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The rise of the new nomadics

If your 'job' entails loitering in coffee shops, armed with only a laptop and mobile, then you're part of a brave new world

Fleur Britten

I suppose you would describe me as a consultant," says Clare Crean, a 40-year-old mother of one in the vanguard of a new working movement. For the past few years, she has been employed on a freelance basis, "tarting up new businesses" for Virgin. She does not have her own office, and her hours are irregular. "I'm a typical mother – I don't want to work seven days a week, 24 hours a day. It suits me to be on contract."

Crean's situation is typical of the way businesses want to work now – hiring expensive, experienced people only when they need them, not lumbering themselves with the responsibility and expense of full-time employees. It suits both parties, but it leaves a lot of these freelancers, or "perma-lancers" as they are now called, with no fixed abode. Mostly, they work out of wireless hotspots in hotel lobbies, earning themselves the moniker of coffee-shop nomads or the new Bedouins. The movement started in San Francisco's coffee houses during the dotcom gold rush of the late 1990s. The pay-as-you-go office rent? A coffee every couple of hours.

"By the time I'd finished writing my book, the Starbucks staff were calling me Little Miss Triple Shot," says Alexandra Heminsley, author of *Ex and the City*. Having discovered she was more productive working in public, Heminsley now has an intimate knowledge of all the wireless spots and decent coffee shops in her area. "Living and working alone induces isolation fever," she says. "If all I saw was my living-room carpet and reruns of *The West Wing*, I'd have written a really rubbish book."

According to reports, there are now 2.4m teleworkers in the UK, up from 0.9m in 1997. Ditching the office is the most modern way to operate these days, it seems. Punchin culture is out – a surgical attachment to a laptop and a mobile phone, and a willingness to travel, are in. So, as BlackBerry sales surge and the WiFi cloud swirls around the country, public spaces are increasingly sprinkled with computers, business-speak and spiralling caffeine habits. Meanwhile, the really successful are being referred to as the "kinetic elite", a term coined by the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas for high-net-worth individuals who work out of hotel lobbies, airport lounges and their expensive briefcases.

Ben Keene, entrepreneur and author of *Tribe Wanted: My Adventure on Paradise or Bust*, set up his eco-tribe on a remote Fijian island. He could often be found perched on a rock "trying to catch a phone signal". Now based in London, he remains a mobile merchant: "There'd be huge costs in setting up an office: all I need is a laptop, a mobile and a passport; it's totally transportable." His resources are all online and free. He connects with his global team via free Skype and video-conference calls. But best of all is the dynamic: "I find the constant flow of movement and action and noise energising."

Kristina Dryza, a consumer-trends expert currently working in Tokyo, and on her way to Shanghai, agrees: "You're open to so many different influences that you can't get at a desk. Most people work derivatively, but by engaging with the real world, your information isn't secondhand."

The demographics comprise youngish consultants, industries of one and boutique businesses, mostly from the creative arena. Still, how can anyone concentrate surrounded by all that white noise, not to mention the cappuccino machine? "The day doesn't end," admits Keene. "It's addictive. I'm often logging on when I'm supposed to be asleep. And sometimes I wish I had the security of a base and a team in the same time zone. I can go for two or three days without any real physical contact."

Enter the latest development: Britain's first members' business club, One Alfred Place, in Bloomsbury, London. Dubbed "the work space of the future", it features roaming secretaries, boardrooms and even a sleep cabin for power naps, all for a tax-deductible annual fee of £1,500. Among the charcoal velvet Chesterfields and an

arsenal of shiny gadgetry, execs power-broke into Bluetooth headpieces and laptops – Crean among them. “This place is made for people like me,” she says. “There are lots of times when Starbucks won’t do and you’re left with dodgy hotels. The Institute of Directors is the next best thing, but not very inspiring, and Soho House is too sociable.”

“There was a huge gap in the market,” says the founder, Rob Shreeve. “Hotel lobbies and cafes are expensive, and the seating arrangements aren’t right. It’s noisy, it’s dirty and your laptop runs out of power. Teleworkers don’t need a formal office, but we do need a base.”

At One Alfred Place, most of the 200-plus members are “in the top quartile” of net worth, according to Shreeve: management consultants, digital-media moguls, senior music-industry types. (Investors include Nick Mason of Pink Floyd, Mike Rutherford of Genesis and the former chairman of Soho House Group, Robert Devereux.) The networking opportunities are fantastic.

“Having set up all these businesses for Virgin, I want to set up on my own,” says Crean. “I’m just looking for equity. It might even happen here.”

“There’s a lot of networking here,” Shreeve confirms. “It’s like a salon culture.” Success breeds success: time to get in among it all.

THE DO’S AND DON’TS OF THE NOMADIC ELITE

GOOD LOOKS

- Sporting the smallest, thinnest laptop, multiple private members’ club cards and sleek, stealth-wealth accessories
- Paying your “office rent” in the currency of food and drink
- Maintenance drinking: don’t overdo caffeine consumption so the shakes kick in
- Turning your BlackBerry off after working hours
- Respecting the different time zones of your global digital network
- Generosity of spirit: offering to help other nomads in need, freeing up table space, flirting to boost flagging egos

BAD LOOKS

- Being on first-name terms with the baristas – a sign of poor productivity. Time to relocate
- Smugness – beware the Nathan Barley-esque campaign out to humble obnoxious, louder-than-necessary, Bluetooth-headset-wearing technocrats
- Industrial espionage – eyeballing and eavesdropping on others’ endeavours
- Exhibiting social desperation: don’t assume anyone with a laptop is fair game for a bold bit of networking
- Swarovski-encrusted, gold-plated or pimped-up gadgetry

TOP 5 NOMAD GADGETS

- 1 Folding bike, £380, by Strida.
- 2 Passport cover, £150, by Smythson.
- 3 MacBook Air laptop, £1,199.
- 4 Nokia E51 business phone, £209.
- 5 JX10 Cara gold-plated Bluetooth headset, £129; www.jabra.com

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