

# PORTRAITS OF KNOWMADS FROM A KNOWLEDGE DYNAMICS PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract

*This work is situated at the intersection between the knowmad and knowledge dynamics research domains, aiming to expand and develop the knowledge in the first segment of literature by drawing on the ideas and concepts of the latter. Furthermore, the paper focuses on the importance of reflection and enables the grounded theory principles as the execution framework of two-tailed qualitative research. The scholarly discourse around knowmads has usually focused on their talents, geographical context, and personality traits, as well as professional skills and competencies. However, there has been a lack of research conducted about knowmads from the knowledge dynamics perspective. The study employed qualitative research methods, including debates and interviews. The researcher enabled the grounded theory technique and prompted the participants to reflect on their decision-making process when becoming knowmads. In our investigation, we started by identifying as many intellectual, emotional, and spiritual factors as possible within a group debate, and we followed up with in-depth, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. Upon interpretation and analysis of collated data, we successfully identified three prototypes of knowmads. The first portrait is of the pragmatic knowmad, driven by practical and materialistic considerations; the second one is instinctual, aware of their intuition and emotions, and led by a sixth sense. The third type, the ethical knowmad, is predominantly motivated by identifying their ideals in the reality of professional collaborations. By employing a qualitative research methodology focused on knowledge dynamics, we facilitated reflection processes and gave meaning to the experiences of eleven knowmads, developing state of the art in the field.*

## Keywords

*Knowledge management; knowmads; the triple helix of knowledge; rational knowledge; emotional knowledge; spiritual knowledge.*

## Introduction

The expression *standing on the shoulders of giants* is a metaphor, signifying the invaluable importance and contribution of the advancements that have already been achieved in different research fields. While the absorption and awareness of state-of-the-art are fundamental prerequisites for navigating any topic of interest, researchers, societal leaders, or corporate strategists might also have to consider new and unexplored perspectives in the face of contemporary challenges.

Our times are marked by the unleashing of phenomena with profound impacts, raising large complexity of challenges for management practitioners. On the one hand, we are facing unprecedented and disruptive phenomena succeeding each other at higher

paces than ever before. On the other hand, these events are exceptionally complex, triggered by different interconnected variables and further impacting myriad effects, defining multiple iridescent glares ready to be admired and acknowledged by researchers.

The emergence of knowmads can be seen as such a complex, disruptive phenomenon, closely connected to several interconnected factors and further raising questions and challenges for the *normality* of work, specifically in the post-Covid-19 pandemic. The knowmad workforce is an unique and emerging population that is seen in several fields within the global economy. The notion was initially proposed in the early 2000s (Moravec, 2008) and is closely linked to systems characterized by uncertainty, digitization, and technical advancements within the framework of globalization. The concept's theoretical bounds are subject to change according to ongoing world events (Moravec, 2013a, 2013b).

In this context, the desire to obtain a comprehensive understanding of both our internal and external constellations of meanings shall be met more often with a cultivated and advanced capacity to modify and adjust our viewpoints. The challenge of identifying viable responses, solutions, and understandings often becomes more manageable if approached from multiple different perspectives during the analysis of a given matter. Incorporating diverse and numerous viewpoints can be seen as a relevant principle in emphatically comprehending social crises, complex problem solving, or fostering innovation. This becomes particularly relevant when certain trends or crises bear the potential to threaten the core of the *normality* while being so subtle to the way we were used to looking at them before. In this context, new lenses might be able to reveal an infrared view of previously invisible mechanisms driving completely disruptive phenomena.

Along these lines, we will start by thoroughly analyzing the state of the art of the knowmad topic to define the foundations of the existing literature. Next, we will introduce the knowledge dynamics and triple helix of knowledge conceptual tenets, and we will implement qualitative research following the grounded theory (GT) guidelines. In the fourth section, we will present and discuss our findings and the paper will conclude with the main takeaways, future research directions, and perceived limits of the study.

## Literature review

*Know thyself* is the famous maxim inscribed on the Apollo Temple in Delphi. Many scholars offered interpretations and explanations for the maxim, from ancient poets to philosophers and intellectuals. Part of these point at the importance of reflective knowledge, turned onto oneself intending to acknowledge personal characteristics at different levels of depth.

Reflection represents an essential cognitive exercise within the realm of research (Dahlberg, Drew, & Nystro, 2002; Mortari, 2015; Steier, 1995). The working definition of reflection considered within the present study is represented by Steier's view, defining reflection as a process of "turning back onto a self" (1995, p. 163). In this acceptance, the objective of reflection is to enable the conscious comprehension of the various ways in which the world is given significance.

According to Mortari (2015), individuals can live either in an unauthentic or an authentic manner. The unauthentic experience occurs when an individual adopts an unreflective attitude, remaining passive and entangled in their thoughts. On the other hand, the authentic condition arises when an individual cultivates a mindful attitude towards their mental life.

To this perspective, building upon knowledge management and the triple helix of knowledge principles (Bratianu, 2015) we might add that mindfulness develops exponentially when attention is given not only to mental but also to emotional and spiritual experiences. The acquisition of knowledge from a reflection process is unique because it is based on the individuals' process of engaging in a contemplative connection to the world, while the main achievement is represented by the gain of a heightened awareness of their own lived experiences.

Bratianu (2013) established the concept of the triple helix of knowledge as a viable alternative to the conventional tacit-explicit knowledge dichotomy. This framework encompasses mental, emotional, and spiritual knowledge, which are seen as essential dimensions of knowledge. The concept of rational knowledge refers to the acquisition and understanding of information by logical reasoning and critical thinking. The concept of emotional knowledge refers to an individual's understanding and awareness of emotions, both within themselves and in others. Bratianu (2015) posits that spiritual intelligence encompasses the active processing of spiritual information and the cultivation of a visionary perspective towards the possible growth of motives on a wide-ranging scale.

Bratianu and Bejinaru (2020) define knowledge dynamics as the process through which knowledge, acting as a type of energy, transforms as it traverses various source fields within a specific context-dependent environment. These source fields might range from individual units to large formal or informal groups. The traditional Newtonian viewpoints, which conceptualize knowledge in limitative ways, saw a notable shift with the introduction of Bratianu and Andriessen's (2008) proposal to examine knowledge through symbolic energy optics. This specific conceptualization of knowledge perpetuates its transformative nature as it progresses from one stage to another through intricate and non-linear interactions.

These concepts are important in our endeavor to develop the state of the art of the knowmad literature. The foundation of the knowmad phenomenon may be traced back to knowledge workers, a term first formulated by Peter Drucker in 1969. The descendants of knowledge workers in our times can be considered to be the knowmads. These individuals strive for a heightened level of independence by breaking away from the conventional influence of corporate culture and forging their unique path in the realm of commerce of ideas. In contrast to knowledge workers, knowmads are actively disengaging from the constraints imposed by traditional organizational structures. Furthermore, they increasingly exhibit autonomy and foster an entrepreneurial atmosphere inside or outside organizational boundaries in various settings such as physical, virtual, or hybrid contexts.

In the existing literature, knowmads have been studied from different niches and specialized viewpoints, focusing on the geographical distribution and fluidity of

knowmads across locations and domains of activity (Moravec, 2008), their networking roles and responsibilities (Garcia, 2012a), appetite for learning, unlearning and relearning (Cobo & Moravec, 2011) and even their distinctive performance in e-learning practices, as it has been measured in comparison to knowledge workers (Garcia 2012b), skills and competencies (Hokanson & Karlson, 2013; Cobo & Moravec, 2011; Bratianu, Iliescu & Paiuc, 2021; Iliescu, 2021, 2022) or educational gaps and needs (Correa & Garcia, 2021; Garcia, Llamas, Fernandez & del Campo, 2020; Herkama & Popescu, 2018; Moravec, 2013a, 2013c; Moravec & Van den Hoff, 2015; Vizueta & Rojas, 2017)

A more refined and abstract view would summarize current perspectives into knowmads preferences (appetence for risks, learning, and development), material coordinates (where, when, and with whom they work, as well as their fluid character across projects, fields, and geographies), roles (networkers by nature), capabilities and needs, with a focus specifically on the learning and educational needs. Nevertheless, the knowmads have not been studied consistently from the perspective of knowledge dynamics. From this perspective, we consider that in the knowmad dedicated literature, there is currently a blind spot that requires scholarly attention.

## Methodology

The general research objective is to develop the understanding of knowmads by enabling knowledge dynamics concepts and ideas through encouraging reflection of knowmads' decision-making process. From this angle, the research is exploratory. Moving forward, we defined three specific research objectives:

- Specific objective 1: Identifying rational thought manifestations in the individuals' swift towards professional knowmadism;
- Specific objective 2: Identifying emotional thought manifestations in the individuals' swift towards professional knowmadism;
- Specific objective 3: Identifying spiritual thought manifestations in the individuals' swift towards professional knowmadism.
- Specific objective 4: Analyzing the specific knowmads' knowledge entropy in the context of professional career choices.

Along these lines, our research hypothesis is represented by the presumption that specific rational, emotional, and spiritual components are present in the knowmads' knowledge dynamics processes involved in professional choices and decisions. Also, these components and how they transform and interact presumably define the portraits of knowmads we aimed to identify.

To meet our general research and specific objectives and to test our research hypothesis, we designed a qualitative research methodology best suited to reveal the depth of the insights sought. This has been achieved by following the GT guidelines (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008) and the Straussian implementation recommendations (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This theory has a little more pragmatic position than alternative systems of thinking (Åge, 2011). Furthermore, as emphasized by Corbin and Strauss (2015), utilizing the GT methodology enables researchers to examine events from multiple viewpoints, resulting in comprehensive and thorough reasons for the obtained findings.

Corbin and Strauss (2015) assert that qualitative research is frequently characterized by an exploratory nature, with the primary objective of generating new meanings and ideas on investigated topics. This strategy is frequently preferred for learning and knowledge development efforts, like our study.

The decision to enable the GT approach was based on the unique nature of the research issue, which so far has enjoyed limited examination, as well as the lack of diversity with regard to angles of approach available on the topic. Utilizing the GT technique is crucial to obtain the most pertinent responses to inquiries regarding the characteristics of unfamiliar events, as the knowmad workforce is (Edmonson & McManus, 2007).

The focus group took the form of a debate between five knowmads moderated by the researcher and was organized online via Skype platform at the beginning of 2023. The participants were asked to debate and identify as many rational, emotional, and spiritual reasons for becoming a knowmad from their own experience. The research moderator ensured to keep the debate on the established areas of interest important for the knowmads in their decision-making processes. Furthermore, the moderator ensured that each of the respondents gave their view on each item of the focus group guide and documented the responses carefully.

To add knowledge to our research and elucidate some of the insights received in the debate, we decided to organize seven more virtual meetings of one hour each, but this time individually. Our in-depth interview guidelines focused on the author asking interviewees to reflect on the most relevant rational, emotional, and spiritual components of their decision to become knowmad workers.

## Results and discussion

A pre-requisite for the debates and one-to-one discussion with knowmads has been represented by ensuring that the respondents work and live in ways relevant to this workforce group. In this respect, we thoroughly studied the previous scholars' findings on knowmads. We integrated their knowledge when we ensured that our respondents worked for a minimum of half a year in a culturally diverse setting (*i*), both at the office and remotely (*ii*), in multiple projects (*iii*), contract or work arrangements including entrepreneurship, part-time or project-based setup (*iv*) and they occupy expert positions based on their expertise (*v*). The details of each respondent are reflected in Table 1 below.

Our study began with recognizing and encoding knowmads' unique reasons using NVivo coding software features. This was done by reviewing the group debate scripts and outcomes. Our initial results show that each knowmad mentioned important reasons encompassing cognitive, emotional, and spiritual knowledge when contemplating their moment of embracing a knowmadic lifestyle. These realms include cognitive, emotional, and spiritual stimulants, as summarized in Table 2 below and further in the body of this chapter.

Next, we embarked on one-to-one in-depth sessions of reflection, guiding knowmads based on our semi-structured interview guide into a knowledge dynamics introspection.

**Table 1. Respondents' overview**  
(Source: Authors' own research results)

<b>Respondents (m/f; age)</b>	<b>Role in research</b>	<b>Knowmad criteria met (min.3)</b>	<b>Domains of activity</b>
A.V. (m; 25)	Focus group participant	Yes (ii, iii, v)	Consultancy (CSR), NGO
M.C. (m; 31)	Focus group participant	Yes (ii, iii, v)	Management, marketing, communication
R.P. (m; 31)	Focus group participant	Yes (ii, iii, iv, v)	Advertising, video.
A.N. (f; 31)	Focus group participant	Yes (ii, iii, iv, v)	Project management, education, events planning
M.I. (f; 30)	Focus group participant and interviewee	Yes (all)	Consultancy (CSR), marketing
A.B. (f, 31)	Interviewee	Yes (all)	Consultancy (CSR), marketing
B.D. (m, 27)	Interviewee	Yes (i, iii, iv, v)	IT industry, R&D
L.D. (f, 28)	Interviewee	Yes (i, iii, iv, v)	Financial consulting, R&D, NGO
I.C. (f, 40)	Interviewee	Yes (ii, iii, v)	Consultancy (CSR), management
A.I. (m, 28)	Interviewee	Yes (ii, iii, v)	IT industry
I.T. (m, 27)	Interviewee	Yes (ii, iii, iv, v)	IT industry

The results of this stage revealed three patterns of decision-making: one based predominantly on rationality, one based predominantly on emotionality, and one based predominantly on spirituality. It is important to note that while all dimensions of the triple helix of knowledge are present and relevant in the individual decision-making process, through knowmads reflection, we grasped three different models of thinking.

**Table 2. Decision-making stimuli for becoming a knowmad**  
(Source: Authors' own research results)

<b>Rational stimuli</b>	<b>Emotional stimuli</b>	<b>Spiritual stimuli</b>
Context changes and evolutions Financial requirements Individual drive for development Flexibility regarding work venue and schedule Individuality and autonomy	Instinct Need for feedback and acknowledgement Relying on their senses	Clash of values Principles and values alignment The need of independence and sovereignty

### ***Pragmatical knowmads***

Based on a thorough examination and deconstruction of the content of our discussions against the knowledge dynamics principles, it has come to our attention that some knowmads have a greater propensity to self-identify as persons who prioritize rationality, pragmatism, and material considerations when deciding matters in their professional lives. The profiles denoted by B.D., I.A., and I.T. are representative of this point of view within the scope of our investigation.

Beyond their perception of themselves, their daily activity profiles also sustain this finding, as they are active in the information technology (IT) field, with highly technical educational backgrounds and a very practical approach to day-to-day activities and deliverables.

All three individuals have a shared spectrum of professional aspirations, which involve working independently in a highly lucrative field or from a leadership position. In the knowmad career path, they aim to have access to cutting-edge technologies and even groundbreaking innovations, which will either enhance their desire for continuous learning or provide them with opportunities for creative endeavors. The first group of respondents stated professional aspiration, which appears to be grounded in pragmatism, characterized by a continuous evaluation of costs and advantages, with the ultimate goal of making optimum decisions based on reasonable judgment. Other respondents share some of the traits above, but in different proportions compared to emotionality and spirituality and hence will be analyzed in upcoming subsections of the results division.

We can say that the knowmadism defined by B.D., I.A., and I.T.'s experiences is motivated by the increased financial possibilities, access to more markets, and, therefore, more and varied technologies sustaining their growth pace and relevance in the field.

### ***Instinctual knowmads***

There are two groups of emotionally inclined knowmads in our panel when it decides to become a knowmad. First, A.N. has been the knowmad explicitly and repetitively identifying herself with a strong emotional inclination. For example, she emphasizes some aspects that, in her experience, have been the most important in career decision-making: "The manner in which the collaborator conveyed welcomes, their attire, and their nonverbal cues were of significant importance to me. There were prospective project options that aligned with my compensation expectations; nevertheless, I declined these chances due to my dissatisfaction with the interview process and how their choice was conveyed".

Second, R.P. and M.I. demonstrated a notable inclination toward feelings and emotions in their discussions without explicitly aligning themselves with any particular components of this information. For example, M.I. displayed powerful knowledge entropy example from spiritual to emotional knowledge in her experience of becoming a knowmad when, at a past workplace where the values within the team were aligned, she realized that this might not be enough for her. In reality, emotional aspects prevailed, such as the need for comfort and a sense of control offered by a home office.



One particularly noteworthy aspect pertains to their respective professional domain. R.P. is known to be operational within the realm of creative disciplines, including filming and advertisement. On the other hand, A.N. is primarily engaged in creative sectors, managing projects, and teaching. Lastly, M.I. holds a doctoral degree in communication and is also actively involved in e-commerce and education. These knowmads' educational backgrounds and everyday routines prioritize the cultivation of emotional sensitivity necessary for their creative endeavors.

We can note that these type of knowmads base their decisions on intuition and feeling and by acknowledging and prioritizing their emotional needs in front of the rational or spiritual ones. Furthermore, based on present study findings, the instinctual type of knowmad has a higher appetite for risk, which he or she sees as a training and self-development opportunity. According to A.N., "Occasionally, despite certain ambiguities, I derive pleasure from engaging in risk-taking activities as a means of verifying the accuracy of my subjective perceptions".

### ***Ethical knowmads***

The individuals within our selection group of knowmads who possess a spiritual inclination are those who engage in activities within the non-governmental organization (NGO) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) sectors, or who actively participate in volunteer initiatives. Specifically, this includes respondents A.V., A.B., I.C., and L.D. Upon careful examination, it becomes apparent that A.V. and A.B. exhibit a strong inclination towards spirituality and indicate that they are interested in trying to manifest their values in the physical realm. By contrast, knowmads such as I.C. and L.D. display a more idealistic approach, relying heavily on rigid examination of life against their values in the experiences they presented in our research.

For example, both A.V. and A.B. firmly believe that freedom holds significant importance, and any form of deprivation in the workplace would inevitably lead to feelings of discontent. Within A.V.'s related experience, there appears to be a strong sense of confidence in the belief that attaining independence is unlikely inside the confines of traditional employment. Consequently, the individual expresses a preference for embracing the knowmad lifestyle.

By contrast, I.C. elucidates that there was never any compulsion to compromise personal values in the process of embracing the knowmad lifestyle. On the contrary, not living like a knowmad has been an experience defined by flaws. Taking a deeper dive, the individual articulates the constraints she identifies in actualizing spirituality in the tangible world. She highlights the persistent inner turmoil she experienced when immersed in a corporate environment that did not align with her principles. However, it was not until a later stage in her life and professional journey that she gained a comprehensive understanding of both her emotions and beliefs, and this has led her to a knowmadic type of life.

We note that for the ethical profile, knowmadism can be either seen as an opportunity to bring their spiritual view into the world, or a means of escapism from environments or contexts unaligned with their predefined spiritual standards and expectations. In either case, ethical knowmads are strongly influenced by their inner rules and beliefs, unable to compromise them regarding daily activities and preoccupations.



## Conclusions

In contemporary society, we inhabit a global landscape characterized by pervasive ambiguity, particularly concerning matters of subjective worth and principles. In the preceding judicial proceeding, our lack of assurance is the crux of the matter. It is imperative that decisions are made using a reasonable framework, yet not exclusively driven by rationality. The advancements in knowledge dynamics research point to the complementary importance of emotional and spiritual knowledge next to rational knowledge.

By asking knowmads to reflect on their internal decision-making processes through knowledge dynamics lenses and analyzing their responses guided by the highest intellectual and ethical responsibility, we could distinguish three types of knowmads: pragmatic, instinctual, and ethical knowmads. While an individual engages in the act of reflecting, their mind contemplates itself. In our research process, guided by the author, each knowmad assumed dual roles: they were the subject engaging in reflection and also the object of the reflection process. By guided self-inquiry, knowmads perform an authentic review of their experiences, thoughts, and motivators. By analyzing the obtained data, the author could grasp three knowledge entropy patterns.

The primary purpose has been to grasp and present relevant advancements to the knowmads dedicated literature by enabling knowledge dynamics principles. This has been achieved by changing the scientific perspective and bringing eleven knowmads in a double reflection exercise under the attentive guidance of the researcher, revealing pragmatic, instinctual, and ethical portraits of knowmads.

Just like building a kaleidoscope and offering it for a self-reflection process of each respondent, we placed the mirrors of rational, emotional, and spiritual knowledge towards their professional experiences and were able to grasp consistent patterns describing emphasized rationality, emotionality, or spirituality.

The limits of the study are represented by the relatively reduced sample size of the respondents. In this respect, the future research direction could refer to scaling the focus group and interview guides to more knowmads. Furthermore, the hypotheses developed with the help of the qualitative research enabling the GT method can be further tested within quantitative research.

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