

Nomadic Culture in Academic Settings: Pervasive Commuting and Institutional Support as Defining Elements

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Abstract. Organisational support for nomadicity has been considered one of the main artefacts of nomadic cultures. Without such support, the establishment and development of a nomadic culture is hindered, as is the engagement in nomadic practices. In this paper, we discuss how organisational support within a German university has fostered the establishment of an academic nomadic culture. We discuss how pervasive commuting practices, the related institutional frames, and resulting collaborative work practices are integral part of this culture. In so doing, we demonstrate how long-distance commuting is a defining social characteristic of the university culture and we start discussing how a number of infrastructural factors compete against nomadic cultures, demanding coping strategies for their maintenance.

Keywords: Nomadicity, Commuting, Academia, Institutional Frames, Nomadic Culture.

1 Introduction

Nomadcity—i.e., the accomplishment of work in and across manifold locations through the mobilisation of the workplace with the help of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (de Carvalho, 2014; Rossitto, 2009)—has been object of many and various research studies within CSCW for the past few years (Ciolfi and de Carvalho, 2014). Whilst these studies have contributed substantially to advancing the understanding of the notion of nomadcity, little has been said about the popularisation of such practices contributing to the raise of nomadic cultures, which in turn supports them.

This paper describes the organisational support within a provincial German university that led to commuting becoming a characteristic element of the local academic culture. This is based on an understanding that workers may spend a large amount of their work hours away from the university campus, which especially for those living in other cities results in a substantial amount of time spend on commuting to and from campus. We discuss commuting as a defining social characteristic of the university that shapes much of its work culture and elaborate on the difficulties that members of this culture have to overcome in their everyday work and life.

2 Related Work

The notion of nomadic culture is not novel. It dates back to 2005, when Chen and Corritore (2005) coined the term to refer to the role of organisational support in fostering nomadcity. The authors suggest that the move towards a nomadic workforce, organisations must provide the appropriate mechanisms for that.

Czarniawska (2014) goes beyond the issues of organisational support, putting forward an argument that nomadcity can be seen as a life-story plot. The author suggests that we are witnessing a shift towards a culture where the notions of nomadcity and nomadism will become more and more intermingled.

In response to Czarniawska, Büscher (2014) draws attention that the life-story plot view can be in fact biased by “key aspects of the socio-economic and political contexts of nomadic work in global neoliberal economies” (p. 223), urging for a more thorough investigation of issues concerning nomadcity, one that takes account of new practices and politics concerning nomadcity, whose focuses lies on sociality and collaboration.

This paper takes Büscher’s arguments into account and sets out to shed light on how organisational support in combination with people’s personal preferences are directly related to the rise of nomadic cultures.

3 Towards a Nomadic Culture

The discussion we put forward in this paper is based on auto-ethnographic accounts of the authors, who work at a German university located in a provincial city of ca. 100.000 inhabitants, and informal exchanges on the subject with their co-workers. The city is an economic, social and educational hub for the region. It is only about 1-2 hours away from several major German cities and has good connections to motorway and railway services. Many of the students and a large number of teachers and researchers commute regularly—not only from the region and these nearby major cities, but from all over Germany. Additionally, the university is spread over several locations in the city, which employees and students frequently have to traverse for lectures, meetings, teaching duties, etc. Commuting and the university's distribution over the city create a number of constraints and challenges and have a visible impact on the local work culture. In particular, changes between personal presence and absence play a major role in everyday working conditions and work practices at the university, as already highlighted in past CSCW research on nomadicity (Bogdan et al., 2006; de Carvalho, 2014; Rossitto and Eklundh, 2007). We suggest a new angle to the state of the art on the subject by discussing how commuting is an integral part of the nomadic culture that emerged in our university over many years and the arrangements around it. Whilst deeper investigations are necessary to better understand the nuances of such phenomena, this paper points out some potential issues to be explored in future research.

3.1 Commuting as a defining social characteristic of academic nomadic culture

From informal exchanges with colleagues and based on our own experiences, we learned that there are numerous reasons for choosing a place to live away from the city of our university. The private environment with family responsibilities can be one of these reasons. Often, the common cross-section of couples or families is not necessarily located there. The partner may have employment in a different city. The children may already be at school or in day-care elsewhere. Moving would mean changes, while parents may rather want to keep the children in a stable environment. The common cross-section may preferably remain in another German city.

Furthermore, the temporary employment character of many of the positions offered in the university can be a source of demotivation to relocate. Another reason that is often mentioned by colleagues who live in bigger cities is that they can have faster access to external events or airports compared to rather long routes they would have to take if living in the university city.

We also got to understand social network effects with regards to relocation: New employees may not move to the university city, but choose to move to the major cities 1-2 hours away because many colleagues already live there. In general, it seems that a high mobility rate among academics makes them not necessarily prone to relocating their homes, but instead to commuting long distances.

Living in different areas leads colleagues to organise themselves in several ways to get to work or to collaborate. An example is to coordinate collective train rides or regular car sharing groups. Both offer possibilities for meetings and discussions with co-workers about work and non-work-related issues and to some extent getting actual work done like reading, writing, and other forms of computer or paper work.

Meeting culture is also very much adapted to commuters. Rather than traveling to the university campus, meetings among colleagues living in the same city or region are often scheduled right there. Meetings, lectures and other events at the university, in turn, are often scheduled later in the morning so as to be more commuter-friendly. Research events such as public talks, colloquia, etc. often extend into the evening for them to be out of the way of teaching and faculty duties but still fit into a single work day, maximising productivity of presence time and avoiding another day of commute. In fact, particularly in commuter-heavy units and arguably at the university at large a notion of “core days” has emerged. While the actual days may shift (examples are Tuesdays to Thursdays or Wednesdays to Fridays every week), these are days where most meetings, events, and in-person collaborative work will be scheduled. The other days remain for remote, techno-mediated meetings, email work, and individual scholarship.

In this way, a sort of commuter-friendly nomadic culture emerges, in which technologically-mediated nomadicity unfolds as work gets accomplished in and across different locations with the help of computer technologies, which are key for the mobilisation of their workplaces (de Carvalho et al., 2017; Su and Mark, 2008).

3.2 Organisational support for emerging nomadic cultures

The practice of non-resident working has been largely established at our university so that the organizational processes are also geared towards it. Most employees use laptops instead of desktop PCs to remain flexible. In order to minimize presence in person, events are preferably placed compactly for a few consecutive days. Mondays and Fridays are usually left free, so to accommodate those who commute. These observations corroborate findings from Lilischkis (2003). However, they go beyond it by demonstrating how this is part of a university culture.

In principle, the productive result of an activity is substantially more important than the place where the activity was performed, which also allows work away

from the office. Student assistants support researchers by digitising books and materials in order to make them more mobile. A VPN client allows access to the university network from external locations, including access to the library and other university services. However, the provided access sometimes can be problematic, which leads people to prepare themselves before leaving and take the materials with them. This corresponds to the *assemblage of actants* discussed in Su and Mark's (2008) nomadicity model, which can be directly connected with the affordances and actual performances of computer technologies in nomadic contexts (Sørensen, 2011).

A particular problem of the university as a whole is limited space with regards to both lecture halls and offices. These space restrictions have led to commuter-friendly solutions. Because the university vastly exceeds the physical capacity of the students it can take, many lectures are now required to be video recorded and made available online so that more students can follow the content than the rooms can accommodate. This organisational support gives people the opportunity to engage in work from different locations and at times that suit them, enabling the *choice* and *opportunity* regions of the nomadicity spectrum discussed by de Carvalho et al. (2017).

3.3 Strategies and cultural understanding in coping with nomadicity

Although commuting and organisational support are important aspects of the nomadic culture herein described, there remain many challenges for people in coping with this situation on an everyday basis. For one, the internet connection on the road is not always good, let alone consistently available, which has a considerable influence on the workflow, especially when one is dependent on data from online resources. Changing trains or switching to other means of transport interrupts commuters in their work. Furthermore, public transport is often crowded and noisy and hence presents challenges in concentrating, reading, writing, or even talking to colleagues.

The arrangement of office hours has in part resorted to online tools. For instance, many lecturers offer the possibility of Skype meetings with students, meaning that neither they nor the students would have to travel for a 15-minute conversation. The communication between employees also focuses on their changing presence and absence. For example, tools such as Telegram are used to communicate internally.

The biggest challenges are the changing presence and absence of colleagues, the availability of resources at any time and any location as well as the necessary planning of meetings with colleagues. Contrasting with arguments from de Carvalho (2014) that suggest that distance is not an issue for people who engage

in nomadicity, our observations show that people in this particular nomadic culture see the lack of personal contact as a deficiency.

In order to optimise face-to-face interactions, there is a cultural understanding that meetings should be arranged on the mid-week days. We further observed that there is a division into "writing days vs. meeting days", which allows colleagues to understand the times when other colleagues would be available and when they would concentrate on individual work. In home office, colleagues remain nevertheless available via e-mail, chat, and phone, so that time-critical arrangements can still be made, which raises questions about work-life balance, as also observed by Gray et al. (2017) and de Carvalho (2013).

4 Conclusion

In this paper, we provided a glimpse of the pervasive commuting practices at our university. These practices have led to dynamics, which have long been engrained, e.g., in the scheduling of events, in the ways student assistants are involved in accomplishing flexible work, and in the ways in which technology is increasingly used to mediate as well as coordinate collaborative presence and absence work. We have shown that some institutional arrangements are in place, that others informally have become routine along the way, but that employees and students still have to cope with and organise around some of these arrangements as well.

Many of our observations resonate with findings from the literature, especially with observations done by Lilischicks (2003) and de Carvalho (2014). However, we advance these findings by demonstrating how commuting is articulated and engrained as a defining element of our local academic culture.

In conclusion, we argue that pervasive commuting and its institutional support from the university have been essential in fostering the described culture. As Chen and Nath (2005) point out, when no institutional support is in place, nomadicity is handicapped. Furthermore, our observations suggest that in such a culture clear agreements on how to deal with absence and changes in plans are of particular relevance. Commuters often experience delayed trains or other delays that can affect office planning. Informing colleagues about such conditions is indispensable for successful cooperation. Such issues must be further explored in future work, so to provide a nuanced account of the role that commuting practices and institutional support plays in nomadicity and emergent nomadic cultures.

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