

Reports From The Nomadic Fringe

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Mobile computing technologies have enabled knowledge workers to work anywhere at anytime. And millions of us are doing it. But it isn't always easy. Nomadic workers often put up with discomfort and inconvenience. That's why Coalesse, a Steelcase company, decided to study mobile workers and better understand the issues they experience every day.

Shujan Bertrand, a researcher and designer at Coalesse, knew she was onto something when dozens of micro-blogging entries began flooding in from bedrooms, kitchens, cars, offices, hotels, airport lounges, co-working cafés, coffee shops, subway trains, sidewalks and waiting rooms. The participants in her study wanted to tell her what it's really like to be a nomadic worker.

"Social breakfast in the cafe. Some like it public, others private. Headphones included. Food + people + content = the right creative equation."

"Very typical 'office' day. Sitting at 'my' spot at our non-assigned bench in San Francisco. Prepping for my Asia trip—heading to Tokyo on Friday. Network is spotty... May head to Starbucks if this doesn't improve!"

"Needed to step away to get some work done... need for a change of scenery... gloomy day and our space isn't the most inspiring."

As part of an innovative, on-the-ground research campaign, Bertrand asked Silicon Valley's creative knowledge workers to track their workdays using the Tumblr micro-blogging app. The blog entries were private, candid and loaded with insights. For a week, the participants issued a stream of consciousness. Some were calling on clients. Some were on business trips. Others were at home trying to juggle kids and work. Everyone was looking closely at how they deal with the day-to-day balancing act of distributed work.

THE QUESTION IS: WHY?

"We all know that technology is rapidly changing the way many people live and work," says Bertrand. "Coalesse wants to support these mobile workers with inspiring product experiences. We believe the only way to accomplish this is to capture insights about their needs."

INSPIRATION. EVERY DAY.

In 2010, to find out how work nomads were handling work at home and peek behind the curtain, Coalesse did something unusual: it followed people into their homes. Emily Ulrich, Coalesse's senior researcher at that time, conducted observational research in the homes, offices, and other places the New York City and San Francisco Bay area study participants worked.

What Ulrich confirmed and reported in a Coalesse report titled “Untethered” was that mobile technologies have indeed untethered work from desks and offices. Time-pressed knowledge workers are working anywhere they choose. And because availability and responsiveness are so important in business, a back-and-forth toggling between life and work happens constantly for many people.

HOME ALONE

Naturally, toggling comes with stresses. The people Ulrich studied are experiencing this radical change in a lonely way, unsupported ergonomically or emotionally, working long hours on mobile devices at dining tables, on couches, and, in more than a few cases, in bed late at night. According to International Data Corporation (IDC) there are now 1.2 billion mobile workers worldwide. In the United States, says IDC, almost 120 million workers are mobile, representing 75.5% of the total workforce. (Japan is next with almost 50 million mobile workers; 74.5% of its workforce).

Since 2010, things have only become more intense for mobile workers as technology has continued to advance and designing spaces that support mobile workers has become more complex. Most people are connected throughout the day to multiple clouds through smartphones, tablets, and laptops. And because networking and social media options have expanded so dramatically, so too has the time commitment to manage them.

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SHUJAN BERTRAND | Coalesse researcher and designer

MOBILE ISN'T MAINSTREAM

Yet two stark contradictions remain. Mobile work outside the office is still not a mainstream consideration. And research is scarce on connecting the habits and needs of mobile workers with the technology trends that are driving changes in the workplace.

According to Primo Orpilla, a principal of Studio O+A, a San Francisco-based alternative officing' firm that has designed spaces for Facebook and Evernote among many others, “There’s a real need to grasp the needs of the ‘other workplace’—the transitory spaces, the hallways, the break areas, the landscape outside the building, the coffee shop down the street. People can work anywhere these days so there are many opportunities to capture that work or to create that interesting space. But not enough people are thinking about it.”

Coalesse has been giving it a lot of thought. Bob Arko, the company's creative director, says there is a vacuum to fill. "Architects and designers are not typically commissioned to do this kind of research and they rely on the major manufacturers for a more comprehensive perspective on workplace trends. At Coalesse, we are extending our own research focus beyond the traditional work environment and attempting to understand work behaviors in the context of people's broader lives, including most recently the increasingly nomadic nature of work."

CROSSING OVER

For Coalesse exploring nomadic work habits is like crossing a boundary. In fact, the term "crossover" has become a foundational concept. It suggests products and solutions that are location-agnostic, serving the multiple needs of nomadic workers wherever they choose to be.

Exploring those needs, says Bertrand, is how you seed great design. "We are looking for behavior patterns that suggest new platform typologies for product development—to turn real needs into needed solutions."

Bertrand began her research with interviews, talking extensively about nomadic work with Google, Oracle, Facebook, Square, Accenture, IDEO, Studio O+A, Worktech, International Contemporary Furniture Fair (ICFF) and the Institute of Design at Stanford, as well as co-working pioneers The Hub, The Grind, WeWork and NextSpace.

PINNING DOWN THE NOMADS

The hard part of nomadic research is, of course, pinning down the nomads. Observing people in offices is fairly straightforward. Watching moving targets is not.

Therein lies the necessity for a micro-blogging methodology. The Tumblr smartphone app is an easy way to blog in short bursts from your phone and upload pictures or video clips in seconds. Having creative people watch themselves, photograph their surroundings, and comment candidly on their situations offers fascinating gems of insight.

Among Bertrand's bloggers were: a senior manager in workplace transformation with Accenture, a product design consultant, a graphic designer, an associate partner at IDEO, a global client liaison at Steelcase, a product marketer, an independent furniture designer, a senior design director at a communications agency, a sales consultant and an illustrator. They were a mix of global travellers, local commuters, and home-based workers. Bertrand describes them as "creative knowledge workers." More senior. More distributed. More on-demand.

The goal was to track their work habits as they moved throughout their days. Bertrand wanted to find out, "Where and how work was being done in first, second, and third places? Tracking pain and pleasure points throughout days, nights, weekends, and during travel. How do individuals transition between personal, collaborative and social work? What do they need and desire to work anywhere, anytime? What behaviors create new questions and insights?"

MESSAGES FROM THE EDGE

Insights from the volunteers tumbled in for a week:

“Working on the dinner table can be quite challenging and needs constant shifting.”

“Second bed in hotel serves as work surface, work in process suitcase, and dresser top.”

“Yesterday I worked in four different spaces.”

“Not having a particular working space is more time consuming...”

NOTICING THE COMMONPLACE

Many of the bloggers found the methodical process of pausing, observing and describing their surroundings or habits put them in tune with compromises and discomforts they normally overlooked.

“Following the chronology of it,” says one nomadic sales professional who participated in the study, “you really start to be aware of the technology limitations. One obvious opportunity is to create ‘the right product to support the hardware interface.’”

Abby Levine, a senior manager in the Accenture Real Estate Solutions Practice, travels relentlessly (more than 200,000 miles a year). “The world doesn’t generally accommodate mobile working, even at places that say they do, like Starbucks. Give me a place where I can get online, where I don’t have to scramble around trying to figure out where I can plug in,” she says.

Another participant, a home-based designer and artist who regularly visits clients’ offices, noticed that the vibe of different office environments affects how she feels about working there. “I began noticing how important it is for me to feel inspired. It affects the quality of my workday. At home I can create that inspiration, and you find it in the more creative office environments, but other spaces can feel almost depressing, physically and socially.”

After the digital dust settled, Bertrand distilled her interviews and blogging streams into a map of patterns. She produced a comprehensive report titled, “Nomadic Work Landscape Design Research” that spans 111 pages in a detailed slide deck.

DID ANYTHING SURPRISE HER?

“It was validating and extended Emily’s ‘live/work’ research of two years ago. By combining what we know about today’s nomadic work behaviors and emerging technology trends we will begin to identify how we can create new work experiences. We see the opportunity to innovate in the gaps between how difficult conditions are for nomadic workers and how much easier it could be.”

“The imperative,” says Bertrand, “is to create new experiences and bring inspiration into people’s lives. It starts by making their lives easier. The slightest gesture in hosting goes a long way for a nomad.”

Three formal product-development approaches have emerged from the Coalesse research: Inspiring Destinations, Optimizing Mobility and Cultivating the Senses.

INSPIRING DESTINATIONS; IMPROVING TOUCH-DOWN

The bottom-line question when it comes to accommodating nomads, says Bertrand, is, “How do we host what you might call ‘high-quality, touch-down experiences’? How do you create that sense of, ‘Wow. This is a place I’m going to come back to.’”

Coalesse has uncovered a number of important considerations. They include the creation of dynamic, configurable spaces, “self-assembly” options and choices that provide a variety of work experiences like open and social spaces for extroverted people and collaborative work, or closed and private spaces for more introverted people and private work. In fact, because of the intensity of digital work and the desire for greater personal interaction and more effective virtual interaction between work teams these days, organizations are creating a “vibe” and fostering inspiring cultures that turn into great work experiences. For example, for heads-down private work, it might be an alcove or a lounge chair with a canopy. For collaboration, perhaps a setting of cushioned chairs and low tables with nearby power receptacles.

This year, Coalesse introduced a new product line—Lagunitas—that exemplifies the high-quality, touch-down experience. A configurable sectional series from Milan-based designer Toan Nguyen, it can be customized for collaborative work, socializing or personal work. Lagunitas evokes a “third-place” vibe in the style of a coffee shop booth or café seating with built-in power.

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Lagunitas is a space defining lounge and table collection that can create a ‘third place’ anywhere

OPTIMIZING MOBILITY: HOSTING TOOLS TOO

“Optimizing mobility,” says Bertrand, “is the platform where we really start to see interaction between product and human behaviors... ‘Temporality’ is important. People want to feel like they temporarily own a space.” It might be as simple as a dock or stand to put your digital tool near a conveniently placed power outlet (access to power and data seem to be the top concerns of nomadic workers). It might be a product that has “curated touch-down qualities”.

“For example,” says Bertrand, “there are not many office chairs or side tables or lounge settings that say, ‘This is where your tools can temporarily be supported with digital docking postures. This is where your bag can be safe.’”

Her strategies for optimizing mobility include offering ways to quickly personalize a space; temporary storage; shared collaboration tools like whiteboards and Post-It-friendly walls; and accommodating postures, both of mobile workers (relaxed or perched over a keyboard) and of their tools (varying heights and angles). Overall, the strategy is to offer options by having the right selection of products available for productive mobility, wherever people choose to work.

Anticipation, Bertrand believes, should be the frame of mind for designing inviting spaces for nomads. Start by admitting that mobile workers are showing up and deserve accommodation. Then imagine their transitions and requirements. Make it easier and less time-consuming for them to touch down, work and leave. Augment the flow.

An example from Coalesse, introduced last year, is Free Stand, a portable and foldable laptop or tablet stand that offers a quick, easy place to work. What makes Free Stand distinct from similar products is its ability to collapse in seconds, so work at home can disappear when it's time to relax.

CULTIVATING THE SENSES: PHYSICAL + EMOTIONAL COMFORT

Bertrand says workspaces and work experiences for nomads are better when they please the senses. A recurrent observation that runs through her research is discomfort brought on by relentless compromises in physical posture due to screens and information overload.

Her suggestions include: a “palette of digital postures,” the right lighting and acoustic qualities for video communication, utilization of outdoor spaces, and generally what Bertrand refers to as a “sensorial orchestration of products that inspire and motivate creativity and innovation.”

Comfortable productivity is expressed in the recently introduced Massaud Work Lounge for Coalesse by designer Jean-Marie Massaud. A wide, embracing swivel lounge inspired by a first-class airline seat, it is paired with an ottoman that opens for storage. The distinctive work-related features of the Work Lounge are a pivoting tablet arm that integrates with the chair and a privacy canopy.

Massaud Work Lounge with height adjustable pivoting tablet and storage ottoman.

CREATING AT THE INTERSECTION

Arko calls Bertrand's research report a “lens” to fresh insights and opportunities. His team has begun an exercise they are informally calling “Digital Postures,” examining the most evident intersections of Bertrand's three themes—where multiple nomadic needs cross over—in the hope of devising life-easing solutions.

But where does this research and these insights about mobility fit in the larger world of workplace furniture and space design?

Arko says it's a slow dawning. “A fairly conventional vision of the office workplace still dominates for many organizations,” he says. “Our job is to look at the changing behaviors and inspire new approaches that can serve these evolving needs.”

ADAPTING TO THE FUTURE

Orpilla points to the hospitality industry where mobile workers are a major customer segment. He says there are now hotel lobbies with free Wi-Fi and comfortable workstations close to food and drink. “Hotels are beginning to understand that part of their business needs to be addressed.”

“Our corporate projects tend to resemble hospitality with the lobby vibe or the restaurant vibe or the coffee vibe. These days, some people work in those spaces more than they work at their desk,” says Orpilla. Historically, Orpilla has seldom worked outside of Silicon Valley. “Now, we’re getting inquiries from the Midwest,” says Orpilla. “People see these really cool incubators that produce these rock star tech types who after a couple of years strike it rich. We’ve created some of those incubators for the best and the brightest. There’s starting to be interest across the country in how to duplicate that.”

Bertrand has no doubt about the opportunities that lay ahead. “If you look in Silicon Valley, you see how people are creating and playing with new technology, how it supports them at work and at home, how it enables people to be free to work where and when they want. It’s hard not to see that as the future.”

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