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Nomads of the working world

By Ian Sanders



It is the end of June and Kevin Roberts is in the air again. Having just left London, he's en route to Mexico City, then Phoenix, Arizona, on to Lancaster, England and then Paris in the space of just a few days.

As chief executive worldwide of Saatchi & Saatchi, the advertising agency, Mr Roberts spends his entire year on the road in a touring schedule so rigorous it would get most rock bands reaching for the Red Bull. "My office is my briefcase," he says.

Mr Roberts is part of a growing tribe of executives and entrepreneurs proving that in business today, you can work from anywhere. This work-anywhere group includes nomadic executives, remote-workers, city-hopping location-independent

workers and entrepreneurs who are relocating to cities a long way from home. A smartphone, Skype account, broadband connection and wide public access to WiFi have liberated them from the shackles of the office to work wherever they feel most productive.

For Mr Roberts, however, technology cannot replace face-to-face. As the head of an organisation of 6,000 employees based in close to 85 countries, he believes that the best way to inspire them is to be on the ground "in their habitat". And with offices inside his New York, New Zealand and London agencies, and homes in New York, Auckland, the English Lake District and St Tropez, Mr Roberts spends 270 nights a year in hotels.

"Technology for me is a liberator – not an excuse not to travel," he explains. "Nothing beats relationships that are forged by being up close and personal. Being on the road constantly keeps me close to the dynamics that change almost daily . . . Talking and listening to the younger part of the company keeps me brutally in touch."

Meanwhile, at the Chicago offices of software company 37signals the average co-worker is not at the next desk but in Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, Michigan, North Carolina and Texas as well as Canada, Ireland and the UK. But the company is not a technology giant with

offices around the globe; it is a 30-person business that encourages its employees to work from anywhere.

Company partner David Heinemeier Hansson was based in Denmark for the first three years of the company's life before moving to Chicago, and says it has never been easier to work like this. His company use their own software Basecamp and Campfire to run the business together with instant messaging, Skype and email. "You couldn't work like this before the internet and tools like Basecamp, but now it's trivially easy," he says.

Mr Heinemeier Hansson believes that more organisations can embrace remote working if they change their mindset. "It's hard if you grew up thinking that 'people in the office' meant things were getting done," he explains. "You have to change your view from people in seats, to stuff getting done. Once you make that transition it's not hard at all."

He acknowledges, however, that face-to-face meetings are still valuable; the company meets as a whole three times a year.

Dos and don'ts for being location-independent

Do...

- **Use LinkedIn** to establish a network. "When I arrived in Brazil the first thing I did was use LinkedIn to find out who are the big technology decision makers and then I went out to meet them" says Mark Hillary.

- **Use Twitter** to find "meet-ups" and business networks happening in your new location. Search on keywords by location in Advanced Search to find relevant people and organisations to connect with.

- **Approach your native government's** local representatives. For example, UK Trade & Investment, the British government's trade promotion body, has a presence in most countries

Don't...

- **Be shy of self-promotion.** If you want to become established you will need to be prepared to do everything to get your name out and tell people what you do.

- **Assume that the locals** will speak your native language even if you are dealing with

Lea Woodward is the co-founder with her husband of Startup Training School and of a site devoted to location-independent working that has turned itself into an online community. She has seen a rise in executives going on the road as they pursue unconventional career paths and agrees with Mr Heinemeier Hansson that today's tools have enabled this flexibility. "Organisations and entrepreneurs are waking up to the fact that technology tools make it much simpler, more cost effective and in some cases more productive to collaborate and co-ordinate without being face-to-face," she says.

She and her husband's own experience are part of the story. Since 2007, they have lived in Buenos Aires, Cape Town, Dubai, Edinburgh, Grenada, Phuket, Toronto and Turkey running an online school and a digital publishing business. Since they do not employ other people, it is not a problem missing face time with employees.

John Bardos is a Canadian citizen and former owner of an English school in Japan, who has embarked on a nomadic work life running his online businesses most recently from Hungary, Thailand and Turkey. With business activities including revenue-generating websites, a job site for English teachers and working as a marketing consultant, he acknowledges that the biggest headache is the logistics of moving. "Excessive traveling gets tiring very quickly. Planning and booking transportation, finding a new apartment, navigating an unknown city and finding local

well-educated elites. And even if you only plan to do business with people who speak the same language, still make the effort to learn a basic local business vocabulary.

• **Risk criticism by complaining** about too much bureaucracy. Inevitably there will be different arrangements for dealing with business law and accounting but you should not enforce the way you want to do business on a local culture.

amenities take up so much time,” he says.

Of course, Mr Bardos says these drawbacks are offset by the benefits – going to a new destination is inspiring when success today depends on coming up with new ideas.

Yet some entrepreneurs decide to settle in a new country altogether, taking their business with them.

Mark Hillary relocated from London to São Paulo 18 months ago. He runs a technology industry advisory business that he realised could be run from anywhere near a major

international airport. He has even developed unexpected new lines of business. Not only has he won contracts with local enterprises, he now also helps US and UK companies wanting to enter Latin America’s biggest market. “I never planned it this way, but I developed the knowledge by setting up a company in Brazil,” he says.

Even maintaining long-distance relationships with European clients required little disruption. In fact, when Mr Hillary was based in London, he either saw UK clients at international conferences or only visited their offices once a year – an arrangement he maintains from Brazil with regular overseas trips.

The only headache for Mr Hillary is time zone difference and the inevitable 5am phone calls from clients who occasionally forget that he is based in São Paulo.

With the challenges that come with integrating into new business communities and dealing with the logistics of excessive travel, the reality of a working life on the road is a long way from the old-fashioned perception of the glamour of sun-drenched destinations, first-class flights and top hotels.

So if you are going to try working from anywhere, you will also need to love living the nomadic life. As

Mr Roberts puts it: “The core to living like a gypsy in this way is to enjoy it. And I do.”

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