

WORK AROUND THE WORLD

Forget nine-to-five desk jobs. The future of the workforce is remote and it's global. Here are some of the companies leading the change.

BY DANAE MERCER



LEFT AND RIGHT: Millennials, more than any other generation, are looking for a mix of freedom and travel while working.

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"THERE WILL BE a world where we'll laugh at the fact that we used to sit in offices and work nine-to-five," Katelyn Smith, founder of TheRemoteNomad.com, says via Skype from Canada.

"It's already such a globalised world where everything is interconnected, and we're about to go to a whole other level. It's going to change exponentially. I'm so excited to see that shift happen."

Smith is a digital nomad — a term she notes is a bit controversial to define, but basically refers to anyone who travels the world while working remotely. More than that, she's a strong advocate for becoming one. Through her website, Smith offers would-be digital nomads advice on how to step away from the desk, step onto a plane, and embrace what she sees as the future of employment.

Smith's not alone. In a world where Tim Ferriss' *4-Hour Workweek* sat on the *New York Times*' bestseller list for seven consecutive years, where huge employers like Virgin have launched entire web series dedicated to remote working, and where the Institute of Leadership & Management reports that 94 per cent of UK organisations offer flexible working, the idea of putting in the hours from home isn't groundbreaking; it's commonplace.

But the idea of globe trotting while you do it? That's a whole different story, one that's being pushed forward by an increasingly mobilised, internet-connected workforce consisting primarily of travel-hungry 20- to 30-somethings.

"Most people we speak to, the thing they often arrive at is the sense of 'I've done everything I was told. I checked these boxes through my 20s and 30s. I have good friends, an apartment, a job, two weeks' vacation,'" says Jonathan Kalan, co-founder of Unsettled (beunsettled.co). "But they reach a point where they say: 'Is this it? I feel there's something more.'" Kalan, a journalist, photographer and entrepreneur, speaks from Nicaragua.

"Millennials, they want to have freedom, they want to travel, and a lot of work can be done remotely," adds Lars Blokdiijk, the 25-year-old co-founder of Co-Work Paradise (coworkparadise.com). Charismatic, with a tan and sun-bleached hair, Blokdiijk speaks via a Google hangout from Amsterdam. "There's this idea [in companies] that you can work from home. But if you can do that, why can't you work from Bali or wherever you want to go?"

This space, where remote working and travel aspirations collide, is a nascent one. For fast-moving companies, it's also ripe with potential. In 2014, Remote Year dangled the opportunity for "interesting people" to travel and work together while the company handled logistics like locations, accommodation, Wi-Fi, and relevant career guidance (remoteyear.com). In exchange, participants would pay a USD 3,000 deposit and USD 2,000 a month. The response was massive: 25k people applied for the programme's 75 spots.

On 1 June, 2015, the journey began. It started a tidal wave. "For Remote Year, there are a million duplicates now," says Smith, herself one of Remote Year's first-year participants. "Competition is coming in hot and heavy."

Enter organisations like Hacker Paradise, a tech-focused programme that hosts around 20 people for a few months at a time in places like Bali or Chiang Mai (hackerparadise.org); the aforementioned Unsettled, a series of month-long retreats for those looking to find "new perspectives" and grow "new ideas"; Co-Work Paradise, a month-long programme in Bali drawing 12 entrepreneurs with their own companies; We Roam, a travel programme made unique by its flexible start/end dates (we-roam.com); and a fair few more. ▶

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All promise to take care of accommodation and other often-unnerving logistics associated with international travel, while allowing for work-friendly environments.

The potential for networking and access to a ready-made community of interesting people play a large role. “The most important thing with any co-working group is that you’re surrounded by the people who are there. We used to think it was about having the best place, the most beautiful villa, but in truth it’s about the people,” notes Michael Tesselaar, co-founder of Co-Work Paradise. To ensure a good group dynamic, the company arranges hour-long Skype interviews with selected candidates.

“A lot of people compare it to freshman year of university without all the drinking,” says 25-year-old Casey Rosengren, founder of Hacker Paradise. “You’re putting a group of people together with this large common area, there are always people to hang out with...” In Hacker Paradise’s case, throw in a resort with an infinity pool in the middle of Bali, surfing, meals out, and “it’s all a bit like college.”

“It’s not for everyone,” he adds. “Some people like to be grounded. Some people’s work won’t allow them to do something like this. But there’s definitely a growing group of people looking abroad thinking ‘all I need is an internet connection’. It’s a fascinating time to be involved in remote work, remote experience, because it’s a growing industry. I think it will continue to grow.”

Blokdiik notes that when he began, there weren’t many of these types of programmes. Things have changed. “This last year’s been crazy. In October, we were in Bali again, and there were four other co-working groups doing the same kind of thing. We’ve been contacted by an investor because they see this as the future of work. Not today, not tomorrow, but in the coming years, they see this as the way.”

Although businesses catering specifically to digital nomads and globe-trotting remote workers have started to emerge, there’s still so much further to go, notes Smith.



FROM THE TOP: Unsettled offers a series of month-long retreats for those looking to find “new perspectives” and grow “new ideas; the Co-Work Paradise accommodation; Katelyn Smith, founder of TheRemoteNomad.com.

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“With this lifestyle of people hopping around, things are going to change exponentially. Think about registering a business. You need a physical address, so how will that evolve? What do I put on my driver’s license when I’m in a new country every month? So I’m curious to see how the laws and the government will come into play,” she says.

“People are becoming more global citizens. Will there be any barriers? Are people going to embrace it? You have traditional people that are acting as walls, but soon they’ll be gone, and our whole generation is into this movement now. It will shape the future. It will change the way we work.” ■