INTRODUCTION

The last few years have seen the emergence of a new class of digital worker, living essentially nomadic lives on the kind of global scale that was previously only available to a tiny and privileged few. Using technology to transcend the need for a permanent base, they spend a significant amount of their time travelling around the world from place to place, enjoying the autonomy to live and work wherever they choose, building global networks of contacts and gaining perspective from the wide range of cultural experiences open to them.

They are relatively small in number, but as extreme examples of mobile workers, many of them high profile in the technology field, they have the capacity to shape both technology and social trends for the rest of us.

In late 2008, Fjord conducted interviews with a small but highly influential group of nomads, to understand their motivations for living this lifestyle, the experience of being a modern nomad, and the technology and other solutions they use to make it all possible.

Our primary goals in conducting this research were to understand the core needs of digital nomads, how technology and services may adapt in future to meet those needs, how the lives of nomads may change in future, and what impact this might have for the rest of us.
WHAT WE DID

We interviewed 11 nomadic participants, in a combination of face-to-face, phone, IRC and email interviews (remote and time-shifted communication is a necessity for this group). Participants were, in many cases, high profile names in the technology world, responsible for some of the best-known web services in recent years.

We are enormously grateful for their candid responses, and have assumed to protect their anonymity unless specifically given permission to quote them.

In return for their time, we made donations on behalf of each participant to The One Laptop per Child Foundation (www.laptop.org).

WHY NOMADS?

11 is a small sample, but the nomads are a relatively small group. However, they are highly influential, pioneering remote working and maintaining global networks of contacts in ways that will affect a much wider audience.

They use the technologies and services that the rest of us also rely on from time to time, but are more highly dependent on them, motivating them to seek creative and innovative solutions to problems that the rest of us also face, albeit less frequently.

They inspire, and in some cases actively create, some of the technologies and services that enable more productive travel and remote working for the rest of us.

DEFINING NOMADS

Not everyone who is highly mobile is truly nomadic. An essential distinction of our nomads is the degree of control that they maintain as part of the lives they have chosen: it’s up to them when to move on, and to where.

TRUE NOMADS

The truest nomads live this lifestyle as a result of an active desire to see the world, because they have become well known for what they do and take up speaking and work engagements around the world, or sometimes because of a desire for fresh adventures, perhaps after coming out of a long period in a job or relationship.

They typically work for themselves, as independent consultants, or are involved in startups. They have the freedom to determine where they work and move frequently, either because the work can be done from anywhere in the world, or because they have deliberately chosen to do work or collaborate with people in a specific location. They may not even have a permanent home base, or at least not one in which they spend a significant amount of time.

“I sort of live in New York, meaning that’s the city where I do the most laundry.”

The places they choose to spend time are typically leading technology hubs with good networking opportunities, places offering easy access to a favourite leisure activity (e.g. ski resorts) or rich cultural opportunities, or the prospect of a comfortable lifestyle for relatively low cost.
“I have regular haunts, but instead of pubs they’re cities.”

Travel is an opportunity to see the world and move in wider social circles than they would if based in a single location. Ironically by transcending physical location they have freed themselves up to enjoy it even more.

In their world, work is inseparable from the rest of their lives, with most of their friends and contacts being fellow ‘connected people’ met through networking and sharing ideas.

There are even nomadic companies, set up and staffed by nomads and collaborators working in multiple countries around the world. This allows them to hire the best person for the job, no matter where in the world they are.

“The company has never all been in the same room and the founders had not ever been in the same room at the same time until 6 months in.”

ROAD WARRIORS

The majority of mobile workers are probably more accurately described as road warriors. These are heavy business travellers, with permanent home and work bases. They are more likely to be employees, and travel tends to mean visiting clients, colleagues or business partners, often resulting in more time in less glamorous locations than the nomads, e.g. suburban business parks or second tier cities.

They have fewer opportunities to build social networks in each location visited so are more likely to perceive a stronger divide between work and the rest of life, which is typically centred around family or friends at home. As such, they are likely to find extensive travel a potentially disconnecting experience that restricts rather than enhances their social activities.

Road warriors may not have the same degree of control over their travels as the true nomads, or the same social experience, but their technology needs are broadly the same and they represent a far larger market.

A couple of our interviewees fell more accurately into this category, but in this report we have focused more on the nomads, who are arguably more active trend-setters. However, design solutions that address the nomads’ needs are likely to work well for road warriors too, especially if they can enhance the opportunities for social interaction.

BENEFITS OF A NOMADIC LIFESTYLE

All the nomads we spoke to were deeply appreciative of the opportunities they have to see the world and meet many interesting people. This provides them
with a broader perspective on the world and issues that concern them and a much wider social network than they would otherwise have.

“Constantly thinking about the world from different points of view.”

“It’s only when you are outside that you truly understand your own culture.”

Some also felt that it was a way of taking control over life, and squeezing the greatest possible opportunities from it, though they acknowledged that it might not be a lifestyle that could be sustained forever:

”Time passes faster when you’re nomadic, but time doesn’t drift, you’re always doing something and always planning something. Life is very exciting.”

Two of the nomads we spoke to were actively trying to encourage others to live nomadically for a while as a way to broaden their horizons, even if just for a short while. They strongly believe that the only remaining barriers to a fully nomadic lifestyle are technological, and that more and more people could and should overcome the mental inhibitions that root them to a fixed home:

“IT’s more realistic for many people to do than they realise. ...People are very grounded in the idea that they are where they are. Nowadays more and more people should [be nomadic for a while] because you can be anywhere with high speed internet access. ... Once you move around it changes your mental perspective so you feel that you can move around. ...If you do it for 6 months to 1 year you will see the new opportunities of life.“

Business benefits of nomadic working may include the opportunity to take work in a technical hub city like San Francisco with great networking possibilities. Nomads can also minimise spend in the early days of a start up by moving to a city offering a good lifestyle and cultural stimulation for relatively low costs, such as Bangkok or Buenos Aires. Some nomads hope to convince more and more businesses to allow their staff to be nomadic, even creating nomadic teams who move from location to location every few months in search of new experiences.

“People should and could change the way you think about not working in the office.”

FRUSTRATIONS OF THE LIFESTYLE

There are some obvious practical difficulties which nomads have to deal with, such as frequent jetlag, lack of sleep and decreasing levels of comfort due to airline and hotel chains reducing costs by reducing levels of service.
“Price gouging on travel culture, increasingly shitty airline service, loss of food in hotel rooms, pay wi-fi.”

In addition, the mundane pleasures of home, such as cooking for yourself or having the means to indulge a hobby (such as playing an instrument) may be hard to come by, and it requires a concerted effort to get physical exercise when one’s lifestyle is so chaotic.

While nomads typically have very wide circles of friends in many locations, maintaining very close friendships and family relationships can be tough. This is a lifestyle requiring a high degree of self-sufficiency and confidence, and emotional support may not always be to hand when times get tough. Friends and family who are not nomadic may find it hard to understand the desire to lead a rootless lifestyle.

“You get imperceptibly alienated from friends back home, it’s not good for you.”

Several nomads acknowledged that this was not a lifestyle they expected to maintain forever, and felt they might soon need to switch it for a slower pace and greater stability.

“The idea of travelling forever is frightening.”

However, the excitement is addictive, and some feared that their sense of grounding, or ability to adapt to a more ‘normal’ life, might be affected:

“Life is very exciting, so major life decisions get put on hold. You might start to lose your appreciation of a ‘normal’ lifestyle.”

“The existential angst of the simultaneously very social and very lonely lifestyle.”
PRACTICALITIES

CONNECTIVITY AND COSTS

After accommodation, the nomad’s most important need is to find an internet connection. Availability is less of an issue than reliability and cost: patchy wi-fi can create an unprofessional impression on a Skype call, and spending a lot of time on the move can make data costs add up significantly.

“Everything is possible, but much of it is difficult or expensive.”

Mobile broadband is often used by people who spend a significant proportion of time in their home country, but the high cost of roaming severely restricts use when travelling, and has led some highly mobile nomads to ditch their smartphones for basic talk and text models (see below).

“Mobile carriers’ complete highway robbery of travellers.”

“My mobile phone has unlimited data in US, but it’s 1.5 cents per KB overseas. I stay connected on IM all the time, as even at those prices it doesn’t cost much but when overseas I can’t even surf the web on my phone.”

“I do text-only checks of mails to manage costs.”

Keeping track of costs is generally difficult, and nomads try to stick to locations with free and unlimited wi-fi, avoid using mobile data roaming, and hope for the best.

“I just try not to worry about it. It is difficult to track. The only thing I really do to try to control these costs are to avoid using cellular services when I’m outside the US.”

EQUIPMENT

All the nomads we spoke to carry laptops, preferably light but full-featured ones such as a small MacBook. All also carry mobile phones, but are split on the benefits of smartphone devices. Those who spend a reasonable amount of time in one ‘home’ country
generally have one or more of e.g. the iPhone, Sidekick, and perhaps a Blackberry. Where these have Powerpoint, Keynote or other document viewers, they can sometimes remove the need to take a laptop to a meeting, and a high-end phone can also function as compact camera and GPS device. However, fiddly text entry and small screen sizes mean they cannot replace the laptop for more than very basic tasks.

“The phone can carry read-only stuff. You need a laptop for doing actual work. Blackberries are only good for yes/no emails.”

For nomads who move country a lot, the extremely high cost of roaming renders smartphones effectively useless for internet access. Some of these people will buy the cheapest possible pre-pay phone in each country and/or carry a bunch of local pre-pay SIMs to be swapped in and out of an unlocked handset. To some, a super basic phone has become a source of retro joy and a sense of rebellion against the networks and their perceived extortionate charges.

“With the iPhone especially you would find it really frustrating as you’d get used to all the great services and you won’t be able to use them abroad because of ridiculous roaming charges.”

“I downgraded my phone. Now I just use the cheapest one I can get.”

Most nomads also carry cameras, with compacts or cameraphones for snapshots and the occasional digital SLR if they are likely to want to take better quality pictures.

Those who are permanently on the move don’t just need tools for work, they also need ways to entertain themselves, and even maintain hobbies. iPods are unsurprisingly ubiquitous, and some may carry small speakers and even miniature amplifiers, like the Sonic Impact T-amp. One nomad we spoke to carries a miniature guitar and practice amp, another a small projector, which doubles as a large monitor for design work and a cinema screen to host film nights (a useful gimmick for making new friends in new cities).

Extra batteries, external drives, power leads and data modems (mostly for use in a home country) are also common. Power and backup are discussed in more detail below.

When life is spent on the go, in hotel rooms and friends’ apartments, and everything must be carried, opportunities to personalise one’s space are limited. For some, bag fetishism becomes a substitute for pride in a home environment, providing a small opportunity to carry a familiar piece of personal identity anywhere in the world.

“I have too many dongles and power cords in a nice bag.”
POWER

Power is to digital nomads what water is to traditional desert nomads: a certain amount can be carried, but it’s vital to stock up when you can, to know where the next source is, and to make what you have last until you can get to it. With planning, a flat battery may be a rare occurrence, but nomads must live with the constant fear of running out of power.

“I rarely actually run out of electricity, but am constantly aware that I might and make adjustments to deal with it.”

“I have at times gone to the bathroom for a long time to charge up. That’s always embarrassing but they almost always have a power plug there. Power is one of the reasons I attained lounge privileges.”

Many nomads carry spare batteries, some up to 3, perhaps even extended life batteries, but some try to avoid carrying them if they can predict where the power sources will be. Some will carry go-bags of adapters and chargers for different international power supplies, but these are easily lost. It’s important to know that spares will be available locally, which has driven at least one nomad we spoke to to stick to using equipment for which peripherals are easily available.

“Whenver there’s an international airport there’s always an Apple store, that’s not necessarily true of something like Dell.”

Mini USB chargers are a useful, lightweight alternative to traditional phone or device chargers and mean that only one local adapter need be carried, for the laptop.

“I refuse to buy any mobile phone that doesn’t charge by mini USB.”

BACKUPS AND SECURITY

We had expected nomads to be very concerned about the risk of loss or theft of data, but in reality most felt this was something they ought to worry about more than they actually did. Their main concern was for losing data rather than the equipment itself (except in the case of treasured possessions such as a camera), and online backups were widely used, whether that was a formal backup service such as Rsync, Google Docs or simply forwarding email to a Gmail account for archiving.

None were concerned that their data would be of any value in the wrong hands, and only two saw the need for encryption.

“If I lose data it would not jeopardise my trade secrets. The problem is not having a copy.”
The primary need is to be back up and running as soon as possible in the event of the loss or failure of any device.

“Get used to the idea you can lose anything and pack light.”

However, online backup can be slow, and expensive if paying for connectivity, so there may be a need to prioritise the most important work only for online backup. Some nomads carry external hard drives, and we heard stories of people carrying multiple hard drives in separate bags wherever they go to guard against loss, as tourists may split money between wallets and money belts.

Only one carried a laptop lock, though another mentioned the need to be sensitive in some locations where using relatively expensive equipment might even incur personal risk.

PACKING LIGHT

You’d think packing light would be a priority for anyone who is highly mobile, but it is an organisational skill that has to be acquired, and some nomads find it hard. Some learned the hard way, after lugging too much kit around the world a few times.

“I just can’t rationalize my stuff to travel light.”

Still others lack the capability or willingness to do without some of the tools they would expect in a fixed office. Small and light things that are designed to be portable (such as small laptops and the aforementioned USB chargers) are easier to carry, but some physically small things can be hard to work with, such as screens, keyboards and mice. We heard indirectly of one nomad who insists on taking a 22” monitor everywhere in a suitcase.

The more nomads know the environment will provide, the less they need to bring, and the lighter they can travel. Packing light requires not just organisation, a ruthless attitude to possessions and the creativity to think of alternatives, but a confidence that certain things will be available on arrival.

FINDING A PLACE TO STAY

Finding somewhere to stay in a new place is often the first need to be met. Hotels provide the comfort, convenience and facilities needed for a short stay. But for longer-term stays, perhaps of a few months, the key need is to find a place which not only offers reasonable comfort, power and connectivity, but also somewhere to relax and feel at home, where mealtimes don’t have to mean eating out and potentially, meetings can be held.

“The luxury of buying groceries and fixing up a salad.”

Services like Craigslist can be used to find short lets in a hurry, and sharing with other interesting people can be a good way to network. Borrowing an apartment or staying with friends are viable options.
for many nomads, who have contacts in many cities. However, sharing a space with people over extended periods of time can be a new source of stress, especially if it must also serve as a workplace.

Most of the nomads we spoke to seemed to need surprisingly few things to feel at home in a new environment. For some, wi-fi is enough, for others, it’s the ability to play their own music out loud that makes the space feel like theirs.

“I do not need to feel at home per se, but at home where I am.”

FINDING A PLACE TO WORK

It’s quite possible to work from a home base or hotel room, though all the nomads we spoke to like to work alongside others, whether for active company or simply to be surrounded by people. This might mean mooching office space from a friend or client, or working from coffee shops, where they may hope to meet other nomads.

Ritual Roasters coffee shop in San Francisco’s Mission district has become the place that most epitomises the geek nomadic lifestyle, thanks to a combination of free wi-fi, power sockets, good sized tables, not telling people to leave, and (according to our interviewees) the “second best coffee in town”. It’s here that nomads go in the knowledge that they are likely to bump into friends, meet new people with similar interests, or simply to be in a familiar place where they recognise the baristas. See below for more discussion of the social life of the shared workspace.

Concentration in public places tends not to be a problem, with many using noise-cancelling headphones and music to create personal space as needed.

SOCIAL LIFE OF NOMADS

Nomadism is simultaneously a highly social and very lonely lifestyle. True nomads tend to have wide circles with friends in lots of cities, and view this as one of the key benefits of the lifestyle. However, limited contact with people ‘back home’ may affect longer-standing relationships, and it would be a difficult lifestyle to combine with a family (none of our true nomads had children).

“I have found that being nomadic has drastically increased the number of close friendships that I have, but that some distant friendships have to be maintained via web.”

In contrast, road warriors may find extensive travel a more isolating experience, as they have less opportunity to build relationships in the locations they visit.

MAINTAINING FRIENDSHIPS

Instant messaging, IRC, blogs, Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, and many other networking sites allow
nomads always to keep track of their connected friends. They take these tribes with them, and only have to open up the laptop to have a friendly conversation. We heard of someone who calls this laptop tribe ‘my little square friends’, as personal icons on social networks are always square. The ability to follow what people are up to online combined with occasional face to face time seems to strengthen relationships in a more powerful way than those ties could be maintained purely online, or purely through occasional visits. Sharing the minutiae of lives and thoughts provides the social capital from which bonds are forged, and face to face time cements those ties. Most of the true nomads we spoke to felt they maintained many more friendships that way than they would otherwise be able to.

“There’s a real comfort to maintaining lots of weak ties [online]. It’s hard to create strong ties online but by travelling and seeing those people from time to time these can be built. Knowing a lot about what they’ve been up to since you last saw them, e.g. from Twitter, makes it easier to pick up and create stronger ties than occasional face to face meetings alone would.”

“I’ve been able to maintain a lot of meaningful relationships through the combination of travel and technology.”

THE SOCIAL EXPERIENCE OF THE PUBLIC WORKSPACE

Nomads welcome the social aspect of working in a public space as opposed to alone in a hotel room or apartment, both for ‘ambient company’ or the opportunities to have random encounters in public spaces and potentially meet interesting people.

“There is a risk of losing professional value and mental value, for your own sanity and mental health you have to maintain [face to face] social connections. My friend works in Starbucks rather than at home and he’s a freelancer and even though he’s a New Yorker and he lives in New York. Once every couple of weeks in a café you’ll meet someone random and different. Of those, there are a few you will stay in touch with. Randomness is a good thing. You can work alone somewhere but it’s about keeping the balance between mental health and how long you’re doing it for, and what value do you gain in terms of social connections.”

When working in public spaces, whether in cafes or at conferences, nomads use cues to indicate their
interests and status, all intended in a subtle way to attract like-minded strangers and provide ice-breakers for introductions. Stickers (such as moo stickers) on laptops are popular with those doing a lot of café work and can signify membership of tribes, such as affiliation with a particular web 2.0 company as well as ownership of the laptop and proof that the owner is not a corporate drone. Stickers can also function as advanced business cards, with new contacts sticking them on each others’ laptops as a ‘remember me’.

If a face to face approach feels too forward, technology can also mediate new social encounters in public spaces. One nomad told us that in popular geek wi-fi hangouts, it’s quite normal for strangers to pop up in Bonjour windows to say

”Oh hello, what do you do?”

ESTABLISHING A NETWORK
For nomads who have landed in a new location in which they plan to stay for a while and experience life as a local, establishing a network and meeting new friends is important. This may well be one of the primary motivations for moving from place to place:

“You meet more smart and interesting people abroad. There’s a niche community of people signed up to the digital world.”

Making friends and contacts takes a little while but gets easier with practice.

“There is a relatively repetitive way to establish social connections, if you are a geek, in the first few weeks go to 6 events, and you will have people that you have met several times over.”

Nomads we spoke to suggested that it takes 2-3 months to get the feel of really living somewhere, and 6 months or longer is more rewarding. However, if a wide network is one of your main objectives, it’s wise to know when to move on:

“If you spend too long in once place like Lima you risk having too local a network.”

MAINTAINING CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS
However wide one’s circle of friends gained through nomadism, they cannot always replace the connection to family and friends you may have had for many years.

“You can have lots of people around you, but if something bad happens back home when you’re away, you don’t have your best friend of 20 years right there for support.”

“Being connected to people through virtual means and meeting them once in a few months is definitely different to having a group of friends that you see once a week.”

It might seem hard to maintain a love relationship with this lifestyle, but as one of our nomads pointed out, if you can work wherever you want, you can also choose to be where your partner is.
OPPORTUNITIES FOR TECHNOLOGY AND SERVICE INNOVATION

There are a number of hardware innovations that would be of clear benefit to nomads; such as smaller but more powerful computers; light, portable (perhaps folding) displays; longer battery life/more efficient power usage; and better text entry on mobile devices.

However, many of the most difficult problems nomads face are less to do with the devices themselves than they are to do with the service experiences around those devices. These may be influenced by cost and/or availability, but as often as not the fear of cost or the fear that a necessity will be hard to come by in a new place are more serious problems than the reality.

Affordable (preferably flat rate) roaming data would radically transform usage of smartphones and mobile broadband, as flat rate domestic data has within markets. Easy ways to track roaming costs would help (surprisingly few operators provide such a service).

If you could have one wish for something that would improve the quality of your life while nomadic, what would it be?

“A world blanketed in free wifi.”

Where mobile broadband is unavailable, or too expensive, predictability is key: knowing ahead of time where the next free, reliable wi-fi will be can save a lot of stress.

Though this may be a non-trivial technical problem, better roaming experiences also require better interoperability between different mobile network technologies:

“I would gladly pay a flat rate of hundreds of dollars per month if my computer and mobile device just worked, anywhere in the world, no questions.”

Predictability of power sources is arguably a bigger issue than incremental improvements in battery life. Service providers can attract nomads (and other mobile workers) not just by providing power sockets in convenient places, but also by advertising their presence and location. Offering use of, and publicising the availability of, some of the physical technologies that can’t be miniaturised or carried in bulk, e.g. monitors and adapters, would also help people feel confident about travelling lighter.

Easy and affordable replaceability of parts can sway nomads to choose one brand over another: knowing there’ll always be someone to hand to fix a laptop at short notice, or supply a forgotten charger, may well justify the decision to pay considerably more for the item itself in the first place.

Ensuring good ergonomics is also difficult when working from a variety of different spaces on the move. Devices that support usage via different input mechanisms or that support usage from different postures can help, as can short term loans of spaces with proper seating.
There are many opportunities for services to help support the social aspects of the nomadic lifestyle. One of our nomads is working on the idea of support networks, such as wikis, offering advice on e.g. choosing locations, finding accommodation, getting broadband and mobile services in different countries, learning local languages, finding the people and user groups you might wish to network with. Nomads are an open and supportive community, and could help each other out, e.g. temporarily lending apartments to others when out of town:

“I dream of joining an association of nomads where I would have access to work/live lofts in many locales, where I could lodge when in London, for example, and in the same location I could sleep, eat (cook) and work, including having meetings.”

WHAT’S THE FUTURE OF NOMADISM?

How will the lives of nomads change in future, and how will they change things for the rest of us?

Right now, the hyper-connected nomads inhabit an elite and slightly cliquey world (albeit perhaps unintentionally). What aspects of this lifestyle may trickle down to the wider market? Is this a lifestyle that’s only available to a small elite of hyper-connected, high profile thinkers and business people? Or will it open up opportunities, or create problems, for the rest of us?

Many of the barriers to more people living like this are social, not technological; such as the feeling of being tied to one place, and low tolerance of remote working. It takes guts, and the ability to work autonomously (or for a very understanding employer) to up and off somewhere where you don’t know anyone and build a network from scratch. If more people did this, the world might well be a better connected place. But it’s not for everyone.

Additionally, there’s a certain irony in the fact that by transcending location, the nomads reinforce to some extent the significance and cachet of certain set of locations. Are they really democratising the tech world, or reinforcing the importance of certain hub locations?

It’s about where they want to be, not where the work wants them to be, and where they want to be is often (understandably) where the other cool kids are. 6 months in London or San Francisco is going to give them a bunch of better contacts than 6 months in Wolverhampton or Wyoming.

How many people can live like this? What would be the impact if many more of them did? We can’t all live in San Francisco or Whistler, and for environmental and currently, economic reasons many of us may need to start using technology
to help us travel less, not more. Some nomad innovations, such as Dopplr, can be used to make more efficient use of the travel they already do, and of course online networking allows all of us to maintain many weak ties all over the world. However, one of the fundamental reasons the nomad trend exists is because face to face contact is still essential to building and strengthening bonds.

Given such limitations, it’s likely that true nomadism will remain the preserve of a relatively small crowd, which for many will be a phase in their lives.

However, the nomads are in a sense pioneering ways in which remote working and a global network of contacts can be maintained which can therefore serve to increase the options available to a wider audience. They are reliant on technologies and services that the rest of us also depend on, albeit to a lesser extent.

The social and technological solutions that serve them can also help the rest of us be more mobile, more effective and more social whilst we are mobile.

REFERENCES/THANKS

Matt Biddulph at Dopplr (now Nokia) for invaluable help with recruitment and cultural orientation; Esther Dyson, Manar Hussain and the rest of the nomads. Ji-Hye Park for research support, Louisa Heinrich for inspiration and not least Christian Lindholm for support and direction.