al. 2000). More recent research has thus adopted a processual view of identity, referred to as ‘identity work’, as an ongoing, enactment in practice and always already in becoming (Alvesson et al. 2008; Harding et al. 2017; Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003). However, what both strands of identity research have in common is their anthropocentric point of departure that privileges human actors (*vis-à-vis* non-human actors) and foregrounds associated human agency in conceptualizing identity work (Harding et al. 2017; Paring et al. 2017; Symon and Pritchard 2015). As a result, identity scholars have recently called for a view that decenters the human actor to examine the ways in which identities are becoming within material-discursive processes (Hultin and Introna 2018; Knights and Clarke 2017).

The identity literature has been critical to explaining how organizations play a key role in defining identities of the individual workers (Albert and Whetten 1985; Gioia et al. 2000). It suggests that the complexity and ephemeral nature of contemporary organizations make the formation of a work identity challenging (Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Casey 1995; Sennett 1998). Indeed, defining a self is especially problematic within flexible working arrangements such as location-independent and technology-dependent work that lack a sense of spatial proximity and organizational belonging (Barley et al. 2017; Ibarra and Obodaru 2016; Petriglieri et al. 2018). We, therefore, embarked on exploring identity work in a paradigmatic case of location-independent and freelance work – that of ‘digital nomads’. Digital nomads are individuals that leverage technology in order to work remotely and live an independent and nomadic lifestyle. They often perform freelance or gig work while constantly changing their place of working and living. Our study of digital nomads seeks to answer the following research question: *how do work identities of digital nomads emerge?* Examining the emergence of work identities in the paradigmatic case of digital nomads allows focusing on distinct working conditions in their digital and location-independent environments that are not necessarily so pronounced in other flexible working arrangements.

We report on an ongoing ethnographic study consisting of observations and interviews supplemented by online archival material. Fieldwork is conducted at key digital nomad locations such as Bali, Indonesia, as well as Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Thailand. The total of 253 hours of observation includes

daily work practices and social events at eleven different co-working spaces primarily hosting digital nomads. In addition, we conducted 23 semi-structured interviews in which we asked participants to describe the personal trajectory they went through when becoming a digital nomad, their everyday activities, and the role of digital technologies in their daily lives. Using inductive analysis techniques, we conducted an iterative textual analysis of the empirical material in an attempt to develop theory grounded in the data.

In responding to the calls for identity as becoming within material-discursive practices, we ground our study in the process-philosophical tradition by adopting a process ontology foregrounding ongoing becoming rather than stable beings (Bergson 2002; Cecez-Kecmanovic 2016; Rescher 1996; Whitehead 1929). Another stream of literature that is central to our argument is the sociomaterial approach (Orlikowski 2007; Orlikowski and Scott 2008; Orlikowski and Scott 2015) based on Barad's (2003; 2007) account of performativity and agential realism. Lastly, we adopt a temporally oriented vocabulary grounded in Ingold's (2007; 2015) terminology to develop the idea of decentered identity work as the temporal flow of life along agentic lines. By tracing the emergence of identities along the meshwork of relations that is enacting the lives of location-independent workers, we seek to understand how digital nomads are continuously becoming in the ongoing flow of digital work practices. We show how the flows of material sites, artifacts, and time are woven together in the process of identity work. In decentering agency from distinct human and material actors, we present an account of identity work that always already positions certain assumed individuals along the temporal performative flow of agency.

Our study investigating the emergence of work identity among digital nomads contributes to the growing stream of research theorizing identity work as a process without centering on human actors. We add to the literature on work identity and new forms of work by providing evidence of identity emergence in flexible and location-independent working arrangements. Our research also offers an empirically grounded account of how individuals become digital nomads. In developing this account, we hope to assist individual workers and organizations in establishing work relations in practice and better navigating the challenges of this unique type of location-independent digital work.

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