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Digital Nomads Choose Their Tribes

Teleworkers Find Camaraderie in a New Kind of Colleague

By [Michael S. Rosenwald](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer

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Work is what you do, NOT a place you go.

Chuck Wilsker, President & CEO
The Telework Coalition www.TelCoa.org

Frank Gruber's workstation at AOL in Dulles could be in any cubicle farm from here to Bangalore -- push-pin board for reminders, computer on Formica desk, stifling fluorescent lighting. **It's so drab there's nothing more to say about it, which is why the odds of finding Gruber there are slim.**

Please go to section 22 on the [Woodmont Triangle web-page](#) and read 1) **Trend Summary** concluding that **the future of the office building will be more like a club than a factory;** and 2) **The Hellman Transform** — explaining human behavior in terms of the relationship between time and space as affected by the evolution of transportation and communication technologies.

Instead, Gruber often works at Tryst in Adams Morgan, at Liberty Tavern in Clarendon, at a [Starbucks](#), in hotel lobbies, at the Library of Congress, on the Bolt Bus to New York or, as he did last week, beside the rooftop pool of the Hilton on Embassy Row.

The term I invented in 1981 to describe this new reality

is:

Virtual Adjacency[®].



Gruber and Web entrepreneur **Jen Consalvo** turned up late one morning, opened their Mac laptops, connected to WiFi and began working. A few feet away, the pool's water shimmered like hand-blown glass.

"I like the breeze," Consalvo said, working all the while.

Gruber and Consalvo are digital nomads. They work -- clad in shorts, T-shirts and sandals -- wherever they find a wireless Web connection to reach their colleagues via instant messaging, Twitter, Facebook, e-mail and occasionally by voice on their iPhones or Skype. As digital nomads, experts say, **they represent a natural evolution in teleworking**. The Internet let millions of wired people work from home; now, with widespread WiFi, many have cut the wires and left home (or the dreary office) to work where they please -- and especially around other people, even total strangers.

*This is a perfect example of the other phrase I invented:
Be where you want to be, do what you have to do.[®]*

For nomads, the benefits are both primitive and practical.

- *increased productivity;*
- *reduce carbon footprint*
- *improve public health:*
 - *more exercise / less stress;*
 - *positive frame of mind;*
 - *less death & injury fr car crashes.*

Primitive: **Tom Folkes**, an artificial intelligence programmer, worked last week at the **Java Shack** in Arlington County because he's "an extrovert working on introvert tasks. If I'm working at home by myself, I am really hating life. I need people." He has a coffee shop rotation. "I spread my business around."

Practical: **Marilyn Moysey**, an **Ezenia** employee who sells virtual collaboration software, often works at **Panera Bread** near her home in Alexandria even though she has an office in the "boondocks." Why? "**Because there is no hope for the road system around here,**" she said. Asked where her co-workers were, Moysey said, "I don't know, **because it doesn't matter anymore.**"

There is no "road solution" see Trends Summary {section 22 on [Woodmont Triangle web page.](#)}

Nomad life is already evolving. Nomads who want the feel of working with officemates have begun co-working in public places or at the homes of strangers. They work laptop-by-laptop in living rooms and coffee shops, exchanging both idle chitchat and business advice with people who all work for different companies. The gatherings are called jellies, after a bowl of jelly beans the creators were eating when they came up with the name.



Although the number of digital nomads is intrinsically difficult to measure -- they are constantly in motion and difficult to pin down for polling -- **evidence of a real shift in where Americans work is mounting**. Dell reports that its digital nomad Web site is getting tens of thousands of hits a month. **Panera**, a popular spot for people working wirelessly, **logs 1.5 million WiFi sessions a month**.

One only needs to visit **Tryst**, a popular coffeehouse on 18th Street NW, to see dozens of people spending money on food and drinks in exchange for the privilege of setting up a day office at a table there. **Cafe owners love the trend**. "If there was nobody in here, people would say 'That place is no good,'" said **Dale Roberts**, who owns the **Java Shack**. "It feeds on itself. If you go to a movie theater and see a long line, people want to see that movie. It's the same thing for a coffee shop."

*This is what cities are all about. See N.J. Slabbert's **Harvard Review** article: The Future of Urbanization — How Teletechnology is Shaping a New Urban Order (an annotated version is on the bio page of my website www.VirtualAdjacency.com)*

One of the inalienable rights of digital nomads is starting their workday well after many of their colleagues out at the cubicle farm have spent hours preparing for and getting to their workstations. Last week, Gruber edged into his workweek from home at 9:15 a.m., posting to his Twitter page, "It's Monday, another busy week ahead!" Twenty-two minutes later, he posted a picture of his breakfast: two eggs, sunny side up. They looked delicious, not a single crack in the yolk. It wasn't until about 11 that Gruber, a 31-year-old product strategist for AOL, arrived at the Hilton pool with Consalvo, his business partner.

She used to work for AOL -- during the stock option boom, she owned a boat she named Options -- but now the 37-year-old is creating a Web startup with Gruber called [Shiny Heart Ventures](#). By lunchtime, they posted a picture of the pool to Flickr with the caption, "**Thank you, technology and other shiny objects that make working anywhere a breeze!**"

Definition of shiny objects: their equipment. Between the two of them, they travel with more than \$10,000 in gear. They lug laptops, iPhones, back-up hard drives, power supplies and too many USB adapters to tally. "We are like good little Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts -- **always prepared**," Consalvo said.

When people know what they have to do they figure out how to get it done!

Gruber worked on AOL products, including the company's instant messaging system. He and Consalvo also chatted about coding for their Web site, dealt with contractors and sent lots of e-mail. When Consalvo won a small victory, hooking someone important to work on a project with her, she feted herself by dipping her feet in the pool. The only stress all day was a weird mix of music piped in to entertain poolgoers. Frank Sinatra followed by Beyoncé does not constitute optimal working conditions.

Consalvo's father, a Maine lobster fisherman, is skeptical that lolling by the pool can constitute a workday. "I don't think he thinks that any of this work is real," Consalvo said.

"But why wouldn't you work this way if you could?"

The attraction of working poolside is obvious, but why would an employer let workers pick venues that shout leisure rather than productivity? "It's a win-win," said Mary Barnes, Gruber's boss at AOL, in an instant message chat. "Frank is happy doing what he loves and from a business perspective, we gain valuable industry knowledge, contacts and insights." Barnes works closely with Gruber to measure his contributions, and both expect to see ever more nomads:

"The younger workforce will demand it. That's how they live."

The key to managing knowledge workers is to know what is expected and communicating it.

{see BusinessWeek cover story 11 Dec 06

[BestBuy: "No Schedules. No Meetings. No Joke"](#)

- see 2008 book by two **West Point** graduates: [Making Telework Work](#)
- see 2009 white paper by **George Mason Univ Prof. Mark Addleson**:
[Remaking the DHS](#)

Carsten Sorensen, a **London School of Economics** professor who studies nomads, said people working away from an office often feel pressure to work harder to protect their freedom. This can make working as a nomad "both heaven and hell," he said, even leading to burnout.

You have the freedom to "go to the office" whenever you want!

At **Buzz Bakery** in Alexandria last week, half a dozen people assembled for a jelly organized by **Lacey Hopkins**, a technical writer. She started co-working once a week after working alone at home left her strangely tired at day's end. "Extroverted people like me get their energy from other people," she said.

*Exactly. It isn't "either/or" — it is some of each!
{ • see my Trend Summary ref. above }*

Sitting across from her was **Chris Charbonneau**, who founded a company called [Joey Totes](#), which sells reusable shopping bags. "Working at home, you don't get to have the office environment and meet people," he said. "From a business perspective, there's some great opportunities out there. You're gonna meet a lot of people who can really help you out." He's gotten valuable marketing advice from people he's met at [jellies](#).

[Slightly more formal co-working centers](#) have opened across the country, including [Affinity Lab](#) in office space above the Diner in Adams Morgan. Ads on the wall at **Tryst** offer space to the fully-evolved nomad who doesn't want a formal office but still wants a community of people to

swap ideas with -- and a fax machine. Members pay \$235 a month to work in a communal room -- no desk included -- or \$575 for a desk. Users include designers, software startup entrepreneurs, nonprofit group staffers and an importer of Chilean wine.

Gruber and Consalvo intend to remain "location-independent" throughout their work lives. "In real estate, the emphasis is always put on 'location, location, location!' and thanks to ever-evolving technology, **we can now be productive from almost any location**," they wrote on their Web site. "And while we understand that there is no place like home, we like to think we have many homes -- the primary one being the World Wide Web."

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do what you have to do.®*

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Here is the comment I posted on the Washington Post webstie 27jul09:

This article is a wonderful anecdotal story validating two phrases I invented and patented many years ago anticipating the now rapidly spreading behavioral-change realities enabled by the accelerating evolution of computer and communication technologies.

The first, "Virtual Adjacency" relates to the three most important things in real estate — location.

The second — "Be where you want to be, do what you have to do." foresees behavioral change using a profound Mark Twain insight: "Work is what a body "must" do. Play is what a body "wants to" do.

Ask yourself why the "**Transportation Paradox**" is ubiquitous. We have more transportation capacity in this country than anyone has ever dreamed of, yet "not enough transportation" is our number 1 infrastructure problem. Montgomery County, for example, wastes an unconscionable amount of time and money attempting to control development to minimize this congestion (acronyms like PAMR and LATR — [Local Area Transportation Review \(LATR\) and Policy Area Mobility Review \(PAMR\)](#) represent painful, time-consuming, expensive study and review processes resulting in higher project costs and considerable "impact fees.") The irony is that this forces more sprawl and greater congestion as people live even further from their jobs.