Becoming a Digital Nomad - My First Impressions

While running a machine shop remotely for years, I have a great deal of experience as a digital nomad. Taking the business on the road through multiple time zones adds new challenges and rewards.

The nuances of additional time zones makes communications (both phone and internet) the only major challenge when traveling abroad and working simultaneously.

Reliable and accessible phone and Internet become the key factors in any decisions for successful deployment when considering working remote.

Providing accessible and clear communications for your customers can make the difference between a sale and buyer loyalty.

Whenever possible, emphasize email communications with your customers and use voice only when needed. A written trail is essential for good business, and email provides that foundation.

Deploying workable solutions to communicate while traveling provide huge rewards since you are not tethered to a physical office location, but rather to secure and reliable phone and internet.
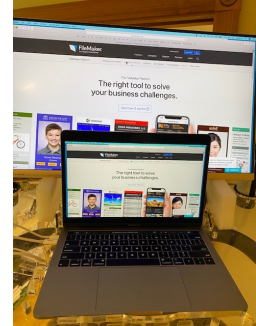
Tools of the Trade

Use a smartphone tethered with a portable computer via Filemaker to make doing business portable.

Put Time on Your Side
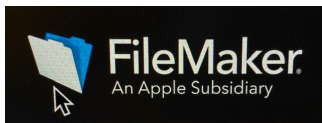
Use and develop solutions to reduce busy work, and automate routine actions, like invoices and inquiry emails.

Routine Makes Success

Develop a strategy that partitions your time between new business, maintaining customers, and paperwork.

Reducing Burn Rate

Cut deals with suppliers. Book economy flights and upgrade to business class, or making deals with hotels for longer stays.

TEMPLATE FOR SUCCESS

Develop a plan of action. The most important starting point is to write down a outline of how you want to work remotely.

Follow your strategy. Deploy your strategy with backup plans, if one segment doesn't work well. Give yourself feedback, to always improve yourself, and your business.

Deploy solutions and have the discipline to follow them. Use workable time flow apps and database solutions which allow you to work faster and more efficient. Refine work flows to redirect efforts which result in rewards. Drop efforts which result in poor performance or low sales.

TIME CAPSULE

Streamline your busy work. Find apps and database solutions which save your time.

Automate routine. Whenever possible, make routine work actions automated. This reduces errors, and speeds your response time.

Preflight your communications. Always double-check your work before you send it out. It's a degree of professionalism that will set you apart from your competition. Don't trade expediency for mistakes.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Use Filemaker to organize your business and time. A database allows you to develop good structure for cataloging data, which can be used multiple times with one entry.

Develop custom solutions to solidify your time savings. Automate routine tasks saves you time, and allows you to enjoy your travel experience.

Smart phone with data backup capability. Have a smart phone which allows you to access database solutions. Backup data on a daily basis with a USB stick, or via a online backup cloud.

Becoming a Digital Nomad - My First Impressions

My Experience of Working While Traveling Abroad Updated on 1/8/2020

Summary: For the past six months, I've been dipping my toe in the water to see if I can work while traveling. This most recent trip included a week in Dubai, a two week cruise, a short stay in Doha, and then a week in the Maldives. All this during December and the festive season. The juggling act was to run a machine shop remotely, maintaining machinery sales, optimizing my Filemaker business databases (which allow me to work remotely), and try my best to answer all incoming calls. At the end of the four weeks, I was surprised how easy it was to not only work, but also get distracted. The key is having discipline to get your work done first, then play. This means getting up earlier than everyone else, to get things done. It also means playing marionette with the iPhone and portable computer, to maximize the efficiency of each.

Goals: By far the biggest challenge was to establish a daily routine (unsuccessful), adapt to the local time zone (successful), and try to figure out the nuances of receiving calls from a 9+ hour time zone lag (challenging, but doable). The one nice thing about the time zone difference is that you have the entire day to do whatever you wish, since calls don't come in until after 6pm (and most between 9pm and midnight). The downside is that calls come in late, when you're not normally working. The biggest lesson here is to do everything in manageable steps. Don't try to do too much at once, or you'll be chasing failure, or running out of time to do things. The nuances of travel make the days very random, which means extra planning to get into a daily routine (especially when traveling with others).

Outstanding: Emerging through all the organizational needs and challenges, was one application call Filemaker. This database powerhouse was originally designed by Claris (an offshoot of Apple) far back, and has become my go-to source for writing, optimizing, and deploying a functional and fun-to-use organizing tool. It basically runs my businesses, and frees up time while traveling while providing a one-stop shop for storing and organizing data. I use it to make well-formed InstaGram and YouTube captions with tags, organize emails, and even keep track of receipts. For the power user, it is a method to automate sending email and letterhead inquiries, tracking daily to-do items, and managing contacts in one place.

New Versus Existing Business: If you're trying a new business, try to get it established (as much as possible) at your home base first, where you have access to a stable address, communications, solid internet access, and have a comfort zone to fall back on. If you have an existing business, making it mobile is a lot less burdensome, than diving right into a new business.

Media Posting: Manage (building your own, or buying pre made) apps to reduce screen time as much as possible. Use power of FileMaker to pre-format post captions and tags for InstaGram, YouTube, FaceBook. Moreover, use FileMaker to completely automate email inquiries, accounting, and other items. Reduced screen time conserves power, frees up time for exploring and eyes up into experience.

Develop a Strategy: When you are considering working as a digital nomad, the first few goals are to develop a strategy that you can practice at home, prior to departure, and then deploy when traveling. Don't make your first trip a big experiment, gradually phase into the concept. I regularly do this with my FileMaker apps before a trip. Sometimes I'll get on a trip, and realized that I really needed a bit more practice time first (but it's all part of the learning process).

Make Each Trip An Experiment: Instead of trying to do everything at once, for each trip, focus on making one additional task automated, or more efficient.

FeedBack Loop: Whenever I travel, I make notes on what works, and what does not. I focus on the most time-consuming things during a trip, which can be streamlined with Filemaker, and then work from there. Anything that can be automated, or formatted are the first items to focus on. I also do the same with non-computer items.

Seamless Travel: For me, the drudgery of packing and unpacking, have led me to develop and deploy luggage that is function specific. I have a bath kit (and toothbrush kit) that hangs from just about any fixture in the bathroom. Not only does it save space, but also keeps items off a normally

cluttered counter and out of splashing water. I developed thin carbon fiber rod clothes hangers with paracord, which allow me to put all my shirts neatly organized into a roll-aboard, then simply pull out and hang at my destination. It saves huge amounts pack time, keeps everything virtually unwrinkled, and gives me more time to explore when I arrive at a destination.

Standup Desk: Be creative when working out-of-office. I find ways to elevate my portable so it becomes a standup arrangement. My favorite was a leather mini-chair (ottoman) that was on a MSC cruise ship. It fit perfectly on the small desk to bring my computer to perfect height. The leather provided a excellent non-slip working surface, and was very comfortable to work on.

Website Hosting: Try to find a website hosting service, which has easy access while traveling (either web-based or app based). I use WordPress, which as proven to be easy to update and access while traveling.

Communications: I use the iPhone when I travel. ATT (carrier) has some good plans abroad, but try to use free WiFi whenever possible. The biggest challenge is how to deal with phone calls. To that end, I'm now removing my phone number from my business sites, and just having email as the first point of contact. This reduces huge cost and time overload from traveling. The biggest problem with cellular phone calls is the major time difference (if traveling far away) and the big lag in sound. Most long distance calls will most likely go via satellite, making an already poor quality call go even worse. The best way to avoid this is to encourage your customers to use email. Not only does it provide a clear history of transactions, but typically is needed for a written follow-up or summary of a call regardless. There have been countless times when a customer claimed to have heard one thing, when reality was different (and was backed up with a written email). Proper business communication discipline really encourages the use of email instead of trying to rely on memory, and what was said on a call. I try never to use texting for business. It's sloppy, and does not provide an easy document trail. Keep emails specific to the point. Do not use mark-ups, or other clutter. Make plain text. Do not use huge signature blocks with junky images and other noise.

Battery Power: I use AA and AAA Blackube Lithium cells which are USB chargeable. They are available on Amazon (at a premium price), but retain charge, and function flawlessly. Using USB as the primary go-to hub for power needs, it reduces the need for additional cables, charges, etc.

Power Plugs: All resorts have adaptor plugs. I typically will carry one country-specific plug to where I'll spend the most time. The plug will have one passthrough 110V power, and two USB ports. This covers everything I need.

USB Hub: If you need more USB ports, consider a hub. Try to acquire devices that are USB concentric, which lessens the needs for other cables, adaptors, etc.

Proprietary Battery Packs Versus Standard: I prefer anything that uses a AA or AAA battery, which can use my Lithium batteries. While drones and some digital cameras may use proprietary batteries, try to find devices that use standard batteries. The result is less weight, and less complexity.

Email Structure: The backbone of most business communication are emails. I have a Filemaker email database, that I can easily search and display customer information. I use Gmail for my domain email hosting, and will copy and past a email into my Filemaker database, then move the email message into a customer labeled area, if they are a paying customer. Otherwise, the email gets stored into my Filemaker database, and deleted (into trash). I try to keep my email inbox updated and clear every day.

Standardized Email Response: For my multiple businesses, I have a detailed email response that I simply copy and paste for the first inquiry contact. That email includes a general description of the product I'm selling, advantages, profit potential, build status, availability, time to deliver, and pricing. Over time, I've developed a comprehensive list of 99 percent of the most asked questions

Morning Focus: After years of trying both late evening versus early morning work, the clear winner is early morning. Studies have been done (and it's well established) that you make the best decisions, and you're more focussed in the first six hours of the day. Included in my health regime is fasting for breakfast, which not only frees up more time, but is actually healthier for your body. The main issue is that with most resorts when traveling, they include breakfast with the stay (and at pricier resorts, this can be a huge factor). Breakfast can zap most of your morning. Instead, try green

tea, and wait until lunch. You'll feel more energized, more productive, and establish a better routine. Trying a new focus is hard work, but the rewards will pay off quickly.

Morning Routine - Focus On a Strategy - Then Follow It: The first thing I do each morning is look at my daily to-do list, priorities, and strategy. I write down (on a daily basis) what I hope to accomplish that day, so I can track productivity. It only takes a few minutes, but has long-reaching implications. Write down your thoughts, and keep a log of what got done, so you can look back and duplicate successful days. When I start my morning, the first priority is revenue emails, which include new inquiries, existing customer maintenance. Next I move onto paying bills, and clearing all other emails. Then I move to any website maintenance, updates, and Google AdWords (or other advertising).

Work Environment: One of the advantages of early morning work, is a quiet working environment. Distractions (and noise) can be a productivity killer. If you have a loud workspace, consider noise canceling headphones (or earbuds). The simple option is to work, when distractions are lowest.

Maintain Routine: The importance of a daily routine can be the margin of success, or getting bogged down in unaccomplished lists. Make your daily routine and priorities achievable goals (not just wishes). Don't be a slave to details, be a master of getting things done. Few can multitask well, so focus on one task at a time. It is ok to group similar tasks, and indeed you will become very efficient at it, while knocking of items on your to-do list quickly.

Automate Duplication: One of the reasons why I have used Filemaker in my businesses for a long time is that it allows me to automate duplication, which frees up time and resources. It allows me to enter information (data) once, then use it in multiple applications. Even better, it allows me to format data so that it can be presented over a host of templates, from a letterhead, email, newsletter, etc. Being creative with learning to format a layout with Filemaker gives you unlimited ranges to run your business, from both your iPhone or computer (offline or connected).

Read From Successful Role Models: My all-time favorite book on productivity is Extreme Ownership. It gives you the tools to build your own successful routine, all at the same time while empowering others to achieve their best.

Replicate Success - Don't Duplicate Failure: Part of learning from a feedback loop is recognizing when to just stop, if something is not working out. The big question then becomes, when do you stop repeating a non-working solution, versus the ambition to try to make it work. It's not a question of semantics, but a question of strategy. It's ok to fail, but only if you have multiple (varied approaches). Trying the same approach, with predictable bad results, is a waste of time. The precursor here is that the strategy must have a realistic outcome. For example, you probably won't change an alcoholic, no matter what approach you have. That is because addictions have predictable outcomes (all poor). The good news is that with business strategies, developing success experiments are fun, and have trackable results.

Whole Health Strategy: The concept of a healthy body and mind, translate well into business. Getting proper sleep, healthy diet, and exercise, are paramount to getting work done. I research self-improvement on a daily basis, to help improve nutrition and how to feel healthier. When I'm at my home office, I use a standup desk (sitting promotes back pain), mobile computer mounting on my elliptical trainer (for when I'm doing emails), and even work on InstaGram posts while on the exercise bike. Getting exercise when traveling becomes a real challenge, so I make it a priority whenever it is accessible.

Accept Paypal and Have Your Suppliers Accept Credit Card Payments: One of the forms of payment I accept is PayPal, for its universal availability, and ease of use. I make all my suppliers accept PayPal, so I can use my United Visa miles card to make payments. While a few suppliers still won't take a credit card, most do. Some don't want to pay the credit cards fees, so offer to pay it. The convenience and expediency is well worth it.

Files Backup: While traveling, backup your work on a daily basis. I use two USB thumb drives (256G), both a USB C and standard USB. With an adaptor cable, I can backup both my MacBook Pro and my iPhone. Having a backup drive is insurance incase anything happens to your devices. For added security, you can also have a online cloud-based backup server (like BackBlaze) which automatically backs up data while you are connected to the internet. When at my home office, I do multiple data backups to both a disk drive, and DVD.

Burn Rate: The amount of money you spend traveling, is best optimized to reduce as much as possible, which means you can travel longer. Essentially this means finding ways to stretch your dollar. Cut deals with resort operators whenever possible. The common technique for just about any reservation is to pay rack-rate (or near full rate) for a few days, and purposely leave days prior and after reservation, during which the operator will make you a deal. With airlines, this means finding a relatively empty flight, buying economy, and you will get offered a huge discount upgrade for business class. The same applies to resorts, sometimes even during the busiest seasons. If your suite is empty before or after your reservation (and you have made a payment which shows you have money), then it's almost a sure thing you will be considered for a discount. The other option is to trade social media exposure for discounts or compensated reservations. This may be anything from a upgrade, to free food, to free additional days. This only works if you have a good following and existing site.

How Portable to Go ? I've traveled with just the iPhone (I have a compact travel version of my Filemaker databases, which allow me to do business invoicing, emails, and other work). For fast replies and keeping up with emails, it works well. And it works well for travel under two weeks. But the ability to compose elaborate emails, file emails, file and pay bills (accounting) can only be done with the portable computer. The backlog of filing can be burdensome after more than a week out of office. The portable computer also allows multiple backup resources. Plan on having your data lost, and you'll always be prepared. My Filemaker resource here is called Travel FM (Travel FileMaker). Once I make this version online (cloud based), it will give the potential of completely removing the physical need to travel with a portable computer, with the limitation of having internet access. Less than two weeks: iPhone only. More than two weeks, both iPhone and portable computer.

PDF World: Some time ago, I took my office and business digital. That means my go-to resource is the pdf. Luckily, the new iPhone IOS has a document scanner built into the photo resources. PDF if the gold standard for attachments to emails (please leave the xls and other virus ridden attachments behind). It's funny (and alarming) to see that resorts and others still use xls for quotes, etc. Go to the pdf standard. For my invoice and quotes, I print to PDF, and then attach that. It gives you a written record of what you sent, and again, good discipline. Always write things down.

Pen and Paper: Yes, I still use pen and paper, especially when making calls and notes. I'll take a photo of the notes, to store in my iPhone for later reference. On flights longer than four hours, I buy a notebook and randomly write out lists, dreams, wishes, experiences, and forecasts. It's a simple way to make time pass much quicker, all while organizing your thoughts. I buy the Moleskin brand on Amazon at a discounted $5 per notebook, or you can buy in the airport for $25. In either case, it's a good way to get your thoughts down on paper.

It's the Experience: Don't let significant digits get in the way of a experience. While there's nothing wrong with attention to detail, don't let it get in the way of the overall experience, especially when traveling with others. Don't trip over a dime, to pick up a penny. I even find myself doing this at times. Sit back, and enjoy the sunset.

Best Travel Organizational Tool: You've heard me mention it. Filemaker is the number one asset I have that keeps me organized. Learn it, and it will set you free.

Time Zone - Friend or Foe ? The greater gap between time zones and your customers, will make phone conversations more of a challenge. Responding on the first call can set the tone for business, and trying to return a call with a large time zone gap, can be a hassle. Try to emphasize email communications whenever possible, since an email can be responded to at any hour of the day, and is not time zone dependent.

References:
Filemaker Database Software (smartphone and Mac/PC):
https://www.filemaker.com

Extreme Ownership:
Book on organizing and taking ownership of what you do. Available on Amazon.

How Not To Die:
Book on proper nutrition for whole body and mind health. Available on Amazon.

Custom Filemaker apps and forms from the author:
https://cruisingreview.com/travel-blogger-software/

Website (I use WordPress for smartphone and portable computer access):
https://wordpress.com

End of article.