

**WORKING VIRTUALLY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL AND AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC  
INQUIRY**

by

**Deja Nienaber**

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Supervisor: Prof Antoni Barnard

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I declare that this dissertation, **WORKING VIRTUALLY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL AND AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY**, is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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**D. Nienaber (Mrs)**

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Date

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## STUDY SUMMARY

Globalisation, technological advancements and changing social needs result in virtual work arrangements becoming more prominent. Virtual work is conducted away from the traditional office setting and usually occurs in employees' personal home environments. Virtual work has been called *virtualling* in this study, and virtual employees are referred to as *virtuallers*.

A phenomenological orientation was adopted in studying completely virtual workers in a completely virtual context; sourcing of participants and data collection were also conducted completely virtually. This study presented new ways of conducting research in the modern, virtual world of work. An autoethnography was included, as the researcher is also a *virtualler* and insider of *virtualling*.

Four key case studies are presented to provide a holistic picture of *virtualling* and *virtuallers*. Thematic results indicate key influencing factors that originate from *virtualling*, as well as factors and mindset requirements that pertain to the *virtualler* personally. It was further found and proposed that the resulting virtual environment changes *virtuallers'* ways of doing things and viewing the world, hence results in changes in their lifestyle and career identity. The abstract psychological structure as it resulted from the thread of meanings was presented as *virtualness*. Authentic psychological identification with *virtualling* and adopting a boundarylessness employability mindset oriented towards psychological success are highlighted as key requirements in order to experience *virtualness*.

**Key words:** virtual office, mobile office, virtual work, boundaryless, employability, identity integration, phenomenology, autoethnography, psychological success, virtual career identity.

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## **GLOSSARY**

### ***i. E-communication***

Electronic communication: Communication and collaboration done electronically and online. E-communication is conducted through use of e-tools such as Skype, E-mail, Linked-In, Drop Box, Cloud Computing.

### ***ii. E-exposure***

The exposure one has to electronic forms of communication and networking, and the publicity one gets through networking and collaborating online using various e-platforms and websites.

### ***iii. E-interaction***

Networking and interaction with colleagues and other professionals conducted electronically via Skype, E-mail, social networking sites such as Linked-In and webinars.

### ***iv. E-lancing***

E-lancers conduct ad hoc work activities in the virtual or electronic world of work. E-lancing is similar to “free-lancing”; an e-lancer is someone who does not have a stable job and income, and conducts ad hoc work assignments as they arise.

### ***v. E-mail***

Electronic mail: written letters delivered electronically.

### ***vi. E-nature (of work)***

The nature of work is electronic, by use of the internet and e-communication.

### ***vii. E-problems***

Problems experienced with virtualing and e-working, mainly problems with technology, hardware and software, and internet connection.

### ***viii. E-resourcing***

Sourcing competent contractors and virtualers electronically, irrespective of physical location and full-time availability, in order to undertake specific projects and satisfy client requirements.

### ***ix. E-tools***

Electronic tools and equipment used in the virtual environment for communication and e-work. These include hardware such as computers, BlackBerry, iPad, iPhone, and software such as Linked-In, Drop Box, e-mails, Skype.

### ***x. Embeddedness***

Being psychologically entrenched, rooted and totally immersed and absorbed in a specific situation that it is impossible to separate or distance one-self from and be totally objective in a specific situation. The word embeddedness is derived from the word embedded; however *embedded* does not seem to totally capture the essence of how involved one is in the specific instance.

### ***xi. Multilayeredness***

This word is derived from “multilayered”. Saying something is multilayered means there are several levels of layers, each with its own meaning and depth of interpretation. The word multilayeredness is coined and used in this document to refer to the essence of having depth in meaning and interpretation, and the fact that there is more to what meets the eye or what is presented in this document. It aligns to the philosophical lens through which this study is interpreted and does not acknowledge that which is presented as the only truth, but accepts that there are multiple truths, and multiple layers of truth to the phenomenon discussed. It also aligns to using terminology as it fits into the context of everyday working in the specific situation.

### ***xii. Networking***

Getting to know other professionals and building professional rapport by collaborating and sharing knowledge and ideas through websites such as LinkedIn and Indaba Music.

### ***xiii. Tele-work and Tele-workers***

Tele-work is work that is conducted away from a traditional office space, office or environment, 'tele' meaning distance (Hoffmann, 2002). The term tele-workers therefore also implies people conducting tele-work on a more permanent basis. They would therefore either work away from the office, from their own home-based office, a virtual office, or with clients (Hoffmann, Farrell, & de Klerk, 2004).

### ***xiv. Virtuallers***

Virtual workers: People who use e-communication tools in order to build a network and client base and provide a service in order to generate financial income as in a working portfolio. Virtuallers refer to people operating in the virtual work environment, performing work virtually.

### ***xv. Virtualling***

The activity of people working and collaborating virtually; it refers to 'the business' of virtual workers as described above under virtuallers, also referred to as e-working. Virtualling refers to the work mode, content, activities and practical arrangements to conduct work, e.g. working hours, working from home, market opportunities etc.

### ***xvi. Virtualness***

Term used to refer to the holistic nature of the virtual context with its unique challenges, integrated nature and situational characteristics. Virtualness poses unique challenges to the person working virtually (virtuallers) and the work he conducts and how he does so (virtualling).

### ***xvii. Virtual Entrepreneur***

Synonymous with virtual workers who start, develop, and run their own virtual businesses from a virtual environment.

### ***xviii. Virtual Environment***

The context from which virtual workers operate, usually the home environment or somewhere non-permanent, for example coffee shops, hotel lounges, temporary meeting rooms hired per half-day. Virtual implies that the environment is constructed by utilising virtual media and e-communication tools and that participants or virtual workers are not co-located, but rather connected electronically by a form of network.

### ***xix. Virtual Organisations***

Virtual organisations are organisations or business networks that function and market as businesses, but have no dedicated physical office space. Hoffman (2002) refers to the virtual organisation as companies that employ tele-workers. In this study virtual workers refer to companies that operate virtually, contracting virtualisers.

### ***xx. Virtual Stressors***

Things in the virtual environment that might potentially cause stress for virtualisers, e.g. connectivity problems, technology glitches, misunderstandings in written messages (communication), dealing with the lack of structure, financial uncertainty, isolation, and balancing work and home demands in the integrated work-home environment.

### ***xxi. VRPs***

Abbreviation for virtual research participants; used when referring to the individuals who participated in this study.

### ***xxii. Work Lifestyle / Virtual Lifestyle / Virtual Style***

The term referring to the lifestyle virtual workers adopt by incorporating their personal lifestyle preferences as a first priority and secondly career aspirations.

## CHAPTER 1

### SETTING THE SCENE: A SCIENTIFIC ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

#### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Virtual work arrangements are a relatively new trend in South Africa (Hloma & Ortlepp, 2006; Van Der Merwe, 2007) but continue to grow, especially in the services sector, as new market demands include service-related businesses and knowledge workers who can work independently from physical boundaries (Mogale & Sutherland, 2010). Virtual work arrangements not only enable individuals to render services such as administrative and knowledge-based ones or others from the comfort of their homes, but have various other benefits to both individuals and organisations. Hoffmann *et al.* (2004), report the financial benefits, viability and sustainability of such virtual initiatives. Virtual organisations emerge to take advantage of diversification of risk and excellence, by optimising cost structures and being more flexible, innovative and specialised (Camison *et al.*, 2009; Tulgan, 2001). As such, virtual organisations and teams contract very specific, unique and essential skills; they become more opportunistic, accomplishing key organisational tasks (Lewis-Enright, Crafford, & Crous, 2009), creating a best-of-everything organisation, with “world-class” functions and processes (Luthans, 2008). Moreover, by offering specialist services, they are able to compete successfully internationally with larger, well-established organisations. Such virtual organisations do not have permanent office space, permanent employees, or traditional work hours, working methods and communication patterns (Luthans, 2008).

As this new work mode and context are completely different from the traditional work environment and poses unique challenges (Kayworth & Leidner, 2002; Mogale & Sutherland, 2010), the impact of virtual working on employees has not yet been fully explored. The focus of this study, namely exploring experiences of working in a virtual work environment, is therefore valuable in identifying potential challenges that need to be managed by organisations and individuals in order to optimise productivity and performance. Furthermore, it may highlight specific factors or implications, which may either promote or derail performance in the virtual environment. This study is a first in that, according to the researcher’s knowledge at the time of writing, it is the first study focusing on completely virtual workers which was conducted completely virtually, by using electronic

forms of communication for sourcing and data collection. This dissertation therefore adds value by being an open, explorative study of work experiences of completely virtual workers, using only electronic media in the process.

This chapter outlines the motivation for this study, the research aim, my involvement in the research topic, the initial literature review and the potential value add of the study. It concludes with the dissertation's chapter layout and chapter summary.

## **1.2 BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION**

It goes without saying that the new world of work with its alarming rate of change has a direct influence on employees and the work environment. Globalisation is increasing the pace of interconnectedness as a result of technological change and the removal of trade barriers, spreading the market economy and culture (Viviers *et al.*, 2006). Increasing globalisation, competition and consumer demands require organisations to be more tough, flexible, and responsive to ensure survival in this turbulent and volatile business world (Anderson, Henriksen, & Aarseth, 2006; Lewis, Goodman, & Fandt, 2001). The shift from production to serviced-based work, globalisation and advances in technology further enhances the rapid growth of virtual work as a source of competitive advantage and to execute business strategies (Kayworth & Leidner, 2002; Mogale & Sutherland, 2010). Such virtual work arrangements enable virtual organisations to decrease overhead expenses and to react to increasing global competition and customer demands (Hoffmann *et al.*, 2004).

Virtual organisations refer to temporary work-structures that exist to deliver specific services, across geographical boundaries, relying heavily on electronic forms of communication in conducting work (Luthans, 2008). Virtual organisations typically consist of core personnel or talent selected for specific project demands (Basson, Lyons & Joubert, 2004). Virtual organisations optimise their flexibility in creating virtual teams and contracting virtual workers in order to temporarily take advantage of various opportunities. Virtual workers imply independent home-based workers working on contractual bases or E-lancing on specific or numerous projects in electronic networks. Virtual workers have been said to be highly skilled, knowledgeable and employable (Raghuram & Wiesenfeld, 2004; Basson *et al.*, 2004).

Internationally, organisations are adopting different and sometimes drastic strategies to ensure market sustainability. They are transforming and restructuring to become smaller, smarter, more flexible and adaptive (Hall & Harrington, 2004). New trends include organisations adopting new management practices and tools (Anderson *et al.*, 2006). These include family-friendly workplace cultures and implementing practices such as flexi-hours, work-from-home options, telecommuting, job-sharing, hot-desking, hotelling, unassigned offices and other alternative work arrangements (Baral & Bhargava, 2010; Dancaster, 2006; Hoffmann *et al.*, 2004; Ngo, Foley, & Loi, 2009; Raghuram & Wiesenfeld, 2004; Wax, 2004).

Hoffmann (2002) states that technological advancements are transforming the way we do business. This new way of doing business entails the increased use of the “virtual office” and/or flexible work practices (Hoffmann, 2002). Organisations are in effect also taking advantage of new technological advances and portable electronic work tools such as pagers, mobile phones, laptop computers and Blackberries, which make flexible work options, telecommuting, and mobile work more feasible by overcoming space and time constraints (Hill, Hawkins, & Miller, 1996; Kirkman *et al.*, 2002; Messersmith, 2007). Mobile technology such as smartphones and tablets are constantly increasing the portability of one’s work, as they are constantly developed and improved to adjust to consumers’ new expectations and needs. The virtual office is therefore akin to using information and communication technology to support normal work practices outside the traditional office space, as would be conducted in a traditional office (Hoffmann, 2002). Such portable technologies are enabling employees and organisations to become “boundaryless”, being able to operate from any location at a convenient time (Marvis & Hall, 1994). Boundarylessness in this instance can imply both psychological as well as physical mobility (Lazarova & Taylor, 2009). Furthermore, employees can focus on their core tasks and use their specialised skills to enhance productivity, as organisations only need to employ or contract core staff (managers, technicians and professionals) to ensure continuity and survival (Marvis & Hall, 1994).

Today’s modern information and communication tools and technology are continuously being developed and improved, and therefore offer a major advantage for virtual working practices. As Hoffmann (2002, p.12) describes it, these “*powerful networks and*

*sophisticated telecommunication*” provide easy access to all employees, instant communication and information requirements, not to mention the added functionality provided by customised software developments and alternatives. In a way, it can be described as having unlimited possibilities, or “limitless”. It enhances flexibility, enables greater satisfaction of customer requirements, provides and seeks information and skills rather than time and location, and furthermore places emphasis on results, enhanced efficiency and effectiveness by increasing the amount and quality of work done by fewer and core staff (Cascio, 2000; Luthans, 2008; Tulgan, 2001).

These virtual networks and organisations can in addition benefit from global changes in the business world, changes in social and gender roles and changing generation demands (Beutell & Wittig-Berman, 2008; Stevens *et al.*, 2007; Theunissen, Van Vuuren, & Visser, 2003), thereby effectively benefitting from a larger talent pool from which to recruit. Their talent pool includes competent and qualified women or house-wives and people unwilling or unable to work in a traditional work environment because of disability, family responsibility or personal preference, and they can be independent of geographical location when sourcing talent (Stevens *et al.*, 2007; Van Der Merwe, 2007; Hloma & Ortlepp, 2006; Wax, 2004). This is especially true as a *completely virtual* organisation is *completely* independent of time and location.

The changing environment and work context invariably has direct implications (physically, psychologically, practically) for individuals, and it is no surprise that literature also reports numerous benefits to virtual workers. Virtual workers have been said to benefit from a greater variety of responsibilities and tasks, exposure to different organisational functions, new learning opportunities, working in cross-functional teams, reduced travelling time and time-based conflict, and having control over their own time schedules (Messersmith, 2007; Tulgan, 2001). This in effect, according to literature, stimulates lifelong learning, creativity and innovation, as well as higher performance, and thus results in more flexibility, staying abreast of changes and achieving sustained growth by indirectly creating a highly skilled, knowledgeable workforce with enhanced employability and personal fulfilment to individuals (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005; Luthans, 2008; Viviers *et al.*, 2006). The employment of more highly skilled and competent staff further results in improved labour productivity and competitiveness (Kerr-Phillips & Thomas, 2009; Kleynhans, 2006). It can therefore be

concluded, based on the argument above, that if virtualising is pursued extensively and these are the actual outcomes of virtual working, it may assist in increasing the world's employability and competency levels, leaving a win-win relationship for both individuals and organisations.

Virtual workers' employability and competitiveness are assumed to be determined by their employer-independent intellectual capital gathered through time and experience, transferrable across organisational and contractual boundaries (Van Der Merwe, 2007). This in effect directly benefits the organisations to which they contract, as they can share in that experience-based and intellectual capital. Investment in their employability and competencies can enhance career success and experiences of boundarylessness, which further enhances their independence from employers (Arthur *et al.*, 2005). This enables virtual workers to network and partner with various organisations and work on several contracts simultaneously.

As mentioned above, work markets, social systems and individual needs are changing, and organisations and individuals need to adjust accordingly in order to remain current and competitive in the world of work. Accommodating and balancing one's personal/family and work life are increasingly becoming higher priorities to employees (Theunissen *et al.*, 2003; Van Der Merwe, 2007). Organisations have been said to increasingly realise the need to facilitate employee work-life balance and try doing so by adjusting company policies and adopting family-friendly work practices (Raghuram & Wiesenfeld, 2004). It is therefore believed that research on home-based, flexible and virtual work arrangements has received a lot of attention. According to research done on such practices, the benefits reported include (Baral & Bhargava, 2010; Cascio, 2000; Dancaster, 2006; Hill *et al.*, 1996; Hloma & Ortlepp, 2006; Muse *et al.*, 2008; Parzefall & Hakanen, 2007; Raghuram & Wiesenfeld, 2004; Rau, 2003):

- Enhanced employee work-life balance and flexibility;
- Greater integration of roles and increased ability to handle competing demands;
- Enhanced quality of life, resulting in lower stress and more optimal functioning;
- Increased job and life satisfaction, motivation, effective commitment; organisational citizenship behaviour, recruitment and retention, lowered absenteeism and costs.

Working from home has also been shown to affect household tasks and child-care arrangements positively, as individuals are better able to handle mini-crises at home and support their family members (Hill *et al.*, 1996). Virtual workers can also be assigned to multiple, concurrent teams and contracts (Van Der Merwe, 2007), which increases productivity and financial earning potential whether they receive hourly pay, are paid per deliverables or for completion of contracts or projects.

Business benefits in virtual work arrangements include reduced real estate expense, increased productivity, profits, customer service and access to global markets (Cascio, 2000). Such benefits and practices have been shown to communicate value and support to employees and their well-being (Muse *et al.*, 2008). They therefore assist employees to enhance work-life balance, thus allowing the organisation to capitalise on enhanced performance outcomes, which leads to a win-win situation.

It seems as though working virtually has positive results and is able to accommodate the individual and organisation equally (Mostert, 2009); however it may also potentially be inefficient (Wax, 2004). Negative results have inevitably been reported, especially by employees who work more extensively virtually, as they refer to virtual working as the “cyberspace sweatshop: an all-the-time-everywhere office” (Hill *et al.*, 1996; Raghuram & Wiesenfeld, 2004). Virtual work arrangements can easily result in 24/7 connectivity and working, which is a source of time- and strain-based conflict (Messersmith, 2007) that has a negative impact on the family environment, as parents are perceived as “virtually” always being emotionally unavailable (Hill *et al.*, 1996). Virtual workers also find it difficult to build relationships and trust and to communicate effectively with other virtual workers because of physical, cultural and language barriers (Ebrahim, Ahmed, & Taha, 2009; Mogale & Sutherland, 2010).

It is therefore not surprising that negative reports include exactly the opposite of the reported benefits, as well as other negative factors, such as (Cascio, 2000; Ebrahim *et al.*, 2009; Heraty, Morley, & Cleveland, 2008; Hill *et al.*, 1996; Hloma & Ortlepp, 2006; McLellan & Uys, 2009; Mostert, 2009; Pienaar, Sieberhagen, & Mostert, 2007; Raghuram & Wiesenfeld, 2004; Rau, 2003; Theunissen *et al.*, 2003):

- Decreased work-life balance, psychological wellbeing and physical health;

- Lower job and life satisfaction, spousal and parental effectiveness, organisational commitment and job performance;
- Enhanced work-life conflict, role imbalance, role-blurring, overload, job stress, absenteeism, turnover, and feelings of isolation; and
- Lack of trust and lack of social support.

This is comprehensible since work and home are co-located and interference from the one *environment* with the other would be more frequent (Raghuram & Wiesenfeld, 2004). Employees also do not have unlimited energy and time resources, which results in a situation where fulfilling demands in one domain prevents one from fulfilling demands in the other domain (Nikandrou, Panayotopoulou, & Apospori, 2008; Raghuram & Wiesenfeld, 2004; Rau, 2003;). Since maintaining a balance between work and home is a personal issue for individuals, it has implications for career aspirations, family issues, attitudes, expectations, and role priorities that are central to virtual workers' self-concept (De Villiers & Kotze, 2003). Individuals as social beings also need social interaction and stimulation and find it hard to build relationships in a virtual work environment for numerous reasons (Ebrahim *et al.*, 2009). This may result in feelings of isolation and loneliness (Ebrahim *et al.*, 2009), possibly creating psychological barriers to effective virtualising.

To conclude, it seems that literature presents two opposing arguments with regard to virtual or home-based working – some highlight the positive benefits where others anticipate negative consequences. It is not evident what the determining factors in either perspective are, and whether the consequences are sourced from the individual, home, or organisation. It furthermore seems as though work-life balance plays a significant role in individual experiences of work in the virtual environment. Work-life balance can easily be explained as the degree of functioning or involvement in one area and may influence or interfere with functioning or involvement in the other (Koekemoer, Mostert, & Rothman, 2010). It is therefore implied that conflict exists between the two areas and the roles each individual has to play in the different domains or environments (work and home). It can be explained that performing and fulfilling one role makes performance and fulfilment of the other role more complex (Wentzel, Buys, & Mostert, 2009).

### 1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT AND STUDY AIM

Virtual work arrangements are becoming more and more of an organisational reality (Cascio, 2000). They are likely to increase exponentially in the future, especially considering the impact of recession and increasing travelling expenses (Kirkman *et al.*, 2002). I therefore regard it as important to study work-related experiences in any specific environment (Hyrkkänen, Putkonen, & Vartiainen, 2007) and more so in the virtual work environment, as little is known about the unique influencing factors, performance variables and consequences of the virtual working world. One specific example may be virtual workers' experiences of loneliness, isolation, lack of trust and inability to build relationships with colleagues (Ebrahim *et al.*, 2009). Such experiences may not only be a source of stress, but may hinder performance.

Considering that all individuals are unique in their needs and aspects that cause personal distress, the question is asked whether there are certain general or shared frustrations, characteristics and experiences that can be highlighted in order to provide assistance and guidance to understanding virtual work experiences. It is nevertheless a relatively new trend in South Africa, which explains why little scientific research could be found on the subject (Hloma & Ortlepp, 2006; Van Der Merwe, 2007). Furthermore, there is a lack of scientific articles on the experience of virtual workers in a *completely* virtual environment, as is the focus of this study. Most studies focus on flexible work arrangements and/or tele-work (Baard & Thomas, 2010; Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Golden, 2006; Mustafa & Gold, 2012; Tietze, 2002). Kirkman *et al.* (2002) moreover state that limited literature is available on factors influencing virtual teams' success or how and why they are different from traditional or face-to-face teams.

Work-life balance is also becoming a growing issue that demands more attention in traditional organisations (Dancaster, 2006; Wentzel *et al.*, 2009). Work-life balance has in particular been proved crucial for success in a virtual work environment (Raghuram & Wiesenfeld, 2004). This is especially the case since interference in any domain occurs when feelings, thoughts, and behaviours specific to one domain are transferred across to other domains and cause inter-role conflict (Raghuram & Wiesenfeld, 2004). It is therefore

also important to study this as part of virtual workers' experiences, especially since little is known about how virtual employees balance work-family demands (Ballout, 2008).

In light of the problem statement above, I set out to study the experiences of work in a virtual work environment. This general aim will guide open discussion and inquiry with participants on their current virtual work experiences.

#### **1.4 MY EVOLVING INTEREST IN THE RESEARCH TOPIC**

After a few years of working in a traditional, office, white-collar or *corporate* environment, I was given the opportunity to take up employment as a virtual worker. The implications were that I would work from home, in a network of professionals doing the same. I refer to the virtual network as a *completely virtual organisation*, as it had no specific office space; however it operated as a normal organisation, with a distinctive brand and core business.

As the idea seemed both interesting and challenging to me, and with nothing to lose, I opted for the opportunity. However, knowing it was a virtual organisation, I still expected to be "on-site" or "physically present" every day – the idea was quite alternative at that time, and took time getting used to. As time progressed, I became intrigued by the work methods and work style. I have since come to know, adopt and prefer it as a working lifestyle.

Initially the personal benefits were appealing – scheduling my time and work as it suited me, catching up with a friend over lunch, and working from any physical location that suited me. I started working when I was most productive: early mornings, evenings, when the house was quiet. I lived with my parents and sister at that stage. These practical benefits in a way motivated me to push myself to deliver better quality work, in order to increase my reputation, but also so that I could be recognised and selected for other contracts. In effect I was motivated to enhance my employability in the virtual work environment. Though at that point I was appointed as an intern and received a monthly salary, I knew I would soon move to the pay-per-contract or pay-per-deliverable arrangement.

Personally, I felt more motivated, as I was able to apply my hard-earned and studied-for knowledge and skills, as well as continue to learn. In a way I had less work, as I did not have the additional administrative duties, the disturbances of an office phone, or informal conversations with colleagues. I was satisfied with this working lifestyle and I could not imagine myself returning to a traditional work environment. Naturally, I adapted easily and was driven to make a success of the opportunity, as well as learn with each task – expanding my competencies daily with every challenge. I also had time for research, studies and loved ones, which assisted in this.

It was not until I had acquired numerous work contracts, changes had occurred in my personal life and preferences, and my master's degree studies adding to the equation, that I realised I might be biased towards the benefits and satisfaction derived from my virtual work arrangement. I then relocated to Lusaka, fulfilled the roles of homemaker and spouse, was a full-time student and operated more independently and more virtually as I consulted across international borders. Because of various distractions and time/resource pressures, my stress levels increased and the quality of my work-lifestyle decreased. Though I loved the virtual work arrangement, as it enabled me to pursue personal goals such as my independence, relocation and travelling, it also left me feeling alone in pursuing my career. Though independent, my physical location and time constraints added to the challenge, as my contracts and clients were all based in South Africa. As my personal priorities also changed, I no longer wanted to work the long hours, which added personal stress.

My turning point was realising I was chasing something out of reach, which left me feeling empty and unfulfilled. I realised that if I wanted to make a success of this and be content in working virtually, I needed to be more open to the learning experience and accept that I needed to make some compromises and changes. I had to re-align my work identity.

My journey initially entailed conscious efforts and positive self-talk and motivation to ensure I fulfilled my various roles and responsibilities. As I chose my roles and the degree to which I wanted to fulfil them, I had to be realistic in my goals, as well as take responsibility to work towards them (*internal locus of control*). Improvement in my time management skills, budgeting, administration, and prioritising tasks according to urgent, important, and preference, were some of the immediate practical challenges. Furthermore, a healthy

balanced lifestyle was critical to me. In the past few years I have come to define it subjectively and explore what it means to me. I have incorporated a healthy eating and exercise programme to support my psychological and physical demands. This is especially critical, as working from home provides the opportunity for disastrous food choices, but if managed and planned well, healthy eating is easier, as I also do the weekly grocery shopping. Physical exercise, not only critical in general, is important to get stimulation out of my full-time home-office environment, and helps with relaxation, getting out of the same environment, being fitter and healthier, and also makes me feel better about myself.

I battled with implementing a physical boundary between when I “work”, and when I’m “at home” – as I often did both simultaneously throughout the day. I first had to establish the psychological boundaries for myself by redefining my goals and roles. Then I had to do this with others, as it is easy for family and friends to intrude on “working time”, as I am practically always at home or available. However, there are pros and cons to establishing the boundaries – and reflecting back now, I realise the boundaries come and go depending on deadlines and other factors. I do feel I am now better able to focus on the one or other (work or home), as I suppose this is now more of a skill and preference.

Still, today, it takes hard work and a great deal of discipline to work in a completely virtual environment, and even more so if one wants to be productive and effective for most part of the working day or week. I have also found it is not always easy to manage others’ perceptions that you “are not really working”. I felt others questioned my status of working or being employed more because I work from home, thus questioning my possible professional contributions. I still at times re-evaluate what I am doing, what I am busy with, and confirm the goals towards which I am working. I do this to ensure I remain focused, and develop and progress in my career and personal goals. This, in essence, has helped me return to a more preferred work-lifestyle which, perhaps, is more in harmony with my personal desires and identity.

My initial experiences and learning about working in a virtual work environment were but a seed of what I had to discover. As each individual is unique, so are our experiences and perceptions. My story and learning grew and blossomed through this dissertation. As the research journey is often described as “messy”, so too have I gone through various

seasons of bearing fruit and losing leaves. This research project, though unique in many aspects, similar in others, led me to ask questions about the experiences, frustrations, success, productivity, and psychological health of virtual workers and their working environments – and in hindsight, my own. I became, and still am, interested in what drives virtual workers to choose to work virtually and deliver quality work above spending time with children or on the golf course. This decision is complicated as, though income is needed for survival, it is not the only incentive or motivating factor.

The water for this seed therefore lies in my personal interest originating from my personal involvement and experiences in a completely virtual organisation, operating across geographical boundaries. I have personally identified, and supported with research (reflected above and below), that virtual work is a growing trend internationally. Furthermore, I recognise the potential contributions of this study to the scientific community, but also to the world of work by applying psychological principles to behaviour in the virtual work environment.

## **1.5 INITIAL LITERATURE REVIEW**

The characteristics relating to the virtual environment pose unique complications to individuals relying and depending on it. Online collaboration and communication can be difficult in that individuals with different cultures, languages, values, orientations to work, leadership styles, etiquette and punctuality are required to work together, often leading to misunderstandings and lack of trust, and can furthermore be challenging and cause strain on workers and such working relationships (Hyrkkänen *et al.*, 2007).

Hloma and Ortlepp (2006) found that for individuals to be successful virtual workers, they need to be personally suitable for such an environment and possess characteristics such as self-discipline, self-sufficiency, internal locus of control, time management and information technology skills. Furthermore, it is apparent that it is not easy to find virtual workers, virtual team members or leaders with the required balance of technical and interpersonal skills and abilities to make a success of such an opportunity (Kirkman *et al.*, 2002). Virtual workers would need to be able to manage and cope with their *interdependent work-home environment* effectively, as distractions from the one to the other could have implications for

both their job and family. Non-work-related distractions have also been shown to enhance mind-wandering and boredom, and affect satisfaction negatively (Fisher, 1994). This could result in virtual workers not being motivated to perform effectively on the job and not concentrating on their work-related tasks, which has an adverse impact on job performance and the quality of work delivered. One could assume a resulting negative spiral of effects or events.

As it is important for organisations to monitor work demands, they also need to consider employees' home demands (Mostert, 2009). This is important, for as referred to above, the inability to cope effectively with competing demands has detrimental consequences for individuals and organisations. De Villiers and Kotze (2003) and Rost and Mostert (2007) found that though employees preferred home activities above working, they still prioritised their work activities above their home/personal activities. They thus concluded that the work environment/role is more likely to interfere with home responsibilities and roles than vice versa. It has also been found that negative spill-over from work to home has implications for work life, home life, and virtual workers' mental health, and influence perceived job satisfaction and stress (Lourel *et al.*, 2009). This ultimately increases work-life conflict (Beutell & Wittig-Berman, 2008).

On the positive side, Allis and O'Driscoll (2008) found that psychological involvement, engagement, and time spent with family and on personal activities yield positive results for individuals. The positive results they reported include psychological wellbeing and facilitation of work-related outcomes and were not associated with enhanced work-life conflict. They advised employers to encourage employees to enjoy rich non-work activities in view of the positive benefits of improved health and wellbeing and the potential positive spill-over of these into the working context. This was supported by Stevens *et al.* (2007) who stated that employers can take advantage of the positive spill-over from the home domain, for it enhances performance in other domains, such as work performance.

In another study, McLellan and Uys (2009) found that quality time spent with children and family, structure and planning and separating personal and family life from work assisted employed women with work-home boundary management. Nevertheless, for virtual workers, the interrelated work-home environment might pose different challenges for a

number of reasons. As boundaries between work and home are blurred, the virtual worker needs to cope emotionally and mentally with sometimes conflicting demands, since the work and home environment might require different sets of behaviour and norms at the same time, example being firm with a supplier, but being perceived as loving to one's children (Tietze, 2002).

Research on the benefits and disadvantages of virtual work yielded contradictory results (as is evident in the previous section 1.2 on the background and motivation to the study) and the matter therefore deserved further study. Irrespective of how many literature sources were consulted and presented on virtual work arrangements, these only served to guide data collection and analysis. The research study and data were approached as far possible from a "clean slate", implying without preconceived ideas or expectations, in order to minimise bias. In this context it also deserves mention that it is not always possible to divorce oneself from one's experiences and involvement in such a case. This is appropriate to my philosophy of science, as discussed in Chapter 2.

## **1.6 POTENTIAL VALUE OF THE STUDY**

Firstly, this study presents a new way of conducting a qualitative study by relying fully on electronic or virtual means to gather data. Data-gathering was congruent to the virtual work environment, which constituted the research context of this study. In as much as the study explores working virtually, it does so by applying virtual inquiry methodology.

Secondly, incorporating case studies, along with an autoethnography approach, adds value to the richness of findings and the description and meaningfulness thereof.

Thirdly, this study presents findings on completely virtual workers, in a completely virtual work environment, and includes a varied sample of participants in various countries and continents. Phenomenological analyses assisted in presenting rich, meaningful cases, which assist in describing lived experiences of the phenomena under study.

Fourthly, this study presents recommendations on specific themes related to the virtual work environment, as well as to the virtual worker, which adds to the existing body of knowledge or literature available. Phenomenological analysis assisted in presenting integrated themes, providing meaning and understanding of the complex nature of the phenomena under study.

Fifthly, this study formulated new hypotheses about experiences of work in the virtual work environment. I believe that this study has the potential to make a valuable contribution to what is known about the new world of work, especially with regard to virtual working and the virtual worker.

Finally, this study presents a new point of departure for the research community to explore lived experiences by means of a virtual inquiry and making sense of virtual phenomena.

## **1.7 CHAPTER LAYOUT**

The chapters are presented in the following manner:

Chapter 1: Setting the Scene: A Scientific Orientation to the Study

Chapter 2: A Natural Account of the Research Journey

Chapter 3: Case Study Results: Virtual Narratives

Chapter 4: Thematic Results: Virtualling and the Virtualler

Chapter 5: Integration and Theory Building: Virtualness

Chapter 6: Summary and Conclusion

## **1.8 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

The scientific orientation to the research was discussed in this chapter. It contained the introduction, background and motivation of the study, with specific reference to the research problem and aims being investigated. It highlighted the new and growing trend of virtual work and the lack of scientific research on completely virtual contexts. This chapter ended with the potential value of this study in being unique in design and scope, and the dissertation chapter layout.

## CHAPTER 2

### MY RESEARCH ORIENTATION AND A NATURAL ACCOUNT OF THE RESEARCH JOURNEY

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Virtual working is significantly different from working in a traditional organisation or office environment. The difference applies not only to the practical implications of not having a dedicated office space shared with colleagues, but also to other psychological implications, as highlighted in Chapter 1. Considering the unique characteristics of the virtual work environment, and ensuring an appropriate research orientation, I decided to adopt a similar and appropriate approach to this research study. By taking on the world view of phenomenology, I used data collection methods more suitable and appropriate to the virtual environment, as I only used electronic means of communication, such as blogging and e-mails. As discrepancies exist in understanding, conducting and presenting phenomenological research, my empirical research approach and design were largely informed by a few key articles (Cutcliffe & Harder, 2012; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Jurema *et al.*, 2006; Lindegger, 2006; Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; Norlyk & Harder, 2010; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007; Wertz, 2011) along with honesty about my personal truths, reality and views. I acknowledge that these views mostly influence the quality of this study, obtaining the desired results, its findings, uses in practice, and future research (Norlyk & Harder, 2010; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007); however the research was guided by what I set out to learn and study (Xu & Storr, 2012). In addition to case studies, I furthermore incorporated my own valuable experience of virtual working in an autoethnography. This data is presented in Chapter 3 as virtual narratives and themes, which emerged across virtual research participants' (VRPs) experiences of the phenomenon.

In this chapter I share my research orientation and natural account of the research journey. This is determined by the disciplinary context within which this study was conducted, as well as aspects that shape my philosophy of science. Furthermore, implications for conducting quality and ethical research are discussed.

## **2.2 DISCIPLINARY CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

The study was conducted within the discipline of industrial and organisational psychology (IOP), and specifically within the sub-disciplines of organisational psychology, organisational development and career psychology, as explained below. From a theoretical perspective humanistic principles clearly directed the theoretical grounding of this study.

### **2.2.1 Industrial and organisational psychology**

IOP is an applied and specialist area of general psychology (Strumpfer, 2007), which entails studying the behaviour of people at work (Cascio & Aguinis, 2005). IOP is appropriate when studying the experiences of virtual workers, as it aims to advance knowledge about people at work, and to solve actual problems in the work context by applying psychological principles, knowledge and insight of human behaviour to the work context (Barnard & Fourie, 2007a, 2007b; Rothman & Cilliers, 2007; Schreuder, 2005). De Villiers (2009) states that industrial and organisational psychologists recognise the interdependence of individuals, organisations and society, and the impact of certain factors; they are therefore able to facilitate solving problems by taking an advisory or catalyst role.

### **2.2.2 Sub-disciplines**

#### ***i. Organisational psychology and organisational development***

The sub-discipline of **organisational psychology** focuses on factors such as role-related behaviour, personal feelings of commitment to an organisation and organisational communication patterns, and the influences thereof (Schreuder, 2005). It aims to work with business and management disciplines (Strumpfer, 2007) to foster employee adjustment, satisfaction and productivity, and enhance organisational efficiency (Van Der Westhuizen, 2006). As the individual's personal feelings, for example, cannot be divorced from his work performance, organisational psychology also pertains to the study of work-life balance and effective fulfilment of personal/family and work roles. Organisational psychology is thus applicable in advising virtual organisations with regard to virtual workers' adjustment,

satisfaction, productivity and efficiency, as well as their work and home interaction, especially in view of the co-location or integration of virtual workers' work and home.

**Organisational development** involves planned and deliberate organisational change with respect to people, work processes, and/or technology, to resolve a problem, adapt to changes, and to assess the effectiveness of this (Schreuder, 2005). It also involves conceptualising organisational effectiveness and developing measures to deal with it (Rothman & Cilliers, 2007). Organisational development is applicable to this research project in advising organisations on changing environmental factors, new trends of virtual organisations, and/or virtual work arrangements in assisting with adjustment to new societal needs, change management, and to measure and enhance the effectiveness thereof.

Organisational development and psychology will also be the starting point from which I will draw my conclusions and make recommendations to organisations on how to enhance efficiency and other benefits associated with virtual work arrangements. In planning to adopt such practices, it will be indicated what to expect in such an environment, and what they can expect from their employees who adopt virtual work practices.

## *ii. Career psychology*

Career psychology is a study of career development and career behaviour as an integral part of human development (De Villiers, 2009) and applies to individuals' work and career-related problems and decisions, and helping them to resolve conflicts between work and non-work interests (Schreuder, 2005). This study explores virtual workers' work-related decisions that affect their career, life-style and inter-role conflicts. It is assumed that virtual workers' career and personal lives are conflicting, and that virtual work arrangements provide the option to have both as a priority, balancing conflicting demands for the individual in alignment with subjective career and personal goals.

Career psychology is also applicable in that a worker's decision to work virtually implies developing their careers as specialists. However the decision to work virtually also supports their lifestyle needs to develop personally and achieve psychological success. This however may at times be in contrast to pursuing objective measures such as financial

security or organisational growth. Virtual workers' careers are therefore viewed as a process of informal career and personal development, which includes continuous learning as a result of the unique work and personal challenges and relationships (Hall, 1996) that are beneficial to their own employability and career security, as well as to the organisation to which they are contracted. Other career concepts, such as employability and boundarylessness, are also explored.

### **2.2.3 Theoretical orientation**

Aligned to my disciplinary context as described above, I decided to study virtual workers' experiences from a humanistic perspective. Humanism conceptualises human nature as positive and acknowledges people's subjective experiences and conscious processes, as these play an active role in determining their behaviour (Mguqulwa, 2008). This is all for the ultimate goal of actively striving to achieve self-actualisation (Ngokha, 2008). I conceptualise self-actualisation as congruent to virtual workers' decision to adopt virtual work practices (as a lifestyle decision), as well as their subjective interpretation of personal fulfilment and success. I worked under the assumption that virtual workers prefer to work in a virtual environment and that they have an option to return to a traditional work setting.

Data was gathered on the basic conviction that virtual workers are effectively able to decide on how to prioritise their daily tasks, and what behaviour to display when working with conflicting demands in their integrated home-work environment. Humanistic principles were used to guide understanding of how virtual workers decide how to prioritise their daily tasks, what behaviour they display in the interrelated work-home environment, and how they let themselves and their work be influenced by events and factors in their immediate environment.

## **2.3 RESEARCH ORIENTATION**

My research orientation is shaped by my personal scientific beliefs as encapsulated in my ontological and epistemological assumptions manifesting in a phenomenological orientation to research. Such orientations and assumptions are entrenched in how I perceive reality and therefore an integral part of my research journey (Barnard, 2007). In this section I

elaborate on my research philosophy and scientific beliefs, the type of study employed and my research strategy as fundamental to explaining my research orientation (Bruwer, 2010).

### **2.3.1 Philosophy of science**

My philosophy of science can be described by how I view the nature of reality (ontology), the questions I ask in order to come to understand this reality (epistemology), and the process to gather and analyse data (methodology) in order to arrive at conclusions. This section makes explicit my research beliefs, biases and thinking through which I conduct this study. It describes the nature of inquiry in the hope of generating a possible and credible hypothesis of what is real (Eisner, 2003; Nel, 2007) in the virtual working world.

Ontology concerns what one considers reality to be and assumptions related to the notion of how one knows what is “real” (Camic, Rhodes, & Yardley, 2003; Nel, 2007). I believe that a reality exists independent of individuals; however such reality is subjectively experienced based on individual perceptions, frame of reference, values and circumstances (Bartle, 2011; Hansen, 2005; Jurema *et al.*, 2006; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006). I hereby imply that all individuals experience their own reality based on their subjective experiences (Terre Blanche, Kelly, & Durrheim, 2006). My ontological belief therefore resembles that of subtle realism as reality exists, but accessing it is only possible through subjective interpretation based on the meaning we assign to our experiences (Bartle, 2011; Barnard, 2007; Decontie, 2013; Hansen, 2005; Xu & Storr, 2012).

Epistemology concerns how one can obtain knowledge about reality, and study the natural world, or what is ‘real’ (Nel, 2007). My epistemological stance is therefore that reality can only be studied by empathetically understanding people’s subjective experiences and the meaning they assign to them (Decontie, 2013; Shaw, 2010; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006). I therefore anticipate with Camic *et al.* (2003), the depth and richness of individual realities to be explored in search of getting closer to understanding what is real. Trying to understand a phenomenon empathetically from within a specific context is often referred to as adopting an interpretive approach (Kelly, 2006c). I continuously moved between adopting a descriptive first-person or insider perspective, as well as an interpretive third-

person or outsider perspective in trying to understand lived experiences (Duncan, 2004; Kelly, 2006c).

To ensure congruence within my research philosophy, I was guided by my research question and ontological and epistemological beliefs in selecting appropriate methodology for data collection, analysis and reporting (Barnard, 2007; Cutcliffe & Harder, 2012; Durrheim, 2006; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). It is therefore evident that applying qualitative methods provides the most suitable method for this specific inquiry, as it will enable studying individual and subjective experiences of real-world phenomena as they occur in participants' everyday lives, in a holistic manner (Camic *et al.*, 2003; Durrheim, 2006; Eisner, 2003). Qualitative methodology promotes open-ended discussions (interviews) with participants in striving to understand experiences on a deeper level and making sense of or assigning meaning to them (Barnard, 2007; Terre Blanche & Kelly, 2004). More specifically, I made use of open-ended e-discussions (electronic interviews and blog entries), as well as an autoethnography, to access meaning in experiences. Flexibility, iterative modification and using various methods are promoted by the subtle realism and phenomenological orientation I adopted (Camic *et al.*, 2003; Wertz, 2011). My unique orientation assisted to "artistically craft" this inquiry and presentation of findings (Eisner, 2003).

My philosophy of science and the lens through which I view the world, or what Eisner (2003) refers to as the beliefs and ideals by which I live, in conducting this study were further shaped by my phenomenological orientation. Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) classify phenomenology as a separate frame of reference or philosophy of science. Phenomenology enabled rigorously exploring and conceptualising the essence of the true nature of lived experiences and the associated subjective meanings in order to gain a deeper, multilayered understanding of the phenomenon under study (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007; Wertz, 2011). I will now elaborate on phenomenological orientation, using autoethnography and theory in this study.

### 2.3.2 A phenomenological orientation to the study

Phenomenology is an appropriate method for studying human existence and the lived experiences people have in life, and in relation to the world in which they live (Lindegger, 2006). Phenomenology is used to conceptualise and describe the qualitative, intentional, and lived experiences of people and the meaningfulness of such experiences and being in the world (Wertz, 2011). These conscious and intentional experiences are the unit of study accessed through understanding how individuals experience the world, or phenomenon, and the specific meanings they assign to their experiences (Shaw, 2010). Such a study explicates the psychological structures of unending meanings in a specific context as they relate to the unfolding phenomenon (Jurema *et al.*, 2006; Norlyk & Harder, 2010).

Alignment between my philosophy of science and methodology is critical for this study to be considered as scientific (Cutcliffe & Harder, 2012), and I deem phenomenology to be the colour in my lenses through which I conduct this study. Phenomenology provides flexibility in selecting or developing research methods to study psychological life and embodied experiences optimally as they occur in everyday life (Wertz, 2011). It promotes the use of a variety of methods and purposefully consulting various appropriate sources to collect data (Cutcliffe & Harder, 2012). This method enables researchers' immersion in the life of research participants (Wertz, 2011). Phenomenology is nevertheless a rigorous, critical, methodical, systematic method of studying the essence of experiences (Cutcliffe & Harder, 2012; Wertz, 2011). If done properly, its study provides authenticity and trustworthiness to psychological life and embodied experiences (Wertz, 2011).

Studying the lived experiences of human and psychological life is therefore central to phenomenology, which makes it most appropriate to my study. At the core of phenomenology is understanding what specific experiences meant to those experiencing them at a specific point in time, or as they take place in the here and now (Shaw, 2010; Cutcliffe & Harder, 2012). This implies that I seek to understand such experiences or phenomena at a deeper level of consciousness, or the essential meaning, essentialness or essence thereof (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). *Openness* on my part as researcher (Norlyk & Harder, 2010) is critical to the success of a phenomenological study. I had to become open

to my own experiences, as well as the potential meanings of others' experiences to get to the core or essence of the phenomenon (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004).

*Essence* can be described as the “invariable” or shared meanings of phenomena or experiences (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). Such meanings, descriptions, and characteristics of a phenomenon, if taken away, will result in the actual phenomenon under scrutiny ceasing to exist (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). For example, if virtualers were not operating completely virtually, they would not be virtualers. Free imaginative variation is used to explore the essentialness of experiences by studying the phenomena holistically (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003) and the interrelatedness of the different variables (Wertz, 2011). Assigning meanings to experiences in this way can therefore result in unending possibilities, as all researchers have their own approaches to investigate, to problematise, to unravel the internal structures and meanings and comprehend the world and make sense of the phenomenon (Jurema *et al.*, 2006).

Studying the essence of experiences implies that researchers need to return to the actual existence of experiencing the phenomenon itself (Lindegger, 2006). This requires that the psychological life of the phenomenon experienced are studied as it occurs in real life. Jurema *et al.* (2006) appropriately refers to this as the uniqueness or concreteness of lived experiences. In studying such uniquely lived experiences, in search of meaning and understanding human life, researchers need not return to previous theories and knowledge about the phenomenon (Lindegger, 2006). Previous knowledge blurs our understanding or openness to what exists in the here and now, or the particular point in time when the experience occurred.

In order to focus exclusively on such lived experiences, though still studying them scientifically, phenomenology requires researchers to make use of “*bracketing*” and “*reduction*” (Wertz, 2011). *Bracketing* entails that I as researcher have to bracket or put aside my own personal assumptions, meanings, and pre-understandings about the topic or phenomenon under study (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Wertz, 2011). *Reduction* involves that I focus on, or “zoom in” on the specific experience that presents itself at a particular point in time, in order to grasp the complexity of the experience and the various variables that have

an impact on it (Wertz, 2011). Reduction therefore limits focus in order to gain a broader understanding of the holistic picture of the experience.

Bracketing and reduction enabled me in a way to participate “objectively” in the experiences shared with me by participants, and refrain from using my own personal judgements in the discussion, but re-live the experience with them, and in the process participate in creating meaning (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004).

It has been described as difficult or even impossible to become totally objective and separate oneself from what one knows (Barnard, 2007; Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010) - how is one then able to assign meaning to experiences? Hence, Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) explain that psychological perspective needs to be maintained during bracketing and reduction. This implies that I not only need to be aware of my subjective judgements, I also need to maintain perspective of the essence and meaning implicit in the phenomenon experience (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). However, as agreed by researchers (Barnard, 2007; Lindseth & Norberg, 2004), our inherent views and assumptions about the world are so deep-rooted within who we are, that one is not always conscious of the judgements and pre-notions applied when listening or interpreting others' experiences.

Phenomenology therefore requires researchers continuously to *reflect* on their interpretations, research journey, and experiences. I did this by making use of a research journal, which was also used to capture my autoethnography, as discussed in the next section (Section 2.3.3). Such *reflection* serves to increase awareness through expressing and capturing the true meaning of lived experiences, and assists researchers to explicate and become conscious of their own judgements (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). Reflection in the form of writing also provides a platform for safe projection and documentation of one's assumptions and conclusions (Shaw, 2010). Not only does a reflection journal help maintain an attitude of openness (Briggs, 2010; Norlyk & Harder, 2010); it also increases the depth of awareness of phenomena (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). Moreover, a reflection journal can be used later for an audit trail to pick up on thought patterns and how one arrived at conclusions (Shaw, 2010). Shaw (2010) further promotes the use of a reflection

journal in stating that it shows quality research through the use of methodical procedures and establishing trustworthiness.

The phenomenological *epoché* of bracketing and reduction (Wertz, 2011) and making use of reflection enabled me throughout the study to take the necessary steps in conducting this research methodically and rigorously. It is only once I have become conscious of my own prenotions and taken the necessary steps to bracket my judgement, that I can critically and credibly study the subjective, personal meanings and experiences of the phenomenon in question (Wertz, 2011).

The true value of phenomenology in this study is in artfully sketching the phenomenon as it is experienced and lived through the participants' descriptions. This implies that it is presented as it is experienced in this instance; however it does not claim that it is true for all cases (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). The argument is therefore left open for more subjective experiences to be added or contrasted to the findings by other experiencers.

### **2.3.3 Integrating an autoethnography**

Autoethnography, as a form of ethnography, is a research method in which the researcher's self-focused writings, narratives and experiences of the phenomenon are utilised as a significant source of data in conducting research (Duncan, 2004; Ngunjiri *et al.*, 2010; Spry, 2001). Duncan (2004) distinguishes between autoethnography and ethnography by stating that in the latter case, the researcher tries to become an insider, but in the former, the researcher is already an insider.

Autoethnography makes use of the researcher being embedded in the research process (Dyson, 2007) and takes advantage of the researcher fulfilling the roles of both researcher and research participant in studying the meaning of experiences (Balaam, 2011). As I am already fully participative and an integral part of this research journey, and using myself as a research instrument through an autoethnography, this is appropriate and adds value on various levels to the data gathered as well as insight gained. It has increased my understanding of my own experiences, the (virtual) context in which these experiences took place, as well as understanding of myself (Balaam, 2011; Ngunjiri *et al.*, 2010).

As ethnography entails detailed and continuous recordings and interpretation of experiences (Miller, Hengst, & Wang, 2003), this autoethnography will require me to be conscious of my experiences, to document them and to reflect on them. Such reflection can simultaneously assist to record and interpret my own experiences as I become more aware of what I am going through. I can therefore study my own story more objectively as I develop in consciousness by exploring myself and my lived experiences in the process (Dyson, 2007; Keefer, 2010a).

Such written self-reflection or self-narrative is viewed as a highly valuable source of data (Ngunjiri *et al.*, 2010). Documenting my own personal and subjective assumptions in a reflexive journal or narrative account helps to record them and make them known (Duncan, 2004). Furthermore, it also serves the purpose of capturing insights, clarifying ideas and promoting further analysis or creative thinking in the process (Duncan, 2004).

Being an “insider” in the context (Duncan, 2004), but also the only expert in my own life and experiences (Keefer, 2010b), I could write from what I know, understand, and experience (De Klerk, 2012) of working virtually and the details of what my current reality is. In writing my “self-narrative” (Spry, 2001), I would reflect on the experience and the personal meanings I attach to the actual experience, but also be open, analytical and abstract about what I am going through, hence, interpreting my own experiences as I go along, becoming more conscious of them and in essence creating knowledge in the process.

Using a reflective journal also encouraged reflection on my personal development in fulfilling the roles of researcher, research instrument and research participant. It facilitated separating personal thoughts, meanings and insights in my various roles, as well as those expressed by other research participants (Xu & Storr, 2012). It also provided a useful platform to bring structure to the “messiness” often experienced while conducting research, especially research of a qualitative and personal nature, such as experienced in this case.

At the heart of autoethnography lies the study of actual experiences of a phenomenon (Keefer, 2010a). Hence, in exploring the world in which we live in, that we experience and in which we find meaning, multiple layers exist in which we can find meaning, relationships

and abstraction (Duncan, 2004; Dyson, 2007). Such multilayeredness of meaning in our everyday life of experiences is what I aimed to understand in this autoethnography. This aligns to the phenomenological researcher's attitude of "openness". I, the researcher, needed to be open to what I might find in the study, but also in understanding the structural content of the meanings attached to experiences. I needed to understand their multilayeredness and present it holistically. This will be explored in more detail in the phenomenological analysis used.

The end-goal of autoethnography is to extract lessons from narratives and experiences (Keefer, 2010a). Such a research project and journey, often referred to as an art or creation (Balaam, 2011; Duncan, 2004; Dyson, 2007), can be regarded as an extension of the researcher's self (Ngunjiri *et al.*, 2010). The researcher and research study are intrinsically connected through personal interest, and hence cannot ever be totally objective, and the researcher cannot remove himself or herself from it (Keefer, 2010a; Ngunjiri *et al.*, 2010).

My challenge as researcher was to capitalise on the essence of conducting such a personally meaningful study, which mirrors my own subjective perceptions of reality as they manifest in my experiences. Hence, this journey does not just present my experiences, but in essence also resembles my identity - not only as a researcher, but as a virtualer, and as an individual.

The benefit of autoethnography is the direct, interactive and bidirectional relationship that is created between the researcher, the research project, and the context (Balaam, 2011). This provided the opportunity for me, in my various roles, to engage interactively with, and explore experiences in a holistic manner and constantly and consciously entrench myself in the research experience and project (Balaam, 2011). Such entrenchment implies I need to dig deeper into the core experiences of the phenomenon, and bring together the different pieces into a holistic account as documented in my self-narrative.

This yielded not only rich emotional responses, but as Balaam (2011) recognises, assisted in approaching other participants, building rapport and gaining trust, as I was able to share my account and experiences and thereby elicit reciprocal interest and response. Such autonomous discussions and mutual sharing created collaboration and connections

between myself and other participants (Ngunjiri *et al.*, 2010). Balaam (2011) in fact suggests that such an interactive interviewing approach facilitates collaborative discussion and sharing between the researcher and participants and results in mutual contribution of stories, experiences and feelings. She states that this is a healthy way to break down limitations and preconceptions that may have an adverse impact on the quality of data gathered in such a situation. Autoethnography, as a form of ethnography, can therefore add value in studying the meanings as they are collectively shared (Miller *et al.*, 2003) by all VRPs.

However my deep-rooted involvement with the research project, as Keefer (2010b) warns, challenged me in working with people more effectively. This was especially difficult as my phenomenological views require me to “bracket” my own judgement and be open to what I may discover in others’ experiences. Balancing my role as “insider” (in my self-narrative) and my role as “outsider” (while empathetically working with others’ narratives) was nonetheless challenging. However, in the context of a qualitative, phenomenological and autoethnographical study the influence I had on the context and the VRPs, and their influence on me are considered to add significant depth to analysing and understanding the experiences explored.

This research journey and this autoethnography in particular had a transformational impact on me. The merged, blurred and integrated roles of being the researcher, tool and the researched, invariably imply subjectivity (Dyson, 2007). However the situation also forced me to become conscious of my own thought patterns, thinking, and the reality I am constructing, living, and experiencing. In the process I was in actual fact constructing knowledge in a legitimate manner as facilitated by the self-narrative (Dyson, 2007). Research, undoubtedly, can change people along their research journey (Barnard, 2007; Dyson, 2007). I opened myself to be appropriately challenged in the process. This was evident in writing a scientific document in the first person, which took time getting used to, as it required a mental shift on my part as researcher. However first-person writing not only provides an active voice, but also implies personal responsibility as the researcher openly and trustworthily presents his story (Dyson, 2007). Dyson (2007) states that such an account presents the researcher’s lived reality and does not aim to be representative of an ultimate truth. Reconceptualising reality entails a process of discovering, recovering, and

re-discovering one's voice in life (Spry, 2001). My transformation therefore resulted from redefining and reconceptualising my own reality and lived experiences as I uncovered new insight and understanding through heightened levels of consciousness. I would like to align this to the earlier point that ethnography is a continuous process of documenting and interpreting experiences, and then consciously extracting lessons for future endeavours. Such transformation is a continuous process of shaping how we view the world and may result in actual changes in how we perceive ourselves, others and the world we live in and ultimately create a new worldview (Dyson, 2007). Keefer (2010b) states that it also provides a means to critically explore, establish, determine and understand one's identity. Exploring, understanding, and developing my identity stood central to this study. This process as it unfolded is crafted in the autoethnographical case study shared in Chapter 3.

Incorporating a self-narrative therefore resulted in me feeling exposed as I became vulnerable in the process of expressing my own personal thoughts, emotions and experiences publicly (Ngunjiri *et al.*, 2010), while simultaneously bracketing these when authentically and empathetically exploring those shared by VRPs. My increased participation on various levels, as well as my intrinsic involvement in this research study undoubtedly increases subjectivity – from design through to data collection and analysis. However, as Ngunjiri *et al.* (2010) noted, it also increases transparency and trustworthiness as my thoughts, line of thinking, and process of arriving at interpretations are made explicit.

A great deal of support exists for autoethnography as an emerging methodology in qualitative research, as it is becoming more popular, and more accepted and acknowledged among the scientific community (Anderson, 2006; Keefer, 2010a; Ngunjiri *et al.*, 2010). Keefer (2010a) even goes as far as stating that sufficient evidence for its use and benefit in scientific research exists and no further substantiation is required.

Autoethnography in essence aims to establish trustworthiness and authenticity (McIlveen, 2008). Its added value is enabling explorative scientific study of various topics, selectively focusing on the specific phenomenon, and increasing understanding of sensitive issues, which could not be studied otherwise (Balaam, 2011; Duncan, 2004; Ngunjiri *et al.*, 2010). Searching such depth of account can only be done in a qualitative, phenomenological

and/or autoethnographical study (Ngunjiri *et al.*, 2010), as is conducted in this research project.

As autoethnography is designed to focus on gaining deeper understanding of personal experiences, its subjectivity and generalisability may be questioned (Balaam, 2011). However, considering my ontology that reality is subjectively experienced and only studied through subjective experiences, it adds value to the core of this inquiry. Therefore, studying what is real or the perceptions of reality, as Duncan (2004) states, is vital to qualitative studies, and autoethnography provides a means for researchers to explore their own realities. I therefore do not claim that this account is the only truth; however it presents a representation of how it is experienced in this specific case. Reality can be said to change constantly as our experiences change, autoethnography therefore provides a tool to make sense of such a changing world of experiences (Dyson, 2007).

The multiple layers of relationships, abstractions and consciousness that emerge from an autoethnography has been said to have the potential to move both the writer and reader (Dyson, 2007). I believe adding an autoethnography to this study adds flavour to my research project and journey. Dyson (2007) states that it adds “life-likeness”, as it makes the story more personal and “real” and in a way more tangible - not only to me, but also to the reader. It furthermore promotes engagement with the research findings and current literature, as well as enabling reflections on my own encounters (Belbase, Luitel, & Taylor, 2008).

The quality of an autoethnography is judged by factors such as:

- study boundaries,
- instrumental validity,
- construct validity,
- external validity,
- reliability, and
- ensuring a scientific account (Duncan, 2004).

The study has been conducted within the *boundaries* of completely virtual workers' subjective experiences of working in a completely virtual environment. *Construct validity* is therefore achieved as it entails the broad types of experiences of virtualers while virtualing. It aims to enlighten readers about the phenomenon as it is experienced by the participants, but does not claim that it is the case for the virtual population. The study is therefore useful in providing knowledge about working virtually (*instrumental validity*); however it does not aim to achieve *external validity* (generalisability or representativeness). In order to ensure a *scientific study*, inferences are based on multiple sources and research participants, using a peer-review, as well as current literature in hypothesising about working virtually and bringing the current study into the context of broader themes.

To further ensure the quality, depth and authenticity of this research project, various other sources or participants contributed to it. McIlveen (2008) states that using various data sources confirms conclusions and enables a deeper and more authentic understanding of the experiences. Incorporating other data sources and data collection methods facilitate data and methodological triangulation, which enhances the study's quality, authenticity and transparency (Kelly, 2006a; 2006b). Data sources, which may include photographs, observations and self-narratives, are mostly triangulated with interviews with others who are able to provide quality input on the phenomenon (McIlveen, 2008).

#### **2.3.4 How I used theory in this study**

Prior to commencement of the study, I did a broad literature review on potential findings and expectations in the virtual environment and also to some degree included home-based working practices and related literature where appropriate. I furthermore consulted research on virtual work arrangements, experiences of work, and work-life balance/conflict, and the effects thereof on the individual and the organisation to deepen my understanding of the phenomena under study. This initial literature study was included in Chapter 1.

A literature review was thus conducted, in preparation of the research proposal, prior to commencing with the study. During the course of conducting the study, I adopted, as far as possible, a non-judgemental approach, and assumed that I had no prior knowledge, expectations or experience in this regard. I therefore attempted phenomenological

*“bracketing”* of my personal views and *a priori* theoretical knowledge by explicating these thoroughly before, during and after the research process. Such attempted bracketing enabled me *“to look and see things as if for the first time”* (Norlyk & Harder, 2010, p. 423) during data collection and analysis. Bracketing also implies being guided by the intrinsic meanings revealed by the data or experiences (Kelly, 2006c). It enables approaching each VRP with a fresh perspective to ensure I am open to what they have to offer based on their unique experiences, views and contributions.

However, as noted elsewhere in this chapter, and confirmed by others (Barnard, 2007; Keefer, 2010a; Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; Ngunjiri *et al.*, 2010), the embeddedness of who I am as a person is unconsciously influenced by past knowledge, experiences and assumptions, and it is not possible ever to divorce myself from it totally. It thus remains challenging, if not impossible, to let go of one’s preconceived notions and ideas (Briggs, 2010; Xu & Storr, 2012) and the best attempt at bracketing is making all my lenses conscious and explicit. Hence various tools, methods and strategies have been incorporated to increase consciousness of my preconceptions during reflection, such as the use of peer review and participant checking. Ultimately, I acknowledge that I became personally so entrenched in this research journey that it still consumes the way I think, act and respond as a researcher and as a virtualiser.

I concluded that the purest interpretation of such a theoretical orientation required me to be true to the situation, and reflect non-judgementally to the VRPs what I *“hear”*, in a *“not knowing”* way, truly being empathetic towards them, similar to how I believe Rogers (Johnson, 2006; Rogers, 1965; Rogers & Roethlisberger, 1952) intended personal face-to-face situations to be handled. This aligns beautifully to what is meant by understanding the *“essence”* or *“essential meaning”* of lived experiences (Norlyk & Harder, 2010; Notter & Barnard, 2006). The constant reflection and questioning of objective knowledge is also conducted in ethnographical-type studies, and normally found in the scientific study in social sciences (Hansen, 2005). I could therefore adopt a phenomenological attitude of *“openness”* in exploring experiences and possibilities as they make themselves known in the current situation and experience.

It was only after the data collection phase, when I was trying to make sense of the phenomenon as it presented itself, that I again started referring to current literature. Post-analysis literature reviews were then used to find support for my findings and inferences, to contextualise experiences shared by VRPs, and to build theory. This is often referred to as triangulation, specifically theory triangulation, as I used various publications, theories and research findings during my data interpretation (Kelly, 2006a). Appropriate literature and references used while identifying themes or “meaning units”, as often referred to in phenomenological analysis, will be indicated in Chapter 4. These themes are derived as they result from the actual data or experiences as studied in a phenomenological study, and what can be referred to as “experience-near” or contextually derived themes (Kelly, 2006c). They aim to report the structure of experience as they are reported (Kelly, 2006c). Leading up to this was highlighting single cases for uniqueness, as well as identifying common themes across narratives, and further analysis and literature review. Literature was further integrated in the presentation of Chapter 5, in a “*macro-analytical level of inference*”, as referred to by Kelly (2006a, p. 380). Here, current theoretical frameworks are consulted in order to make sense of the data (Kelly, 2006c), substantiate conclusions and add to current theory. This comprehensive picture or psychological structure emerged from the findings and themes identified (Van Eeden, 2005) and as far possible, literature was extensively consulted to support and contextualise the psychological structure of the phenomenon studied in Chapter 5.

This concludes an explication of my research paradigm or philosophy of science – a foundational understanding for what follows – a critical discussion of qualitative research as appropriate mode of study.

## **2.4 A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

A clear thread runs through from what I set out to study in this research project (the phenomenon of experiences of work in a virtual environment), my research orientation (as defined by my ontology, epistemology and phenomenological orientation), and how I aim to do this by incorporating an appropriate qualitative methodology. Congruence is required to ensure I am conducting qualitative and scientific research, and that my philosophy and methodology are inherently linked (Cutcliffe & Harder, 2012). Adopting qualitative

methodology is therefore the next natural decision to enable me to rightfully wear phenomenological lenses in exploring individual reality through others' subjective experiences.

This section answers the questions I posed to myself - exactly what a qualitative study entails, why it is best suited to my specific enquiry, and lastly how the subjectivity adds value to the outcome of this study. I aim to provide insight into these questions in the paragraphs that follow.

Firstly, qualitative research does not entail measurement in quantifiable terms (Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006). Rather, it aims to provide rich detail and in-depth interpretation, description and understanding of the true nature of research participant's realities and subjective experiences of the specific phenomenon in question (Durrheim, 2006; Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006). A qualitative study seeks to make sense of such experiences and 'real-world' phenomena as they occur in a natural, everyday setting, with minimal interference, artificial conditions or control, as would be found in a quantitative study (Durrheim, 2006; Kelly, 2006b). A qualitative study therefore aspires to make sense of such experiences and realities and to describe the true essence thereof in "*human terms*", as Terre Blanche *et al.* (2006), aptly phrase it. Studying people in their natural virtual setting has therefore enabled me to gain perspective and make sense of the true qualities or essence of their feelings, behaviour and experiences (Eisner, 2003) and ensure documentation of these is aligned to the typical working day in the life of a virtual worker.

Conducting a qualitative study requires me, as a researcher, to become part of the research process, context and experiences of participants' realities. This is critical to the quality of the study, as it is only empathetic understanding of the context and experiences in the context that will enable me to make sense thereof (Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006). As Kelly (2006a) states, it is only by becoming part of the context in which the phenomenon occurs that the researcher can truly engage openly and empathetically with the experiencer (or research participant). Though I have experienced working virtually and have an understanding of the context, conducting a qualitative study challenged me to let go of my own pre-assumptions and become part of the reality experienced by others. As Terre Blanche *et al.*, (2006) warned, this qualitative study dared me to grow throughout the

process by setting aside my personal biases as I had to re-learn how to listen and truly engage and connect with others and what they were revealing about their reality. This obviously entailed being respectful and empathetic, but it is much more than that - I had to become part of their experience, frame of reference, and reality.

This form of inquiry therefore entails that I, as the researcher, had to become an integral part of the process, by using myself as the research instrument (Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006). My role as instrument involves creatively collecting data in many ways, from different sources, and empathetically engaging with participants in as natural a way possible, as would happen in an everyday setting (Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006; Kelly, 2006b). This was in no way easy, as I was confronted with challenges from the onset; however this made the study much more meaningful.

A qualitative study is best suited to a relatively new area of interest, with no explicitly defined variables or predicted outcomes (Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006). It is most suitable in facilitating a context-specific and holistic study of complex, dynamic and extraordinary phenomena (Camic *et al.*, 2003; Durrheim, 2006) as studied here. Conducting a qualitative study therefore enabled me to explore this new virtual mode of work, to explore important issues, identify key variables, formulate a potential hypothesis and develop a theory in this regard (Camic *et al.*, 2003; Durrheim, 2006; Kelly, 2006b; Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006).

Ending this inquiry by hypothesising about the phenomenon based on the subjective experiences implies not being objective, and not being able to generalise to the larger population. Lack of objectivity and generalisability may seem to be a limitation to the value of this study. However as reality can never really be studied, true objectivity may never be found; Camic *et al.* (2003) state such objectivity is a myth, and classify people's real-life experiences as a valid source of knowledge. Such subjective interpretation and sense-making of experiences provides perspective on what is experienced, or what is real (Eisner, 2003). As each of us experiences our own reality, our "world of experiences" would not exist without being an integral part of who we are. Exploring the richness of personal experiences and realities enables me to explore various dimensions of experience and obtain a multilayered understanding of the phenomenon by analysing various aspects of the phenomenon in an interactive and artistic manner (Camic *et al.*, 2003; Terre Blanche &

Kelly, 2004). Such a multilayered understanding can be viewed as similar to sketching a three-dimensional picture of the virtual working world. The integral subjectiveness around which this study was built therefore made this study possible and added value in giving detailed accounts of experiences in making sense of the phenomenon (Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006).

In this qualitative study, I made extensive use of personal and subjective experiences as the main source of meaning in the virtual context. I adopted an empathetic understanding to participants' realities and surfaced my own subjective experiences through critical reflection and my research journal. A holistic approach was adopted to explore the multiple variables and aspects that may have influenced experiences in any way. Being the main research tool, I adopted my approach for data collection as appropriate in a qualitative study, however remaining rigorous and true to my research philosophy and the type of study adopted (Camic *et al.*, 2003). In artistically crafting and presenting (Eisner, 2003) this research inquiry I also presented the findings in a manner appropriate to a phenomenological qualitative study in the chapters to follow. To enhance authenticity and trustworthiness, I present the research methods by providing a natural account of how the study transpired.

## **2.5 A NATURAL ACCOUNT OF THE RESEARCH JOURNEY**

The research journey was influenced by the research setting and context, how participants was approached and sourced, the data collection process, followed by the process of meaning-making and presentation of findings.

### **2.5.1 Research setting and context**

Aligned to my research aim and orientation to this study, exploring lived experiences of virtual workers in their everyday work life, I deem it critical that my approach to accessing participants and collecting the required data be aligned to the true nature of my orientation, as well as to that of working virtually. I believe studying such true embodied or lived experiences can only be authentic if studied under such natural conditions as they occur on a daily basis. Support exists for such an approach to get the quality and depth of data

required for this study (Camic *et al.*, 2003; Durrheim, 2006; Eisner, 2003; Kelly, 2006b). I therefore used methods in approaching VRPs which are more natural to the virtual work environment, by using electronic forms of communication, such as electronic platforms, blogging and e-mail.

I regard the data collection methods as appropriate to the context of the study, as they also form part of virtualisers' everyday communication tools. The meanings people ascribe to their everyday work experiences are best studied in their natural setting and context, which adds to the quality and validity of the study (Barnard, 2007; Camic *et al.*, 2003).

I used e-documents and an electronic blog to capture my autoethnography and research notes. Some documentation of experiences also occurred on documents stored on my personal computer, and/or the hard copy of my daily journal.

## **2.5.2 Sampling and access to participants**

Sampling from a qualitative and especially a phenomenological perspective is usually purposeful, as researchers seek to gain access to participants who have experienced the particular phenomenon under inquiry (Cutcliffe & Harder, 2012). Purposeful sampling has also been referred to as critical case sampling, as the focus is on getting appropriate participants who can provide cases rich in information to gain deeper understanding of the phenomenon or experience (Kelly, 2006b).

The benefit of using purposeful or critical case sampling is to ensure that participants are able to add rich, informative and valuable data to the study, based on their personal experiences of the phenomenon in question (Cutcliffe & Harder, 2012; Kelly, 2006b; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). It therefore automatically eliminates people who have not experienced the phenomenon, as it would not add value to the current study. Such a strategy is most appropriate for this inquiry, as analysing cases in a phenomenological study focuses on the quality and content of experiences, as opposed to their quantity (Camic *et al.*, 2003). Having a large sample size is therefore not an important factor when selecting research participants in this case (Camic *et al.*, 2003). The aim is therefore to

focus on a smaller, less random sample (Kelly, 2006b), which is able to contribute significantly to the project.

As the phenomenon under study were experiences of work in a completely virtual work environment, with virtualers being the unit of study; the specific participant selection criteria were therefore that participants have to work in a completely virtual work setting. This can be translated to working from their home office, or any other location, for an extended period of time. Such virtual workers in effect do not have a permanent office or permanent colleagues, and work on non-permanent contracts or work assignments. This eliminated teleworkers and workers adopting flexible work practices, among others. This study was therefore conducted on virtual workers in a completely virtual work environment, contracting to a virtual organisation or e-lancing with no permanent offices or employers.

Focusing on this sample group enabled in-depth understanding of the experiences in the specific virtual context. It further distinguished this study from other studies conducted on telecommuters, people working flexible hours or virtually only for a few days a week, as found in other studies (Kirkman *et al.*, 2002). As completely virtual environments are a relatively under-researched field, this research endeavoured to gain new insights into the phenomenon without pre-existing expectations (De Villiers & Kotze, 2003; Sewpershad, 2003; Van Eeden, 2005).

My first sampling strategy was therefore purposeful or critical case sampling. I firstly used the virtual organisation network I often contract to. Though I anticipated more responses, it yielded two valuable sources. I also used this sampling strategy in conducting searches on Linked-In, a professional networking website, specifically to identify VRPs who could add value to my study. I also incorporated the sampling strategy of snowballing or the “friend-of-a-friend” method (Kelly, 2006b) by requesting my network to refer me to possible cases matching my sample criteria.

In effect, a good variation of participants was obtained, differing in demographics, physical location, and operating in different industries (Norlyk & Harder, 2010). A large sample was not required, however because of the varied degrees of contributions; a total of 16 other virtualers participated either in providing me with a narrative account, or responding to

some specific issues on which I needed enlightenment. Of these 16 participants, I selected three detailed cases to present as case studies. As I also included an autoethnography, my total VRP contributions can be said to be 17. Participants were approached and probed until a point of theoretical saturation or sampling to redundancy had been reached (Kelly, 2006b). This implies that I stopped collecting data, as new contributions did not add new information to the unfolding phenomenon (Kelly, 2006b).

### **2.5.3 Data collection**

As in qualitative-type studies, where the researcher is the main tool for data collection, I used myself to collect the required data in order to make inferences on the meanings and experiences shared in the virtual context (Barnard, 2007; Durrheim, 2006; Terre Blanche & Kelly, 2004). Aligned to qualitative requirements, which imply that the phenomenon to be studied is context-dependent, I needed to collect my data in a way that was unobtrusive to the natural environment in which the experiences occurred (Durrheim, 2006; Kelly, 2006b). This assisted in providing valid data, which I needed to make accurate inferences about work in a virtual environment (Durrheim, 2006). Valid data implies that the information obtained does in fact represent the meanings or experiences being studied as they would occur in a natural setting in the real world (Durrheim, 2006; Kelly, 2006b).

The benefit of a qualitative and phenomenological study is its flexibility in using appropriate and varied methods for data collection (Briggs, 2010; Cutcliffe & Harder, 2012; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007; Wertz, 2011). It therefore does not prescribe rigid methods (Schluep, 2009), and enabled me to find creative ways most appropriate to collecting data from the sample participants, in the most natural and suitable manner. I therefore decided to engage through e-communication tools used by virtualers on a daily basis in conducting their work. This implies information and communication technology such as e-mail and the internet to collaborate virtually. I therefore used flexible and suitable e-communication tools as required by the situation or preferred by the participant.

The main form of data collection was an electronic blog registered specifically for this study. The context and purpose of the study were clearly explained, along with informed consent, which was implied when participants decided to contribute. I requested voluntary

participation and the use of a “screen name” for confidentiality purposes. Potential participants were initially invited via e-mail or Linked-In to share their narrative accounts of virtualizing. They were invited to subscribe to the blog and interact with other participants, or comment on what others had posted or shared. The blog was made public and open for viewing and contribution by anyone under a “screen name”; however e-mail addresses were required for data integrity purposes, but not published. Commenting on others’ blog postings was encouraged to stimulate conversation.

The next phase was to delve a bit deeper into experiences to promote deeper understanding. This data collection phase could be referred to as a written interactive interview. By using the blog or e-mail communication, I would respond to experiences and narratives shared with questions to promote understanding and elicit more information. As Jurema *et al.*, (2006) state, *problematizing* is at the heart of phenomenology as one aims to deconstruct and understand individual perceptions, meanings and experiences of the phenomenon in question. I therefore aimed to openly explore the breadth of experience holistically. I selectively started probing during e-conversations with VRPs, mainly via e-mail because of the response rate. Such e-mails were then automatically updated to the blog using a specific e-mail address, with the URL sent to the recipient for confirmation and/or comment.

This was followed by some specific questions I formulated as I explored deeper into the inquiry and started to form hypotheses and yearned for better understanding of the context. These I sent to my full data base of possible participants, in hope of a better response return. This in fact yielded positive feedback from virtualizers who initially did not want to participate. This built the sample size to 17 contributors. Possibly because the initial approach was too open-ended, some uncertainty may have existed as to what and how much to share. I had a few questions about individual preferences for participating in a qualitative-type of study, but did not explore these further. Other questions with regard to participation via e-mail compared to the blog also arose, as some seemed more comfortable and open to sharing via e-mail, whereas others preferred the blog. Exploring these differences however was beyond the scope of this study. After the data level and quality had become satisfactory and reached saturation, the blog was closed for public viewing.

It has been stated that the quality of data collected is highly dependent on the researcher's own expertise, being the main research instrument (Xu & Storr, 2012). I therefore challenged myself continuously to be flexible in adopting appropriate strategies, to learn and develop skills in order to recruit participants and enhance the depth and quality of data gathered (Chenail, 2011; Xu & Storr, 2012). I regarded having an open mind set during data collection and analysis as critical in making this study a success. This aligns to my qualitative phenomenological stance adopted, where such further probing is limited in a quantitative study.

Data collection by means of electronic communication (blog and e-mail), as mentioned, was my main form of data collection. My secondary data source was incorporating an autoethnographical account, which consisted of my own personal thoughts and experiences of working virtually. These were also captured electronically on the blog where I wrote and posted narratives, open for viewing and comments by others. I also had a private section for my experiences while conducting this research study, which I referred to as my research e-journal. However it was not always easy to be certain of where to document which experiences, since everything was such an integral part of this research project, and the result was a bit "messy". This strategy of documentation elsewhere enabled me to reflect on my personal development as a research instrument, as it facilitated separating my own thoughts and experiences from those shared with me, filtering and reflecting on the meaning within and between the different data sets (Xu & Storr, 2012). Personally this assisted me to provide structure to the "messiness" of the data and actual research process, especially owing to my embeddedness into the core of the study.

However incorporating an autoethnography challenged me to adopt a different role and mindset in conducting qualitative research and considering various sources that could add value in the ultimate goal of accepting that reality is not fixed or set in stone, but changes as we change (Xu & Storr, 2012). Documenting my subjective experiences of virtualising and personal research journey in an autoethnography furthermore enabled me to understand the collaboration and connection between myself, the research study and other virtual participants (Ngunjiri *et al.*, 2010). This provided a platform to channel my subjective views and not bring them into discussions when exploring VRPs stories. As my judgements

where documented elsewhere, I could be open to truly listening to their inputs and *hearing* them. This approach enabled me to understand and respect the uniqueness of each individual participant's experiences and reality, as well as the culture embedded in the virtual world of work (Dyson, 2007). I therefore have various documented experiences that provide a means to compare the case studies and individual experiences with one another and enable me to draw conclusions and highlight trends in these subjective and personal experiences. Such an approach is effectively aligned to what phenomenology stands for.

Autoethnography has also been said to have consequences for developing one's identity (Keefer, 2010a), which resulted in shaping my journey throughout this study – both as researcher and as virtualiser. This autoethnography provided an honest and pure expression of my lived experiences as I experience virtualising. It therefore promoted my engagement in reflection and introspection, researching embodied experiences in a mindful and explorative manner, by being the primary data source and instrument, but also making this study truly my own – and in effect realising the wider implications of my journey into the literature (Dyson, 2007).

I feel this autoethnographical account adds flavour and a personal touch to this presentation, as I may be one of the richest data sources in this study. It provided me with a voice, as well as a tool to research my own personal experiences, perspectives and story (Keefer, 2010a). It signifies my personal involvement and intertwinement with the research, my internal motivation, and biases in conducting the study and working with others' stories (Keefer, 2010a).

#### **2.5.4 Meaning-making and analysis**

My approach to analysing my data and making sense thereof needs to be most appropriate to the inherent nature of my study and has guided my research paradigm to ensure inherent alignment (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). My orientation through analysis is therefore aimed at making meaning of subjective experiences and understanding what is real for VRPs as individuals, as defined by my ontological views (Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006). This required me to approach the actual phenomenon as experienced and shared in the data, as

opposed to first consulting existing theory on human experiences and behaviour (Lindegger, 2006).

Phenomenological analysis is the most appropriate method for deriving meaning from the data collected in this study. Phenomenological analysis has been described as a meticulous process, which enables description of the way people engage with the world and consciously construct meaning in their lives (Lindegger, 2006; Wertz, 2011). It not only requires me to immerse myself in the research and data to understand the core of experiences and being better, but it has also been said to establish faithfulness, trustworthiness, reliability and dependability in psychological life (Wertz, 2011). This is achieved through the clarification of processes, meanings and psychological structures of experiences of the phenomenon, which cannot be achieved through other methods (Wertz, 2011). The analysis is conducted in a natural process of first developing a holistic understanding of the data as it represents lived experiences of the phenomenon; secondly the data is broken down into manageable chunks that provide meaning and indicate themes, referred to as meaning units. These meaning units are then reflected on to ensure that their essence is understood. Finally, a holistic picture of the phenomenological structure is presented. This phenomenological analysis aims to intentionally describe and provide insight into the lived experiences and structural conditions of the multiple meanings and relationships as they exist in the context (Jurema *et al.*, 2006) of the virtual working world.

### ***i. Developing a holistic understanding***

The first step in making sense of the data is to gain a general or holistic perspective thereof by reading the reports in a naive, non-judgemental manner, and being open to all the possibilities and details of the experience (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; Wertz, 2011). This refers to reading and re-reading the raw data as shared candidly by participants, in their everyday language, as they experienced the phenomenon (Wertz, 2011).

The raw data was printed and read a number of times to gain understanding of the basic and daily experiences of virtualising. This assisted me in finding meaning in the subjective and personal experiences as they emerged from the narratives. Time was spent to get a holistic feel for the data and virtual experiences before starting to identify themes. Shaw (2010) warns against jumping to conclusions prematurely, so I read the data non-judgementally and in an open manner to get a sense of the holistic picture of the phenomenon. I had to make use of phenomenological bracketing in order to be open, sensitive and empathetic to what might emerge from the data, and not be influenced by my own pre-understandings (Krauss, 2005; Norlyk & Harder, 2010; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). However it has been argued that our unique pre-understandings, perceptions, knowledge and experiences assist to provide insight and find meaning in the data (Briggs, 2010; Johansson & Ekebergh, 2006; Norlyk & Harder, 2010). My personal thoughts and reflections as I was reading the data was therefore, where needed, captured elsewhere to be consulted at a later stage and possibly to use as part of the data in interpretation or reflection in the next phase of data analysis. Lindseth and Norberg (2004) confirm that bracketing assists the researcher to be more open to his or her own experiences and their implied meaning. Bracketing in this case helped me to return to the actual embodied experiences of the phenomenon irrespective of what literature and current theory state (Lindegger, 2006).

As mentioned, the raw data was read as it occurred in the conversation flow of the blog or e-mail to understand descriptions of experiences as they occurred in the context. Individual real-life cases were also read and understood holistically to comprehend the virtual worker as an individual. This assisted me in forming an abstract picture of the virtualiser and virtualising in my mind.

From the total 17 data sources, three information-rich stories and the autoethnography were selected to be shared as real-life cases in Chapter 3. This aims to provide the reader with an opportunity to obtain his or her own holistic understanding and perception of what working virtually is about, and how subjectivity and meanings manifest in the virtual context.

## ***ii. Forming meaningful units***

The next phase entails organising the data into themes and sub-themes according to relevance and how they are interpreted and made sense of at the time (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; Wertz, 2011). These themes are referred to as meaning units. Meaning units are formed from the raw data or narratives in an attempt to bring structure and coherence to the data, as well as initiate understanding of the essence of experiences as they manifest on a daily basis (Wertz, 2011). It entails interpreting the meaning of experiences and starting to look for relationships between and within the data sets and/or themes according to their psychological relevance to the phenomenon (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Shaw, 2010).

Meaning units were identified by interpreting and decontextualising the real-life data by breaking it up into smaller more manageable pieces and identifying descriptions and possible themes (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). The challenge while decontextualising, interpreting and moving the data around was to ensure the true meaning or essence of the experience was not changed or lost in the process (Sewpershad, 2003; Van Eeden, 2005; Vessey, 2005).

As the selected meaning units were re-read, themes were identified and written into the margins of the document. The identified meaning units were then electronically sorted in a word document according to the themes identified. This implies that the actual items of data and descriptions, referred to as meaning units, were allocated to the relevant theme or sub-theme as identified. This resulted in a constant forward-and-backward movement between the data sets as I immersed myself in the data and was guided in the meaning-making process. As Barnard (2007) notes, such immersion in the lived experiences of participants as being guided by the data, enables deeper understanding and interpretation of the phenomenon studied. This served to provide a holistic picture of all the themes and sub-themes and relationships between them and the data. The end-product can be described as a complex, structured chaos of possible themes and relationships.

It is important to note that as Shaw (2010) states, these themes and sub-themes do not merely “emerge” from the data. They are identified through systematic study, proactive engagement and conscious immersion into and with the data (Shaw, 2010). This enabled

me to identify such themes only once I had sufficient depth of insight into, and understanding of the data and phenomenon under study (Shaw, 2010). These meaning units and themes are presented in Chapter 4. Actual data items and VRPs' verbatim quotes are used to substantiate the identified themes, as all themes are supported by actual data to prove their psychological significance and existence (Wertz, 2011).

### ***iii. Psychological significance and reflection***

Data analysis was then taken one step further for deeper understanding to include the researcher's reflection on the psychological significance of each meaning unit (Wertz, 2011). This is appropriate and a key step in the meaning-making process, as researchers add depth to meaning units during reflection on, interpretation and description of participants' experiences and meanings (Shaw, 2010; Kelly, 2006a). Shaw (2010) explains that researchers, through empathetic study, get involved in others' experiences, and can start giving meaning to others' experiences through their own reflection and descriptions thereof. This reflection and interpretation entails improving and deepening one's awareness (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004) and relies on the researcher's creativity in what is referred to as free imaginative variation (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). This entails reading between the lines of everyday experiences to find meaning within the data (Marecek, 2003) and to creatively explore, discover and articulate the underlying psychological meanings and significance of embodied experiences as they occur in the specific context (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

As research is often referred to as "messy", I like to describe this stage as the one where I got my hands dirty. It is during this psychological reflection that one starts to develop general knowledge and understanding based on what the meaning units reveal about the phenomenon (Wertz, 2011). Such reflection entails going up and down between the themes and meaning units, reflecting on the deeper meanings as they manifest and are explored on a daily basis, but also how they affect the bigger scheme of things in what is referred to as virtualing or virtualness. Increased understanding of the essence of conscious human embodied experiences becomes more abstract (Wertz, 2011) and in a way more complex. The multilayered interpretation of meaning units and interrelationships between themes is evident in Chapter 4 as it starts to resemble the psychological significance of the meaning

units. This mirrors the phenomenological analysis process in an attempt to conceptualise the phenomenon experienced.

Potgieter and Barnard (2010) refer to going through this iterative process of thematic analysis until one reaches a point of saturation. The themes as presented in Chapter 4 started to resemble a psychological structure as they provided a holistic picture of the phenomenon. However, in interpreting the data, the possibilities of themes, reflection and interpretation are endless (Wertz, 2011). Each experience implies different meanings to different people experiencing it (Wertz, 2011). I therefore apply my own perceptions to the data and arrive at different themes and data structures than someone else would. This is supported by the fact that phenomenology, as a qualitative research orientation, is inherently subjective as the researcher applies his or her skills in collecting the data, decontextualising, recontextualising, and categorising it, identifying themes and making sense and meaning out of them (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). However, through analysis the researcher aims to gain as much insight into the depth and essence of human experiences of the phenomenon rationally, abstractly, consciously (Wertz, 2011), inductively (Shaw, 2010) or in as many ways as possible.

It deserves mention that the final write-up of case studies (Chapter 3) and themes (Chapter 4) was not sent to participants for valuation. Norlyk and Harder (2010) explicitly state that such a strategy is contradictory to a phenomenological inquiry, as individuals undergoing study adopt a natural and not phenomenological attitude to describe their experiences. The phenomenological stance adopted, along with the researchers' judgement, is highlighted as a key strength in presenting the uniqueness of the findings, as it is deemed impossible to divorce the researcher's subjectivity, experiences and knowing from conducting research, making inferences, conclusions and presenting this document – the true essence of the findings are based on this premise. Value is further added by using phenomenology, as reality is unending and perspective-bound, enabling me as researcher to view it in a unique way (Jurema *et al.*, 2006).

#### ***iv. Conceptualising an abstract structure***

The last phase of the phenomenological meaning-making and analysis process requires the researcher to re-read the data, meaning units and themes systematically again with psychological sensitivity to ensure that a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the phenomenon is gained and presented (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). Current and existing literature is consulted in this final meaning-making process, to support inferences, as well as to seek new insights (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). Possible new insights are refined and bi-directional relationships in the context, and relationships and factors outside the context, are then further explored with psychological sensitivity (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

It is important at this level to look at the meaning implied by the structural analysis. Lindseth and Norberg (2004) refer to the thread of meanings that surfaces based on the similar and different experiences of the phenomenon, as well as the themes and subthemes identified. The multidimensional nature of experiences and meaning units therefore needs to be considered (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). This multidimensional understanding implies concluding a holistic structure of the integration of relevant meanings, meaning units, reflections, and insights on various levels - I like to refer to the multilayeredness of the phenomenological structure of meanings. These multilayered conclusions and interpretations nevertheless need to be representative or typical of how the phenomenon presents itself (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Wertz (2011) states that if this process is conducted meticulously with thorough description, it can provide fidelity to the psychological life as it is experienced.

However, interpretations and conclusions are based on the researcher's psychological meanings and not those of the individual participants (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). This is done as individual experiences are based on their own subjective interpretations or natural attitudes and not those of the phenomenological perspective applied in conducting this research (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Norlyk & Harder, 2010). If the "last word" is given to participants, the role fulfilled by myself as researcher in fact becomes obsolete.

In simpler terms, this step entailed re-contextualising and reorganising the data and bringing it together to describe the core, essence and overarching structure of experiences (Cutcliffe & Harder, 2012; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Imagination is used to reflect on the larger context or phenomenon of experiences (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). The newly emerged psychological structure of the phenomenon, as presented in Chapter 5, provides an all-encompassing contextual description of what working virtually entails for the virtualiser. It is presented under the theme of virtualness. Presenting this ultimate understanding aims to bridge the gap between the data as presented in themes, and limitations in current literature (Sewpershad, 2003). This phenomenological study and analysis therefore results in making inferences on experiences of working virtually in this relatively unknown work environment.

### **2.5.5 Presentation of findings**

As would make sense at the end of this phenomenological research journey, I presented the findings in various ways, not only as they resemble the various stages of phenomenological interpretation, but also to provide the reader with his or her own journey to gain a holistic understanding of what the phenomenon entails. This is supported by Starks and Brown Trinidad (2007) in that they suggest presenting the findings of a phenomenological study in such a way as to give readers the opportunity in fact also to experience and share the conclusions and meanings as they are presented by the researcher. In trying to do so optimally, I adopt three reporting strategies: a narrative presentation of four real-case studies (including my autoethnographical case); theme identification and abstractly describing the phenomenological structure as it emerged. This aims to align to the phenomenological roots in providing a proper thematic description of the essence of the lived experiences of the phenomenon studied (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). A phenomenological study is in actual fact only judged by its outcome and description of the structure, as opposed to the process of sweating and swearing in putting the end product together (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

Though Norlyk and Harder (2010) do not require phenomenological researchers to make extensive use of verbatim statements, I used them in support of the themes identified. This is counter-argued to satisfy the consistent need to support my conclusions to ensure they in

actual fact do exist in the embodied and reported experiences. Wertz (2011) maintains that researchers should use and present raw data in ways that make sense to the study purpose and audience. He explains that reference to these actual quotations support researcher inferences and arguments and furthermore provides evidence and insights when describing psychological experiences of the phenomenon.

In summary: Findings as followed from the phenomenological analysis are presented in three stages. Firstly, readers will be invited to experience the virtual work experiences of participants in this study as these experiences become evident in the four virtual narrative case studies presented. The first three cases are those of actual virtual participants, and the fourth will represent my autoethnography. These stories will be told in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 will provide the themes and subthemes as they emerged from the meaning units and researcher reflections. Chapter 5 aims to present and conceptualise the holistic and abstract psychological structure of the unfolding phenomenon in the context of current literature. These concepts will be explained briefly next.

#### ***i. Lived experiences (case studies)***

Using a case study approach enables the researcher to get a general sense of experiences of work in a general work environment. The case studies emerged as they were shared by various virtual participants over a period of time. The cases selected were viewed as being rich in providing depth of experience and detail. Each case study also symbolises a different degree of working virtually, each with unique situational impacts and/or personal preferences. Using case studies as the first phase to present the findings adds flavour in that it sketches individualised experiences of working virtually. It may result in some individuals associating more with one case than another. Alternatively it also provides understanding of the thoughts and emotions in specific instances, considering personal values of family, time, working, flexibility, personal motivation and dedication, which is often taken for granted.

The metaphor of a television story or movie characters is used to illustrate each of these virtual narratives. Metaphors are often used in presenting and describing results in qualitative phenomenological studies (Jurema *et al.*, 2006) and to provide physical cues to

promote imagination and understanding (Inkson, 2006). The metaphor chosen assists in giving meaning, description and depth to the characters in reporting on them in this case. I trust that these case studies are suitable to portray the most genuine account of the individual differences among VRPs. Each case is therefore unique and significant for the depth and sensitivity it brings to understanding lived experiences. The four cases will be presented in Chapter 3.

## ***ii. Structure of meaning units and interrelated themes***

The initial data sets as they were collected from individual cases were further broken down into meaning units and then further analysed to identify specific themes. The themes and sub-themes identified from the data were categorised according to three main themes, each with its respective sub-themes. Verbatim quotations were used to support the existence of the theme and provide a description of how the theme manifested in lived experiences. Reference to the raw data also serves to provide deeper understanding of the significance or impact of the theme of the VRP, and/or the larger context.

The findings and themes are not mutually exclusive, but can be said to be inherently interrelated and assist to structure the data into meaningful units (Norlyk & Harder, 2010). A simple model was presented to indicate the global themes. Chapter 4 aims to provide understanding of the first two global themes – those relating to the virtual work environment, as defined by *virtualling*; and those that related to the virtual worker, as defined by referring to the *virtualler*.

## ***iii. Describing the unfolding phenomenon***

Data were furthermore presented to describe the phenomenon as it made itself known in gaining deeper understanding of embodied experiences of working virtually. Chapter 5 aims to describe the unfolding phenomenon in as much detail, and as holistically as possible. Integration of the themes and cases are presented to build current theory and arrive at new insights of experiences of working virtually. Effectively, such a presentation aligns to the inherent aims of a phenomenological type of study – to comprehend the world,

with its relationships, significances and subjectiveness, and represent it as a structural condition of multiple meanings, values, and contexts (Jurema *et al.*, 2006).

## **2.6 ENSURING QUALITY AND ETHICAL RESEARCH**

Various opinions exist on how to judge the ethical and quality standard of a qualitative research study. Qualitative studies, as opposed to quantitative studies, are designed around, and personalised for the unique contextual and changing conditions of the specific study in question (Kelly, 2006a). They therefore cannot be judged according to uniform standards of research best practice (Kelly, 2006a). However, adopting a customised research strategy as appropriate and required for this specific inquiry (Camic *et al.*, 2003) makes it challenging to substantiate its quality and ethical standards by using a non-customised check-list. A few appropriate criteria will be used to judge the quality of this study.

Kelly (2006a) identifies four standards for quality research: good qualitative practice, triangulation, generalisability and transferability, and communicative validity. Kelly (2006a) however adds that pragmatic proof through action research also needs to be considered, as it influences research ethics and quality. Van der Riet and Durrheim (2006) consider validity or credibility, generalisability or transferability, and reliability or dependability as requirements for good quality and ethical research. However, referred to differently, the same standards apply.

Wassenaar (2006) speaks of four philosophical principles and eight practical principles of ethical research. The four philosophical principles refer to autonomy and respect for the dignity of people, nonmaleficence, beneficence and justice. The eight practical principles he refers to include collaborative partnership, social value, scientific validity, fair selection of research participants, a favourable risk/benefit ratio, independent ethical review, informed consent and ongoing respect for participants and research communities (Wassenaar, 2006). Furthermore, as this study is psychological in nature, professional ethical standards as set out by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA, 1974) were also considered as critical criteria by which to judge this study.

Each of these will now be explored in more detail; however I am of the opinion that although good quality research implies ethical conduct, ethical conduct implies more than just good quality research. The research quality will thus be discussed first, followed by the additional ethical criteria.

### **2.6.1 Ensuring research quality**

In judging the quality of this research, I find it appropriate to refer back to my philosophy of science based on which I conducted this study. Firstly, since this is a qualitative, phenomenological study, I regard other people as a valid source to provide meaning and perspective on experiences of the phenomenon as it would occur in natural every-day conditions (Camic *et al.*, 2003; Eisner, 2003). Using this approach questions that a true, objective reality exists (Camic *et al.*, 2003), and I hence aim to study it through my own subjective experiences and those of others. This type of study, just like any other type of study, has its benefits and limitations; however it is identified as most suitable to obtain the rich, context-specific and meaningful data I required to understand the essence of experiences in a virtual context in a holistic, dynamic and thorough manner (Camic *et al.*, 2003).

#### ***i. Validity and credibility***

Classifying research as valid implies that it measures the intended construct and provides information and conclusions on the actual stated construct or phenomenon (Van Der Riet & Durrheim, 2006). This implies that the inferences made based on the actual data reflect experiences of real-life contexts (Marecek, 2003). This is often referred to as external validity (Marecek, 2003). Camic *et al.*, (2003) make a suitable argument in stating that researchers cannot seek both external validity and internal validity, implying precision and control, at the same time. They therefore conclude that qualitative researchers should seek to maximise external validity by ensuring that their data and conclusions resemble those of the natural or real-world context (Camic *et al.*, 2003). Wassenaar (2006) states that validity is dependent on the nature of the research question. To achieve the research aims for this study, external validity and representation of real-work phenomena and contexts are deemed more important than internal validity. Conclusions were therefore based on using

VRPs stated experiences to imply constructs and real-life situations, implying external validity (Marecek, 2003).

Valid research also implies rigorous, justifiable, appropriate, systematic and feasible application of research design, methodology and data analysis to yield valid data and conclusions (Wassenaar, 2006). Kelly (2006a) states that the rigour, credibility, truthfulness and validity of a study can also be proven and ensured by seeking dialogue and critique from the research community and professional audiences, and by leaving an audit trail. In aiming to deliver valid and credible research, I made use of a research supervisor as mentor, the study will undergo a formal examination process, and an audit trail is available for review by independent reviewers. The application of the research design, methodology used and analysis process is furthermore reported in detail in this chapter to indicate its methodological rigour, as advised by Wassenaar (2006).

As mentioned, this study aimed to conduct qualitative research in a setting as natural and close to real life as possible. Hence, it is worth mentioning that it is not possible to control all variables and potential 'nuisance' variables may have influenced VRPs responses (Van Der Riet & Durrheim, 2006). Fortunately such unique challenges and influences are considered part of the everyday work-life of virtualisers, and therefore increase the genuineness of reported experiences and add to the value and credibility of this study. As Van Der Riet and Durrheim (2006) acknowledge, the credibility of qualitative research is established while research is conducted in striving to generate a rich and credible account. Triangulation is therefore often used to find supporting evidence by using multiple methodologies (Van Der Riet & Durrheim, 2006), data sources, and perspectives or theories to check the credibility and accuracy of inferences (Kelly, 2006a). I attempted to establish credibility in this study by gathering rich data close to the natural real-life setting, by making use of methodological triangulation in using case studies and an autoethnography for data collection, as well as by using career, industrial psychology and business management literature for inferences, implying theoretical triangulation.

## ***ii. Generalisability and transferability***

Generalisability implies external validity as proved above. It also refers to the appropriateness of transferring interpretations and conclusions made on the study sample and context to the larger population and context (Kelly, 2006a; Van Der Riet & Durrheim, 2006). The implication is that the conclusions reached, based on the virtualisers who participated in this study, are also applicable to all virtualisers.

The challenges of conducting a qualitative study and using such a small sample size makes one question the representativeness of the whole population and therefore limits the study's potential to generalise and transfer its findings (Kelly, 2006a; Van Der Riet & Durrheim, 2006). Though I used purposeful convenience and snowball sampling strategies, as appropriate to qualitative research, my sampling size was fairly large for a qualitative study (17 responses as opposed to usually four to eight being sufficient), and virtualisers participated from various countries and continents and operated in different industries. My sample size can therefore be said to be quite diverse. Though many of the experiences shared were repetitive, the unique experiences added significant value. These apply specifically to the limited few virtualisers who have already adopted the boundaryless employability mindset. It is difficult to source such a mindset because of specific criteria required. It is my honest opinion that the quality data and detail I received from the primary case studies are enough to substantiate most of the inferences in this study; however other VRPs' contributions were not discarded but used as supporting evidence. Eisner (2003) and Marecek (2003) support this in stating that the goal is to extract lessons from the reported experiences or data in order to influence better judgements and decisions, and contribute in generalised and abstract ways. Sample size is therefore of less concern in case-study analysis (Camic *et al.*, 2003), as a sample size of one could yield tremendous value if the case is efficient in providing richly contextualised, usable information to extract the necessary lessons and conclusions (Eisner, 2003; Marecek, 2003).

The goal was to collect rich data in as natural a setting possible (Camic *et al.*, 2003), enable experiences to be transferrable outside the study or experimental conditions (Van Der Riet & Durrheim, 2006) and hence make conclusions applicable to most virtualisers in the virtual work environment. As this study aimed to explore and describe experiences of work in the

virtual work environment, enabling generalisability or transferability, as Van Der Riet and Durrheim (2006) describe, requires describing the specific context to which this study applies accurately and in the necessary detail.

### ***iii. Reliability and dependability***

A study is said to be reliable if the study and its results can be repeated (Van Der Riet & Durrheim, 2006). It is said to be dependable if the experiences and findings are in fact as they are reported (Van Der Riet & Durrheim, 2006). However, the basic assumptions on which this study, being a qualitative study, is based imply that people are different, and their experiences, opinions and reality change along with their context and experiences. Therefore I do not anticipate repeatability of the results (Van Der Riet & Durrheim, 2006). Dependability is however more appropriate in this specific study, as it is achieved by providing detail on how the data was collected and analysed, with comprehensive descriptions of philosophical and subjective views from which the study was conducted, as well as how inferences were made (Van Der Riet & Durrheim, 2006). This I have already done in the current chapter.

### ***iv. Good qualitative practice***

Kelly (2006a) states that in addition to the above criteria, researchers should consider the impact they could have on the study, on the context and interpretation of the data. He warns that it is possible for research to result in a self-fulfilling prophesy in selecting appropriate data, being biased towards non-confirming cases, and arriving at desired conclusions. However I aimed to be transparent in reporting what I had done, how I did it and arrived at my conclusions. Shaw (2010) refers to transparency not only as important, but as a critical requirement for quality research, to establish trustworthiness, which implies reliability, dependability, validity, credibility and fidelity. It is for this reason that I used a reflective diary (Shaw, 2010), and reported the data in different ways, to provide the reader with the opportunity to make his or her own inferences.

During interpretation and labelling, Kelly (2006a) advises researchers to align with what emerges from the data. In putting this document and research dissertation together, I used terminology I regarded as most suitable at that particular time to illustrate what was intended. Particularly where no such descriptors exist in this relatively unexplored topic/subject, I created terms that aimed to describe the essence of the experience or phenomenon. These terms were intended to assist me in appropriately describing and explaining the phenomenon, and seemed applicable in conducting a qualitative, phenomenological study.

The initial aim of the study was to enhance understanding, which entails exploring a new type of working – or new context or phenomenon; and to understand experiences from the point of a relatively unexplored population, virtual workers. This study is also part of fulfilling the requirements of my master's degree in Industrial Psychology. Prior to conducting the study I was conscious of the fact that few of these types of master's studies actually do add value or make a difference to the scientific community. At the time of selecting the study aim and context, I had the illusion that it would be easier in that it was already the context in which I worked and I had a network of possible participants. However soon after embarking upon the study, I was convinced otherwise. The least I hoped for, prior to starting this study, was for these study results to be useful to organisations that wanted to adopt virtual arrangements, or individuals who wanted to become virtualisers. Such ambitions are supported by Kelly (2006a, p.382) in his statement; "good research should have the power to reorient and change practice". Secondary to that I hoped in doing such a broad-scoped study I would increase understanding of the virtual environment and potentially identify something specific for further study afterwards. Whatever my ultimate goal, I had to focus on what the current study entailed and presented in the here and now.

## **2.6.2 Upholding ethical standards in research**

As this study is psychological in nature, it was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines as set out in the Health Professions Act (Act 56 of 1974), Annexure 12: *Rules of conduct pertaining specifically to the profession of psychology* (HPCSA, 1974). Ethical and professional concerns as highlighted by the UNISA CEMS Research Committee (2010)

also apply to this study. Though the different documents present different criteria, the key criteria required for ethical research as appropriate in the social sciences and this study will now be discussed.

***i. Principle of autonomy***

The principle of autonomy requires that I respect the research participants' dignity (Veiga, 2009). Such respect is communicated by the use of an informed consent form, voluntary or willing participation, confidentiality and protection of individual identities (HPCSA, 1974; Tengimfene, 2009; Wassenaar, 2006). VRPs were approached for voluntary participation, and an informed consent form was e-mailed to them individually. The goal, outcome and context of the research study were explained, along with what the results would be used for, and the measures to protect the confidentiality of their data and statements. The facts that participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time and that continuous participation was not compulsory (Wassenaar, 2006) are evident in the large sample size (17). Some participants only provided short paragraphs of descriptions of their experiences and thereafter either lost interest or did not want to participate further.

Consent was implied by providing data to the research study, and in a few cases a formally signed informed consent form was returned. As the risk/benefit ratio of participating in this study was judged as very low, this was considered appropriate practice for this specific study (Amdur, 2003, in Wassenaar, 2006).

***ii. Principle of nonmaleficence***

The principle of nonmaleficence requires that I may not do any harm, or no harm may come to research participants, or any person or group, either directly or indirectly, in or after participating (HPCSA, 1974; Veiga, 2009; Wassenaar, 2006). The nature of this research study was regarded as not being harmful in any way to potential research participants.

### ***iii. Principle of beneficence***

The principle of beneficence requires that this research project should be of benefit to those who participated, the population it represents, society at large, or the research community (Veiga, 2009; Wassenaar, 2006). This research project aims to add value to the scientific community and virtual workers, and will ultimately be shared with all VRPs after publication. However the current social value has not yet been determined, but the current beneficiaries are the researcher, in order to obtain my master's degree, and the University of South Africa, since I am one of its students.

### ***iv. Principle of justice***

The principle of justice requires that researchers should apply the values of fairness and equity in working with research participants and applies to selecting participants, collecting data from them and post-data collection (Wassenaar, 2006). The sampling strategies employed must be appropriate for the type of study conducted and no discrimination other than that required to ensure appropriate participants for the study was applied, namely completely virtual workers.

The principles of justice could also be extended to myself as a researcher in undergoing the study and therefore getting exposure to being a research participant, and also feeling exposed in the process. However I believe this assisted with developing sensitivity and empathy for VRPs' experiences and vulnerability, which leads to more responsible and ethical research.

### ***v. Researcher's competence***

This study is undertaken for educational purposes in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a master's degree in Industrial Psychology, under supervision. This was stated appropriately to research participants, and was therefore not perceived as an ethical concern (Wassenaar, 2006). It is however acknowledged that research not conducted methodically, rigorously and appropriately is considered poor science, which implies unethical conduct (Wassenaar, 2006). I however do not yet consider myself a competent

researcher, as this was the first research-related journey for me. I do have trust and confidence in my research supervisor who has guided and mentored me in the process to ensure ethical conduct and a good quality research study. This is supported by the fact that the study was conducted under natural conditions, and I displayed thoroughness in applying the research methods within the stated context, with possible meaningfulness and usefulness of the study outcome (Camic *et al.*, 2003).

#### ***vi. Independent review***

A professional and independent ethical review is required to enhance quality, gain approval and ensure ethical conduct (HPCSA, 1974; Wassenaar, 2006). Prior to commencing the study, the research proposal received ethical clearance from the IOP department research committee at the university.

#### ***vii. Data integrity and availability***

Throughout this research I upheld professional standards of integrity concerning the representation of the data obtained, to avoid misrepresentation and falsification (Wassenaar, 2006). Secondary to that I referenced the work cited appropriately to avoid plagiarism and unethical use of information or breach of copyright (Wassenaar, 2006).

The lengthy process of conducting and reporting the findings also served to prove methodological integrity (Xu & Storr, 2012). The raw data and audit trail can be made available in an attempt to ensure the integrity of data and inferences, as well as enabling interested others to extract other possible conclusions from the data (HPCSA, 1974).

I furthermore declare that this research project is my own work and that I tried to make it as transparent as possible by using an open form and conversational style in communication, writing in the first person, and making all the data collected available to any person interested to review it at a later stage. The results are therefore also made available for scrutiny by others.

## **2.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter explained the disciplinary context and my research orientation to this study. A discussion followed on my natural account of the research journey, the research setting, the sample of participations, and data collection methods. This was supported by explaining the meaning-making and data analysis process and how I presented the findings. This chapter was concluded with the desired attention to the quality and ethical implications of this study.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **CASE STUDY RESULTS: VIRTUAL NARRATIVES**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

In this section I present the narratives shared with me by VRPs during this study. I firstly provide some background on how the stories were shared with me, and share my own learning and insights incurred from interactions with virtualisers. Just before the selected four stories will be told, I will enlighten you, the reader, as to why I chose to use stories in reporting my research data, before identifying themes in the next chapter.

#### **3.2 BACKGROUND INTO THE VIRTUAL STORIES**

During this study I shared experiences with various individuals who have adopted virtual working for various reasons. In total 17 virtual workers contributed to my study in various degrees through various e-tools. VRPs were geographically distributed, as input was obtained from the following locations: the United States (Chicago and New York), Portugal, Monaco, India, South Africa (Port Elizabeth, Amanzimtoti, Umhlanga, Pretoria and Johannesburg), and Zambia.

I was appreciative of the various industries explored by virtual workers, as I initially assumed it would mostly be independent consultants or contractors, but soon realised the vast number of opportunities that are created virtually, globally. The majority of VRPs provided services to businesses (consulting, coaching, training, recruitment, accounting, writing and editing, data coordination, telecommunications, IT, and technical support). Not only is virtual working adopted as a working method or work style, but virtualisers are now also becoming a target market that requires different and specific products and services to enable virtual operations and the adoption of a virtual lifestyle. Virtualisers need, for example constant connectivity, to be able to operate independent of location, while travelling or on holiday. Telecommunication services such as Wi-Fi or mobile operations that provide cost-effective international call options and data download while roaming might be attractive to some, whereas others want uncapped data for downloads, WebEx, webinars and e-conferencing.

The wide dispersion of those who contributed to the study in both geographical location and profession illustrates the significant impact of the changing world of work and the need for more flexible working alternatives and opportunities. Factors leading to changing working methods such as globalisation and technological advancements enable international operation, and provide flexible working solutions, but are also influenced by societal changes. People want to be more flexible in their daily routine and working lives and are increasingly realising the importance of time with family and loved ones. This is also supported by the changing values of the new generation entering the working world, but also values of the older workforce who want to catch up on quality family time they missed out on in their younger years.

As highlighted above, changes in the working world provide increased virtual possibilities by providing, benefiting, utilising and/or optimising technological advances globally. The electronic nature of virtualising provides software companies with a new market for applications such as electronic time management solutions, more user-friendly payroll and accounting solutions customised for the individual operating his business virtually, from his home environment, or other convenient locations. Virtualisers also have a larger need for electronic storage space, such as hard-drive storage space for e-mails, but also electronic back-up systems for archives and easy access if one's computer is lost or broken.

Other unique needs of virtualisers are educating them on work-life balance and a healthy lifestyle. Ergonomic factors and the importance of having a healthy office space, lighting etcetera is also very important to the productivity of virtualisers, but also their psychological and physical health in view of their co-location of work and home life. Virtualisers are truly becoming an independent niche market.

### **3.2.1 Self-reflection and insights into virtualisers**

During this research project I have learned that virtualisers are in fact themselves entrepreneurs and business owners/managers. Each VRP has his or her unique way of conducting business by ultimately creating opportunities for themselves and others as a means to generate income and to pursue their personal interest, either by being with family,

touring the world, or exploring any other hobby or interest. I have learned that pursuing passions in the virtual world is about prioritising appropriately, planning ahead and sometimes making difficult decisions. Though this might sound like standard and easy activities, they are inherently complicated by the co-location of work life and personal life, the activities, and the personal nature of virtualers in every decision.

On this journey I have come to appreciate virtualers' unique and subjective decisions on why and how to operate virtually, and what by default is considered priority. The decision by default considers family and personal preferences and attempts to balance these with career/job opportunities in order to provide a stable lifestyle for oneself and one's loved ones. Virtualing seems to provide a means to balance these two often contradicting and conflicting goals.

Some choose to work virtually, and for others virtualing is chosen for them. Factors that attracted VRPs to virtualing included personal flexibility, the ability to relocate with a spouse, the potential to earn more and to grow professionally, the opportunity to be at home and the quality of relationships and family life. Some participants viewed virtualing as the only option to accommodate their unique needs. It is interesting that almost all virtualers said they did not foresee themselves returning to the traditional work environment as it did not provide flexibility in their schedule to spend quality time on their own and with their children and others – and should they return to traditional work options, the financial benefit would need to be significant, and they would still require flexible work hours.

Virtual working has been described as frustrating and “hard work” at best. Some virtualers even stated that they worked *more* and *harder* than when they were part of the traditional working population. As a virtual entrepreneur one is directly responsible for one's business success and is therefore more responsible for building networks and rendering quality services. Marketing and sales acumen are therefore important in building one's personal brand. Virtualers need to ensure their customers are truly getting the quality they expect and that they will return in future. One therefore becomes one's own biggest challenge – in developing a vision and rendering good service to achieve one's goals. Factors such as self-management and personal-motivation are very important and are often neglected when looking at the person-requirements.

Virtualling is akin to instability. VRPs' express concern in the security of current and future contracts and earning a stable income on a regular basis, as work can be very volatile at times. On the up-side, when contracts are secured, virtualisers can decide their own limit, as they can undertake as many things as they have the competence and capacity to deliver. Virtualisers however still need to make time for advertising and exploring new opportunities, as current contracts may end at any time. The question is where to allocate the time; in completing contracts that are bringing in current income, or on spending a lot of time on pursuing potential opportunities, which can be seen as an expense (lost opportunity costs) if they do not yield positive results. The saying "no work, no pay" definitely applies, and VRPs would rather spend spare moments with family.

Though VRPs have described virtualling as personally very demanding, they all seem to be satisfied with their working decisions, conditions and situation. Each conveyed a sense of excitement and vigour in virtualling and making a success of the work-lifestyle they chose, and possibilities that lay ahead. Because of the personal involvement of virtualisers in their success and the direct link to their inputs, the personal satisfaction derived from their achievements has been experienced as very rewarding and worth the extra effort, time and energy.

Each virtual story is unique and I wish I could share them all. However, as I use reference to all 17 stories in summary sections such as above, I will share the details of three specific stories below as well as my own autoethnography. The three stories selected provided the richest data and most insight into virtualling – why virtualling is best for the VRP, what their working conditions and opportunities are like, and some information on the VRP character. These stories provide a comprehensive account of the data collected and experiences in working virtually. It also provides good insight as to the various degrees of virtual operations adopted by various VRP's. I invite you to travel on the road of the various virtual-lifestyle options I have come across in my journey.

### 3.2.2 Why I chose stories

Stories, whether watched or read, create a sense of novelty and excitement about what lies ahead – they can engage children and adults for hours. Though I do not always remember the details in the stories of my younger years, I still smile when I think about the excitement and emotions aroused while exploring them. Little ones can watch the same story over and over, each time with new excitement and appreciation, like the first time. I too, have experienced such a sense of wonder, every time I engage in a new virtual story shared. Each story is unique and special to the virtualer – full of opportunity, enriched by detail, each time getting closer to understanding the bigger picture, the colours, the smiles, and the happy endings.

From my childhood years I reflect on the role-playing games after we watched stories – how we used others to fulfil roles in our lives and how they were portrayed in the play. In-group, out-group, the evil witch, the frog who became a prince – everything as one wanted and created it, all building up to a happy ending.

Looking back, I do not remember the details of the personalities in stories, as they all seem “flat” – Cinderella, Ariel, Snow White – I am not always certain how different the characters were. As I got older and stories evolved, the personalities of characters were elaborated. Shrek and Madagascar are good examples of this, as the individual characters display their identity and uniqueness, and the dynamics of the relationships come to the fore. Today, the excitement and involvement in such stories are enhanced by three-dimensional technology and the maturity of the target audience. Considering the alarming rate of change, such visual graphics, details, and experiences are enhanced daily in order to stay abreast of consumers’ (viewers’) constantly changing needs and increasing expectations.

This is symbolic to me of how the working world has evolved from the caveman days, characterised by events of hunting, marriage and birth; to when only men were allowed to take on employment, later followed by women entering the working world, fulfilling the dual role of mother and income earner, and in modern days men are starting to fulfil more roles at home. Today, this trend is capitalised on as technology and globalisation are offering

more opportunities for dual-career couples to pursue various career or lifestyle options unlimited by traditional boundaries.

Saayman and Crafford (2011) suggest stories are the vehicles by which we create meaning and make sense of the world. They say we do this by recalling fragments of experiences and presenting them in a manner that makes sense to us as a coherent whole. As stories play such a significant part in our lives, and are an integral part of how we experience life and share experiences, I want to share the virtual narratives in the same way. In presenting the narratives, I'd like readers to view them as a play happening in the distance. These virtual narratives are therefore presented in story format, assuming the roles and flow of fictional characters and stories as a means to contextualise and "play out" experiences and scenarios. These stories are shared as they materialise from virtualisers' fingertips (all shared electronically).

I will first present the main characters in the virtual play, which will lead into each unique story, highlighting significant experiences and priorities in the virtualisers' life. Congruencies between various role players present potential generic experiences and/or factors to be considered by both virtualisers and organisations considering adopting virtualising to a greater or more limited extent. As people, perceptions and experiences are dynamic; I will account for basic and generic expectations. However I aimed to make sense of all the fragments of data and present them appropriately. The fragments of data created themes and sub-themes, which assisted in putting together a data structure or model to explain the findings. These are presented by experiences related to virtualising and those related to the virtualiser. The interdependence of these two (virtualising and virtualiser) created a third theme, referred to as virtualness.

Our first character is played by Bob the Virtualiser who provides practical insight into the everyday virtual life, explaining work life and personal life as best kept and managed separately. He is a practical gentleman who leads in helping and mobilising others. He runs and leads a virtual organisation and shows a high preference for spending time with his children and fulfilling his roles as father, parent and homemaker. On a work level, he often shows interest in the personal development and welfare of his team and colleagues, and has an encouraging and supporting or "building" approach to his children. This is

symbolised by the story taking place in two dimensions, as he maintains his two main themes, work and family, as completely different and separate dimensions. His personal and career identities can also be described as different – his personal identity is that of a caretaker father, and his career identity that of a virtual worker. His parenting role takes priority, as he aims to be supportive, constructive and *building*. However he shares his personal struggles to *build* a stable virtual career and financial security for his children.

Our second narrative is played by Cindy, our Cinderella character. Cindy plays the real-life character who lost her initial dreams and desires in the rut of corporate life. She risks jeopardising her personal safety, health, balance, and personal relationships in the hope of satisfying a dream. She recalls driving home, alone, late at night, receiving little appreciation for her hard efforts and enjoying few benefits. Achieving her goal however is not possible owing to the nature of human ambitions – or the evil stepmother who will always demand more and never be content. Cindy's life drastically changed when she lost her glass shoe, and became physically ill. She retracted to the safety of her home life, before the clock struck and she lost all she had worked for. Now, she is running her own recruitment business, operating electronically from her home. She now reports a healthier, better balanced and more satisfactory work-lifestyle and taking the necessary care of her personal needs too. Though virtualising is not easy, she shares her strategies to ensure performance and personal success.

As individuals and the working world evolve, so does one's desire for development and integration. Visual media, technology and graphical advancements enable real-life characters to play in an animated world, creating a more realistic story for children to engage with, such as the 1999 film of Alice in Wonderland. Three-dimensional technology introduced new possibilities of modern technology and how viewers' experience can be enhanced by making use of computer technology, graphics, and props.

The third narrative will take the profile of Alice in Virtuelland; as Alice explores a wide range of e-tools to enhance her virtual operations and experiences. Alice plays the character that, after being alienated at first, becomes one with her surroundings and experiences in order to reach a happy ending. As a character, Alice learns and grows throughout her journey, and incorporates her experiences and learning in order to be more successful virtually. She

flourishes on the flexibility and autonomy presented by the virtual work environment, as she pursues her passions for music and writing, among others, and experiences a better quality lifestyle. Along the yellow-brick road of virtual freedom, Alice takes a moment to warn us against some dangers that exist in the virtual world, as well as the continuous personal challenges presented by the virtual work-lifestyle.

Finally, once we have been introduced to the possibilities virtual working has to offer and what the three stories guide us to understand about virtualising, I share my autoethnographical account. Bumblebee from Transformers is used as metaphor. Bumblebee is a steel robot, built to support the human race where needed. He is *also* not very large in size, but tough on the outside, transforming between a car and a fighting robot - whichever is most appropriate at the time. Bumblebee has a soft, caring side, which is not shown from the start, but implied in the extremes he goes through to protect those he cares for. Being a robot, and a car, he is unable to communicate by mouth or word, and throughout the story he is unable to truly express his thoughts and emotions. However he eventually becomes skilled in using the radio's words and expressions on the various channels to express himself vocally. Similarly, I feel I have shared this phase of development or transformation from a naive virtual worker to finding my voice to express the essence of virtual experiences as a researcher.

The Transformers story acknowledges that the world is changing at a drastic pace, and that the human race's wants and needs are forever changing, which results in the continuous creation and invention of new products and services in order to satisfy the market and earn an income. This is continuously communicated by VRPs, as virtualising provides the opportunity for increased flexibility in the services offered, when, how and where, as well as the changing needs of consumers and virtualisers becoming a market segment on their own.

Bumblebee shows significant strength of character in pulling through hard times and taking drastic measures in order to create a sense of appreciation and wonder at the end of the movie. In a way he symbolises the growth and development of my autoethnographical account – by bringing together my personal struggles to find creative ways to communicate throughout this project, but also to acknowledge the personal hardships when completing a

research project of this scope. Like Bumblebee, I feel I have gambled with losing valuable time with my loved ones, but only to gain in the end.

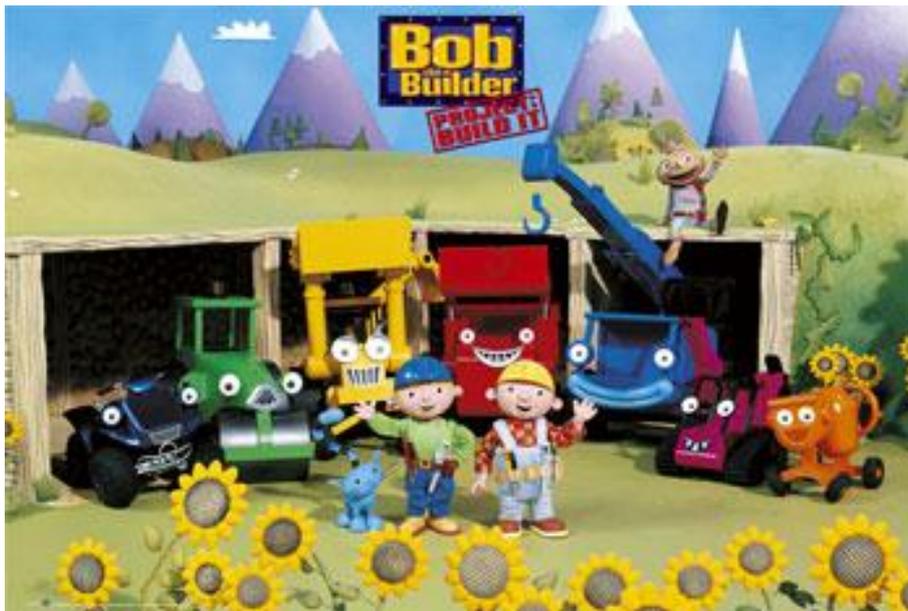
Reflecting back, I also acknowledge the initial frustration I experienced in bringing this research project together; the complexity of expressing my ideas, vision, experiences and my extreme involvedness in the rich context and detail. For me, it was a journey of development of constantly finding alternative ways to communicate with my (potential) research participants and audience, stimulating excitement and gaining support for this project. I had to explore and use various e-communication tools such as Skype, e-mail, blogging and social networking – as Bumblebee has to use various radio channels to express one message.

Perhaps I have not perfected the art, but I have indeed travelled a long path, and I invite you, the reader, to become involved in the journey of virtualisers in their everyday life of virtualising, as each has its unique flavour and colour. This autoethnography shares the challenges I experienced with flexibility and discipline, adopting a virtual lifestyle and integrating my work and personal life, and ultimately pursuing an integrated virtualising identity.

### **3.3 VIRTUAL NARRATIVES**

These narratives are written in the third person. However, the VRPs own words and data were used verbatim in-text and typed in italics. This is done to distinguish between my own writing and interpretation and experiences shared by the VRP. Paragraphs from their original narratives were also used for reference and reported in quotation marks and italics. Where emphasis is placed on specific words, these are in **bold**.

### 3.3.1 Bob the Virtualler



[http://www.last.fm/group/I+Still+Buy+CDs/forum/32003/\\_/247825/508](http://www.last.fm/group/I+Still+Buy+CDs/forum/32003/_/247825/508)

**Bob the Builder** was originally a stop-motion animated television series with characters made of clay. Bob is a building contractor who has his own construction business and works with a team consisting of colleagues and friends; they use work vehicles and equipment also made of clay. Bob fulfils a parenting role to the machines that often display child-like behaviour (impatience and not anticipating the possible consequences of such actions), as he patiently teaches and helps them, though some problems result from his habit of leaving his mobile switched off (Wikipedia). This British children’s show, created by Keith Chapman, is broadcast in many countries, as the programme’s catchphrase and theme song, “*Can we fix it? Yes we can!*”, are ideal to build the “*core programme philosophy of teamwork, co-operation, problem-solving, trying your best, determination, achievement and a can-do attitude mixed with the fun of building and construction...*” (HIT Entertainment Limited & Keith Chapman, 2011).

The third spin-off of Bob the Builder, called “Ready, Steady, Build” uses full computer-generated imagery animation, which enables the machines to display more human-like traits and behaviours, such as moving their mouths to speak, sniff and eat, and moving their bodies more flexibly (HIT Entertainment Limited & Keith Chapman, 2011; Wikipedia). This

also enhances the complexity of building projects (Wikipedia) and may potentially be more cognitively stimulating to viewers, enhancing their learning experience.

**Bob the Virtualler** is also a contractor of his own virtual business, and is *“addicted to this”*. He has been working virtually for more than 14 years and considers himself a successful virtual worker and active parent. He does *“not foresee returning to traditional employment and way of working”* as he has *“been doing it for so long and will likely not be able to work any other way,”* he *“think[s] and perhaps even believe[s]”*.

Bob’s story started where he described himself as *“successful”, “has arrived”* and having a *“career and certainty”,* or so he *“thought”*. This was in the early 1990s, when Bob was in his early thirties. He was *“working for a decade, doing three degrees with distinction and on [his] way to a Doctorate in Business Psychology”*. He characterised this stage of his career as *“driving a Mercedes, having a corner office with a secretary, a management team, a large staff, perks, and many things in my diary – sometimes booked for weeks in advance”*. To highlight his success, he was allocated two promotions in two years and was his initial supervisors’ boss.

Changes in the modern economy led to Bob being retrenched from his corporate job, and being a white, older male, he found few other opportunities, possibilities or options, but to start working for himself. That was when he started operating from his home office by applying his personal competencies and experience in the business consulting industry. He describes this as his immediate plan to secure income, but *“the benefits came later with a little bit of commercial success. Then [he] realised [he] may just be able to make a living like that and [his] frame of mind changed a lot. Once [he] started really working for clients – some remote and some on their sites, [he] started to gain more benefit and not only financial. Since [he] was earning a living [he] could apply the freedom to be flexible supporting [his] children at school much better.”* Virtualling for Bob was *“more out of need, initially”*, but as his virtual-commercial success grew, his personal preference for this working style also increased, his success-measures changed and it is his only long-term plan now *“because of the lifestyle [he] is able to lead as a result”*.

Bob describes his current virtual situation as follows:

*Now I drive a Yaris, [am] a regular in a few coffee shops on three continents (literally), have a few trusted colleagues who became friends – with me in the trenches of management consulting, [am] my own worst secretary I ever had, do Grade II reading and Grade III maths every afternoon, have 3 sons, never studied a day in my life again formally, **but** learn every day, are in my mid-forties, try and be successful, run a business to make money, and do not know where our work in the next quarter will come from, do not think many days it is worth it ... or so I thought.*

He considers his current work arrangement very similar to that of his senior manager position in his previous corporate position. Working virtually does not limit his ability to conduct work activities. His main working goals and responsibilities are to:

*Run a company; get good and competent people; deliver as we promised; get our own business strategy done, decide on our go-to-market position and branding; plan, guide, monitor, and coordinate; attract staff, retain and optimise them; pass grade II and III with my two sons; expand our business successfully to the US & India; with the last 2 equal in importance to me; and be successful and make money.*

This aligns to the success of the Bob the Builder series' international distribution and interest.

Virtual working sounds very easy through the eyes of Bob, listening to how one can do one's normal work activities, but from the comfort of one's home. However, he does acknowledge that it is not that easy at all and that he had some personal challenges of his own. For example, his initial rewards were "not much" as "it was too difficult". Bob "found it very tough to adjust to the lack of organisation and structure and it took [him] about two years to get used to it." He "had major challenges to balance working at home with [his] family life," and says that "more than a decade later [he] still finds it difficult".

Self-discipline, working with lack of structure and wondering where the next contract will come from were some of his initial challenges of working “*in the cloud*”, running a business that cannot be seen, touched, or physically visited, and to do all of this either in his head, or on his laptop.

*It takes a lot of discipline, also from your family. You are mostly working alone and it is not easy to feel isolated and out of touch. You have to have a very tough frame of mind to keep motivated, positive and most important focused and productive.*

Bob considers the virtual arrangement to provide “*unlimited opportunities to get things done in unlimited ways of creativity, but it also create[s] unlimited opportunities for things to go wrong.*” The fact that he operates his business in untraditional ways still means he needs to conduct business and serve clients in the “*real world*”. He and his colleagues are not employees, but contractors to their own businesses; they are mainly middle-aged seasoned professionals from post-1994 South Africa and work with many young, upcoming and energetic pre-1994 South African professionals. The up-side of “*not having a boss means no-one expects anything from you and you can take leave, or not – you have yourself and your family to answer to*” however one is marginalised by the stress that “*uncertainty of future contracts and financial income and stability*” presents.

*The year has started and works on two of the three client sites as well. I need to get my mind ‘sorted’ not only to be a professional value adding service provider, but also on how I get all work going again and what will be waiting to be done once the current work finishes. The last is the scariest and toughest part of working on your own and virtual.*

Bob has a daily routine, similar to what a working parent with a traditional job would have. He needs to be dressed for work before 7:00, has to work from home, needs to work hard every day, but also needs to be flexible to play an active care-giver role at home (similar to Bob the Builder who fulfils a “boss” and “parent” role to his machines). As his schedule is more flexible, he takes advantage of the opportunity by exploring less-traditional male roles at home, on which he places high value. He needs to do things his way, while making money, sensibly, and do it with others who are also happy, cared for, and believe in what is

possible for their business. He does not think he will be able to work for a boss again, yet considers himself having more “bosses” now than ever before.

One may easily be intrigued by the idea of starting one’s own virtual operation and/or becoming a virtual worker with ad hoc contracts. Initially it is not all that favourable, considering various factors within oneself, as well as one’s environment, which greatly influence one’s virtual success. Bob’s story is therefore unique in that his *“current fundamental and unwavering self motivation”* drove him to prove a point and be a successful virtual worker. Virtual working for him also came by default owing to applying his competencies and experience after being retrenched. (Similar to how Bob the Builder applies his natural teaching and coaching skills to empower his colleagues, Bob the Virtualler needs to do this to himself consciously in order to keep him productive.)

Though virtual working is characterised by working from home, Bob describes his home environment as *“the worst place to work in or even try and work in”* and rather works in spaces where he feels more *“connected”*. This includes the kitchen, quiet coffee shops or client sites. It does not include the home environment, especially in the afternoons when his three sons are home, as it poses *“too many distractions and I also have a psychological block that at home I relax and [am] with my family and not in my ‘work space”*.

One of his biggest challenges is the perception that when he is at home, his children also “think” he is at home. This provides the opportunity to bombard him with various requests and demands (similar to how Bob the Builder is always the “go to” person), which he regards as legitimate. This adds to the difficulty, as it is far more attractive to pay attention to them than to his work. He therefore ends up being a virtual worker, working effectively in various locations that are not the home environment, as described by the verbatim quotation below:

*I thus have become a coffee shop and hotel business lounge citizen of note and have a number of ‘offices’ where I work. I am a ‘local’ there and [am] recognised as a regular and I never do anything else than work or meet people and of course drink gallons of coffee and have the occasional breakfast or lunch. My ‘offices’ and the ‘support’ there have as many pros and cons as those resulting of the virtual working*

*world. When I am in my virtual working space, normally there is coffee and people around me, I focus and [am] very productive, just not at home. On balance though, the benefits of no office hours and no structure which allows me to do important things with and for my children as a parent, [outweigh] the challenges and cons attached to it by a mile.*

Whether in his home or virtual environment, Bob considers himself to be the main source of his distraction and unproductiveness. In his words, *“some days I conquer the world and some days the world conquers me”*. For him, this is influenced by daily family activities and the difficulty of having a quiet and stable personal space to operate from. He therefore considers focus and discipline to be critical in the virtual set-up, and familiarity helps with stabilising the work environment and also enhancing the ability to focus on work. (Bob the Builder’s show also builds on familiarity and repetition, which makes it easier for youngsters to identify and learn the lessons presented in the show. They use the same catchphrases, sentences and story roll where something goes wrong and they need to call Bob to help. The town in the third series, Fixham Harbour, is also very similar to, and often implied to be Bobsville, the town in the first series.)

As virtual working poses various possibilities for both success and derailment, Bob the Virtualler requires discipline as the most important single trait required for virtual success. Working virtually requires working *“early mornings, late hours, weekends, and when the kids are in bed”*. All virtuallers need to find work options that are conducive to their productivity; or else *“you will not be a virtual worker for long”*. The benefit is that one is able to schedule time and routine to one’s personal benefit, but no-one is following up or measuring one’s daily activities and work delivered (*“not having a boss means no-one expects anything from you”*). One is one’s own boss, and though “no work, no pay” applies, the situation is further complicated as one is solely responsible for getting oneself working again. Personal motivation and frame of mind have a direct impact on performance in this case (*“psychological block that at home I relax and am with my family”; “it is a constant issue to prove that you are working and working as hard as anyone else”*.)

Aligned to the above, Bob clearly states that virtualers require specific personal competencies and behavioural choices in order to be successful. He is *“convinced some of these to be: initiative, tenacity, focus, sense of achievement, goal orientation, perseverance, flexibility, well orientation, strong sense of self, and a strong sense of others.”* He however does not elaborate on the implications thereof.

Advancements in technology, social networking and other forms of e-media are becoming very popular and offer various possibilities to the virtual industry, as we will explore in other cases to follow. Bob however admits that he might be *“an ‘aging’ virtual worker”* as he consciously decides not to participate actively in these new forms of communication and social networking. He expresses anxiety that *“technology is likely going to reduce [his] usefulness as a virtual worker.”* Though he feels that virtualing is a choice and *“may at some point limit [his] ability to access or generate information and [he] may find himself isolated. For now, [he is] still able to do all [he] needs to do, but may at some point not be able to.”* (Bob the Builder “forgetting” his cell-phone may also result in some frustrations or added challenges).

Bob is now *“addicted to this”*, as he has come a long way in virtual working, but mainly because of his resulting lifestyle choices and benefits. He is able to manage his time effectively to support his two youngest sons with their school work in the afternoons and considers this the only real major personal benefit he is concerned about and would not want to forfeit.

### 3.3.2 Cinderella, the happy ending, and virtual reality thereafter



<http://www.zerochan.net/Cinderella>

**Cinderella**, now a princess, was previously ill-treated by her stepmother and stepsisters. She had to work day in and day out to clean and look after them, returning to her room late at night, exhausted and burnt-out from the day's work. She was alone, with only animals as friends, as she was prohibited from going out and living the life of a normal teenager. Though life was tough and unfair, she never complained, but dreamt that things would be different.

Cinderella's character has been described as "headstrong and independent", "doesn't let her anger and sorrow get the better of her", "she can overcome her obstacles", and she "simply wanted to live a better life and escape the harsh world of her wicked stepmother and sisters" (Disney Wiki, 2005).

**Cindy** (our virtual character), is a competent and ambitious recruiter, who "*came from a corporate of chaos*". She knew a life where only long hours, hard work and dedication would result in achieving success in the corporate environment. There she was side-tracked from reaching her full potential and experiencing life to the full by having many efforts forced onto her by the corporate structure and values. Though Cindy does not have children, she is married, and has four dogs, which she loves dearly. She would work hard

and long hours just to get her work up to date, returning home alone at night, exhausted from the day's work, but she kept believing that her efforts would yield positive results.

*In corporate, I worked ridiculous hours which also posed a security risk – woman travelling in her car alone at all times of the night on her way home, most often out of industrial areas. Scary!!!*

Reflecting back, Cindy remembers how she always felt guilty if she took personal time or a lunch-break “in corporate”.

*...was always guilty in corporate to even allude to a personal life with its own challenges, such as a dentist appointment etc... in corporate I know I would not have even been present as you don't even get time to make a 5 minute personal call during the day...*

Cindy's commitment to her spousal role guided her to start her own recruiting firm, operating from her home environment. Getting to understand Cindy's story helped me to realise that being a successful virtual worker requires a combination of various things, including having structure and routine that works for the virtual worker, and the right combination of personal characteristics to pull one through, among others. The operational and “soft” challenges and battles of virtualising are amplified by the integrated nature of work and home, and the continuous striving for balance, and perhaps – inner peace.

Cindy describes herself as “*ultra-disciplined*” and adds, “*you will not find me away - well, very rarely – I have a hair appointment just now ... but I view that as a lunch break that I never take – from my work during standard working hours.*” Her being disciplined is also evident in the following;

*It is just not in me to shirk my work which is insane as I wanted to do this (virtualising) for more flexibility, however I have become more balanced and now do shut “my shop” between 17h00 – 18h00 and then I focus on things I never used to have time for and always felt guilty about not getting to e.g. cooking decent, nutritious meals*

*(as opposed to takeaways 5 times a week and spending quality time with my husband and pets and catching up with friends etc.*

*I am strict and cut off strictly between 17h00 and 18h00. The domestic knows she is not to bother me unless the house is physically on fire LOL or it is really an emergency. She has also been taught to discipline the dogs if they bark during working hours as I believe this can sound a tad unprofessional on the phone (barking dogs in the background) and she has to close my office door if she is going to use the vacuum cleaner (yes, I know offices get vacuumed too, but even in corporate I had an issue with the vacuum cleaner in the background whilst taking calls). Fortunately we have no children except the four paw ones, so cannot comment on that.*

Being “ultra-disciplined”, she schedules time for filing and backups in her diary as she “lose[s] sleep if [she] miss[es] those appointments with [her]self”. She understands that “it will only be more work later or if the backup is not done,” she will be “working at risk of losing important data.” Though Cindy has a high work ethic, she acknowledges that she now takes better care of herself, since she adopted virtualing:

*I am my best boss also as I also recognise that I am human and have a personal life (one was always guilty in corporate to even [allude] to a personal life with its own challenges, such as a dentist appointment etc.) so I find now that my health is in better condition as I do attend to medical things like a bad tooth which may cause headaches etc. On the flip side regarding health, the stress is a totally different stress to corporate stress and needs a completely different set of skills / coping mechanisms to deal with that.*

With modern technology, Cindy finds it convenient to up-skill herself and to keep up with the market. She “regularly attend[s] webinars for [her] industry and subscribe[s] to a lot of related newsletters, blogs etc. that are related”. She also receives a monthly newsletter from “a personal coaching company for entrepreneurs and that always gives [her] such food for thought and often a push in a new direction.” She describes these newsletters as being very useful. Though virtualing gives her the opportunity to schedule her time conveniently,

she sometimes files these e-mails to read on a “quieter” day in order to “savour and think” about them.

These publications, to Cindy, “are more about addressing and even identifying weaknesses one never gave thought of before and ... lets you know that you are not alone in your challenges.”

Unique challenges originate from the isolated nature of virtual working, such as being isolated, motivating oneself, being responsible for one’s own administration, IT management, and everything always happens at once because of home and work being co-located. Cindy shared personal experiences to give some context to the “reality” of a virtual princess:

*...a classic example of the last two weeks was as follows: due to not having a “dedicated” IT division, one uses friends or small companies for IT support. As a result of this for the first time ever I had a computer virus , it wiped my entire system (thankfully I had backed up a couple of days before) whilst this was going on my one little dog got diagnosed with cancer and went into surgery immediately (instant hysterics as these are my babies), so whilst that is going on, I was with a new IT company for 3 days trying to restore my system, during that same week, my husband had a major personal crisis and in the same week I got a new client that I have been trying to bag for a long, long time. So the following week, I get new work from the new client, plus still getting work in from old clients, I am 3 days behind and my other dog suddenly gets sick and passes. When one of my animals passes, it debilitates me – now add all the other drama on top including the new work – I really struggled to focus so I found myself crying at my desk night and day trying to do the new work to meet the deadlines and although it was taking me half a day to do what should take an hour, I met my deadlines in the new work but not the old work (fortunately my old client knows me well and understands which still does not make it ok, I felt unprofessional), but trying to overcome the shocks of my significant other’s crisis plus my deep personal loss and still keep telling myself “focus, if you don’t, there will be no revenue generated” ... Not easy when you have tears streaming down your face all the time.*

If Cindy had not been so disciplined and committed to taking control of her administration and making frequent back-ups, she would have lost a lot of hard work, data and client records, which might have put her business and reputation at terrible risk. And as life has it, such disasters always come at the worst possible timing, as Cindy confesses, she

*...could not have dealt with anything more that week. There were a lot of other smaller things going on as well, such as the domestic having issues, not performing, missing a lot of work, the lawn mower broke and due to all the added unexpected expenses of the new IT programs (other virus software that hopefully works better than the last, nearly R8, 000.00 vet bills, there is no money to buy a new mower, so have to borrow one which is also not a nice things as it is not [her] proudest moment).*

When Cindy and I started communicating, it seemed as though virtual working “*did not help her to be more flexible*” (as she comments), but it has enabled her to be more balanced and satisfied with her lifestyle and has a positive impact on her physical and psychological health. However, lately things have been really tough, and she has “*lost quite a bit of weight the last 3 weeks.*” Moreover:

*If I were not working from home, I would not have been here for my baby (her dog) when she suddenly got ill and she would have died the most horrible death on her own and I would never have forgiven myself, I am so very lucky and blessed to have been here when it happened and to have been able to get her the best medical care and at least she passed in my arms with the doctor and lots of drugs to help her. Having said all that, the above crises have led to me working very late nights the last 2 weeks which is affecting my health and nutrition. I am too tired to cook properly the last two weeks and that is not good. I have also been able to be here for my spouse during his crisis and lend support and ideas on how to overcome his crisis – in corporate I know I would not have even been present as you don't even get time to make a 5 minute personal call during the day and even less so at night as your supporting colleagues are generally in your office or boardroom finalizing tenders and projects and therefore absolutely no privacy to talk.*

If it had not been for Cindy's self-discipline, will-power, perseverance and personal motivation, she would not have been able to succeed virtually:

*Deja, my personal experience is that you cannot survive without these aforementioned qualities. They are absolutely critical. During rough patches or bad times, you have only yourself to pick yourself up off the ground and say "ok, let's try this again". And my favourite things I tell myself are "put on your big girl panties" and "it's up to me" as there is no one else to pep talk you.*

*Sadly Deja, I think a lot of folks think it is easier than it is and even more sadly find only once they have tried, that they do not have the self-discipline to make sure that certain things need to happen by certain deadlines and abuse their freedom and end up failing. I have yet to find a way for someone to assess beforehand if they could really do it: "The Grand Duke" (real name omitted, character in Cinderella story who arranged the ball for Prince charming to meet, choose and marry his princess) taught us on the SMME course a SWOT analysis of self to determine this, but a lot of people do not admit their shortcomings so the SWOT does not come out accurately.*

Cindy's strong character and dedication to make a success of her virtual business also lead her to realise she needs to work hard on herself to ensure personal and professional development to ensure success in the long run. It is evident in how she commits herself to identifying her weaknesses and continues developing through attending webinars, for example.

Cindy's hard reality of "no work, no pay" leaves her with no choice but to stand up and get it done. She has her mantras and keeps pushing herself as she knows she can do it – "I am moving forward, just very slowly, but at least I am not stopping" she says. The "no work, no pay" scenario also requires her to plan ahead for unexpected situations that might creep in, as she once experienced:

*if one gets very sick like I did in 2008 (they thought I had cancer when in fact I was allergic to antibiotics which I was receiving weekly for a stomach bug picked up in Bots[wana!]), but it was a sudden allergy that is rare and I was off literally for 2 months and most days could not get out of bed – who was there to continue my work and business – no one! Fortunately I had planned financially for such an event so I was ok, if one had not again, one would have been screwed.*

Though independent and isolated in her work, she is not alone, as she has a friend whom she admires and strives to have similar qualities. Having a friend, “*who [has] faced more drama in her life than you can imagine and has come out on top*”, also inspires Cindy to “*suck it up ... and get working,*” as she “*needs the income!*” Furthermore, Cindy’s “*belief and faith [are] completely pulling [her] through*”. She actively works on this as she writes:

*...subscribe to daily e-mail prayers that are in my box every morning. First e-mail I open for inspiration and faith, second mail of every mail is “barking mad click reminder” to click for free food for underprivileged rescued dogs, as I believe it is “1 small way of giving back daily” and I always put others first as per my faith. Even under the above circumstances, these two electronic communiqués I have been clinging to and my day is worse if I have not “handled” them by lunchtime.*

Virtualling requires a lot of independent and isolated work at times. This can be challenging to any person, and even more so to people who prefer the social interaction. Cindy describes herself as a “*social creature*” at times, but not always. She has found her own ways to get out and socialise with “*friends who also have their own little business*”. She also lives her passion for animals by getting involved with charities where she commits herself weekly to meetings or outings, and visits her “*clients from time to time to get the feel of ‘team’*” if needed.

*I know definitely Jaq and Gus (names omitted, names of Cinderella’s two mice used) ... too struggled with this in the beginning. Me personally, I came from a corporate of chaos and just savoured the peace and have never really missed the chaos at all, just my office friends and some of the banter and jokes.*

Cindy's narrative truly digs deeper into the complexity of adopting an integrated work-home persona into the core of one's daily virtual lifestyle. In view of the purity of her emotions and experiences, and the openness with which she shares her world, I cannot help but use the description "kind", but "in no way naive" (Disney Wiki, 2005), of Cinderella, the now-princess, to symbolise her.

Cindy's autonomous and determined approach to virtualising ensures that she overcomes obstacles and emerges a stronger person on the other side as she commits to continued personal and professional development – just as I imagine Cinderella would. The challenges she faced in the corporate environment are also finely weaved into her unique view of life, and reflecting back, it will keep her appreciative of life going forward. She adopted certain practices that worked for her "in corporate", such as working hours and a strict schedule, but also changed those things she did not like, such as incorporated flexibility, and commits to charities and socialises with other business owners, as opposed to only with colleagues, talking about work the whole time.

Cindy's story confirms that virtualising is hard work. She makes a conscious effort to take care of herself in every possible way, by looking after her health (dentist appointments, health check-ups, cooking healthy meals); spending time with her husband and pets ("children"); ensuring discipline in her administration, making back-ups and looking after her clients; and remembering that she also has a life and making time for charity work, hair appointments and catching up with friends. The fact is that Cindy went through a difficult time while sharing her virtualising experiences, and though this might be a once-off event, it highlights the importance of virtualisers needing to have a strong character – as mostly, virtualisers are alone in their virtual battles.

Cindy's dream of flexibility was not achieved, but she describes herself as more balanced and healthy now, than before. Balance (the "happy ending") is something we also strive for, but it needs constant work, and virtualising also remains a constant battle with the self to remain focused and keep pushing oneself to keep progressing – the reality Cindy is facing daily. Hence, I chose the title, "Cinderella, the Happy Ending, and Virtual Reality Thereafter", as title for her narrative.

### 3.3.3 Alice in Virtualland



[http://www.aceshowbiz.com/still/00004530/alice\\_in\\_wonderland17.html](http://www.aceshowbiz.com/still/00004530/alice_in_wonderland17.html)

In her heart, Alice searches for new things, excitement, learning, and enrichment of what might be explored on the virtual yellow-brick road, in an all-imagined-possible wonderland.

Alice is a collector of information and friends, building her networks and growing opportunities. Her story, in contrast to Bob's, tells of how modern technology can be used effectively to enhance virtual success. Her character has been described as curious, imaginative, and stubborn, though she likes daydreaming and exploring, as she reminds her sister, *"In my world, the books would be nothing but pictures!"* (Disney Wiki, 2005). Her story also gives insight and perspective into how virtualing can be integrated into everyday life to achieve both career and personal goals.

As Alice in Wonderland shrinks to enter Wonderland through a door's keyhole, so Alice in Virtualland minimises complications by incorporating the virtual lifestyle and capitalising on the benefits of integrating the two separate identities, and maintaining balance. Entering the keyhole (the virtual space) is like instantly entering a new world with global connectivity and the opportunity to explore and conduct business across various continents (virtual spaces).

Alice in Virtualland uses terms and phrases such as rapidly and instantly, which Alice in Wonderland experiences in the blink of an eye – she enters a whole different life once she goes through the keyhole. She also rapidly transforms in size throughout the story when

she eats a mysterious biscuit, carrot, and mushroom. The talking doorknob, flowers and animals can be related to the interactive manner in which the virtual world is constructed – the various WebPages and social sites where one can leave comments and receive feedback. As these Wonderland characters come across as bizarre and rude, Alice, confident and not afraid, warns virtualers to be careful of whom they trust in Virtualland. On the way home Alice in Wonderland got lost in Tulgey Wood – as it is easy to get distracted by the internet and everything going on in the home environment and not focus on the job requirements at hand. Wrongfully accused, Alice in Wonderland is put on trial to defend why she works virtually and is still working and earning an income, though it is not the traditional way of doing things.

Alice “works in a virtual capacity 90% of the time to manage the activities of [her] business ..., which consists of publishing a global business (digital) magazine and also as being an indie recording artist/music producer”. She describes virtualing as having “both its ups and downs”, but she regards the “flexibility and freedom to work from anywhere and connect to a global audience instantly” as very favourable and worth the challenge. This is ideal for her, as she never favoured working behind a desk or in an office continuously. Alice “needed the freedom to create a stronger work-life balance”, and perceives virtualing as providing various opportunities in this regard.

*This kind of work lifestyle isn't for everyone, as it takes more discipline and ability to work independently, as opposed to being in an office setting with your boss or other co-workers nearby where they know exactly how much work you are getting done. It is easy to goof off when you have been given the independence of working from pretty anywhere. Also, once in a while you may experience technical glitches when communicating via Skype, Google, Facebook, etc.*

As highlighted in the verbatim quote above, Alice also acknowledges that the benefits of virtualing are accompanied by unique frustrations experienced in this environment. However, she supports Bob's suggestion that a certain type of character or profile is required to work virtually, because of the great degree of freedom and independence experienced virtually. She acknowledges that discipline is needed to stay focused on

working and not “*goof off*”, especially since one does not work in close proximity with colleagues, implying lack of supervision, or “*checking up*”.

On the road to virtual freedom within Virtualland, Alice explores and uses various e-tools quite extensively on a daily basis. She “*uses Skype to organise most of [her] conference and web calls, which are free or just cost a few dollars. [She] also use[s] Facebook a lot to communicate with both potential clients and partners, Twitter for posting announcements and updates on magazine articles and new music, niche social media networks like LinkedIn groups to meet new people and grow [her] professional network, and additional online networking places.*” These modern platforms provide much opportunity for professionals to connect and share information irrespective of their physical location, or having to establish a personal face-to-face connection first. The social media environment enhances sharing and market exposure since “fans”, “followers” or “friends” are able to “like” or “share” her postings or announcements with all their “contacts”, “fans”, “followers”, or “friends”. This enables rapid exposure and as she mentioned earlier, “*connecting to a global audience instantly*”. The turn-around time of such postings is extremely rapid, and enables her to receive feedback immediately as people are very expressive on these networks.

Alice advises that “*there are several tools and networks ... not only to grow ... professional networks but also to collaborate on projects*”. She uses the example of Indaba Music whose target market is musicians who collaborate on “*music projects and find opportunities ... to gain more exposure.*” Indaba Music focuses on connecting musicians, promoting and marketing their music, getting feedback from other professionals in the industry and potentially getting new opportunities. Another similar e-platform is Sound Cloud, where artists can upload their music and listen to other artists’ productions. Alice also uses Drop Box to share larger files online via a private link. Drop Box works similarly to an “on the cloud server”, which allows users to save documents in a folder on their computer which synchronises with a folder on the internet, which is then accessible through a web-link from any computer online. Most of these web-based services or e-platforms are free to use.

Though Alice appears to be a free spirit, exploring the corners, ins and outs of the new Virtualland in which she finds herself, she does acknowledge that one should not be naive about potential risks.

*At first, Wonderland seemed like the perfect place for Alice, as it allowed her to indulge in her imaginings as well as her intense curiosity. However, Alice's quick temper and pedantic eagerness to show off her knowledge often proved to be bad qualities in Wonderland, and landed her in many precarious situations.”* (Disney Wiki, 2005).

Similarly, Alice in Virtualland is careful when deciding with whom to do virtual business, as *“anyone can get on the internet and say that they can do this or that, you have to make sure that they truly want to do business with you and that they will do what they say”*. There is obvious risk in conducting business virtually, as business partners are usually geographically spread, have not met and do not know each other personally and a trust relationship has not been established. Lengthy formalities are not really required, but just ensuring one has a basic *“written agreement and understanding of what kind of business will be conducted and what happens if the contract is broken due to the other party not making good on their promises”*. Signing, sending and receiving contracts can easily be done electronically.

Another risk Virtualland poses is that computers and the internet *“can be misused to the point where one easily loses privacy and become[s] overburdened with work”*. This can easily happen if Virtuallers overuse *“e-communication tools and expect everyone to be online and ready to do extra work past reasonable hours”* and fall victim to constant connectivity, are virtually always at work and virtually never at home. This is an important point to consider, as it will influence virtuallers' psychological success and experiences of happiness and fatigue. It is not healthy to work the whole time, even though one has constant access to work owing to the co-location of work and home and internet technology. It needs to be *“kept in mind that everyone has a ‘life’, family and friends”* and that virtualling *“is a way for us to get things done with more convenience and with more flexibility, not to overwork others or ourselves”*.

With regard to ensuring a boundary between work and home and still “having a life”, Alice also experiences the need for her family to respect her virtual working arrangements:

*If you work from home, then there has to be an understanding with your family members that you are ‘working’, so interruptions have to be kept at a minimum. Not everyone understands even the concept of working virtually. Some of your family members, who are not very educated on the growing popularity of the virtual work environment, may think that you are not ‘really’ working, but just playing with your tech gadgets.*

Establishing boundaries between one’s work responsibilities and family responsibilities, and emphasising the importance of all parties respecting the virtualer’s “other roles” and work-life balance is central to journeying successfully through Virtualland. Alternative options include using “*a virtual office separate from the home environment*”. Some companies specialise in renting out temporary offices or meeting rooms at a pay-per-use fee. They provide “*virtual offices to those who would like some of the benefits of having an office (e.g. receptionist, printing facilities, kitchens with beverages, smaller offices, meeting rooms, whiteboards, teleconferencing and equipment), but don’t want to commit to a full time office space*”.

### 3.3.4 My transforming autoethnography



<http://images2.fanpop.com/image/photos/10200000/Bumblebee-transformers-10217501-1280-800.jpg>

The Transformers film combines computer animation with live action where humans interact with alien robots who can disguise themselves by transforming into everyday machinery. The robots are “in an endless struggle for dominance or eventual peace” (Wikipedia).

Bumblebee is a fictional character from the Transformer science fiction (American) action film, released in 2007. Bumblebee is a small, yellow automatic robot (Autobot) which can alternate or transform himself into a Chevrolet Camaro. He is a cautious, but brave character, determined to prove himself to the other robots. He is rendered effectively mute, owing to a battle injury, and communicates through the use of selected playback of radio and television signals (Wikipedia). His small size, high adaptability, fuel efficiency and constant need to confirm his worth cause him to take risks, but also to go into places where his larger commanders cannot.

For me, virtual working means I have more control or flexibility over what I do, how I do it, and when I do it – taking ownership of the personas I assume and the roles I fulfil (as Bumblebee physically transforms himself to suit the current roles needed – a car or a fighting robot). This means that my role and responsibilities as a virtual worker sometimes include those of a working consultant, but also those of a homemaker and student. Virtualling gives me the opportunity to pursue my personal needs and interests, while still being able to earn an income and grow professionally. Sometimes my earnings are more, sometimes less, but my quality lifestyle is the priority and great benefit in this work-lifestyle choice.

I was introduced to this work-lifestyle when I took a contract to complete my psychometrics internship with an industrial psychologist who operated virtually. For me, it was mainly a career decision. Naively I thought I would still be operating from 08:00 to 17:00, and looked forward to basic things such as not having to dress formally every day, savings in fuel, cutting out traffic and related frustrations. Soon, I realised that structure, security and stability were relative and something of the past. I found myself working long hours and over weekends and hardly found time for my loved ones. Potential financial benefits were possible, as the more I worked and the more work I was able to take on, the more I was able to earn per contract. It became a trade-off between what I could do (competence and capacity), and what I wanted to do (my personal need to grow and learn professionally). However the “life” Alice refers to was something I thought I would get to after all of this was over; somehow the goal-post was always extended.

My situation of being at home and managing my own hours was not always respected by others; I always ended up helping friends and family with things they could not do because they were at work, and stuck with chores and things required for the household. I also battled to relax when I was out because of feeling guilty about not working, and being stressed about missing deadlines. Taking lunch and having coffee with friends later felt like a chore. When I was at home, I battled to switch off, as my work was virtually always there. If I wasn't working, I was thinking about work – whether at home, or not, as I would be “at work” as soon as I returned home. As Bumblebee strives for dominance and peace, so I struggled to be in control of my work-home situation and experience harmony in the end result.

Similar to an adolescent learning the tricks of driving, and Bumblebee learning to control his speech and his autobot functioning, I had to learn the tricks of pacing myself, setting healthy targets and achieving work-life balance. I really have a passion for what I do, and can easily work extended hours without breaks or social interaction, but I had to be careful not to burn myself out. As I soon realised, a big part of me was beginning to suffer, as I was suffocating myself by over-committing.

I had to re-evaluate my goals and priorities, and what I wanted to achieve in life, which included career goals, but more importantly more personal things such as having healthy relationships, a healthy and balanced lifestyle, and enjoying life. I made a list of everything I wanted to achieve to be more realistic and envision where I wanted to be and map out my plan of how to get there. Once I was able to view it practically for what it was, and had developed an understanding of a harmonious life (as opposed to juggling everything), I was able to acknowledge that the one dimension was not more important than the other, even though I might allocate my time differently. I accepted that though my work gave me a sense of satisfaction and is part of my identity, it was not the be-all and end-all. I also valued other personal things in life and did not want to miss out on those either. I had to recognise that I needed to work harder at “living” and adding value to the lives of people around me and to myself personally. Though balance will always remain a constant struggle or “give and take”, I now find it easier to prioritise my activities and not to overwork or over-commit to things that are not aligned to my goals. As Bumblebee physically transforms between his robot and car roles, so I had to learn, grow and develop to be more flexible and to cut out work distractions while spending time with significant others.

Though Bumblebee’s transformation and ultimate role fulfilment were not initially optimal, in being determined to prove himself, he learned how to control his autobot functionality and took risks in the process. Partly, that is what this research journey entailed for me - realising that certain tasks and decisions in virtualising may not be easy, and definitely not consistent, but ensuring that I was spending my resources on the right things and focusing on what was most significant in the longer term – being more effective and efficient strategically. Reflecting back, it sounds quite rational, easy and do-able. However, on a

personal level I still often find it challenging and draining constantly to motivate myself to deliver high-quality work, especially being at home with its own distractions.

Virtualling requires a lot of dedication and discipline from me – to drag myself to my office diligently, start working and focus on what is important. I have to beware not to be distracted when researching something, not to get side-tracked to read and look at other things that are more interesting to me. That happens quite often, especially since there is always something around the house I would like to do. As Bumblebee often went through extremes fighting for the human race, so I had to transform into a fighting robot in order to achieve my goals of being in control and experiencing harmony.

Virtualling has also challenged me to develop certain soft traits; otherwise I would never have been successful in this way. I find constant positive self-talk and motivation are needed, as well as endurance to keep trying despite facing challenges. This is often challenging in not having a nearby colleague for encouragement or quick support when I am stuck. I find that at times I also battle to manage the full end-to-end business responsibilities effectively. General management of a virtual business requires sufficient financial acumen to deal with my personal finances, taxation, managing income and all expenditure related to my virtual business. I also need to have confidence in giving clients quotations, not to be embarrassed about asking for payment, and being thorough when considering what projects might cost. I also need to do sales and networking, ensure delivery and stakeholder engagement, and deal with all the administration. Many of these things I don't consider strengths of mine.

In my opinion and experience, Virtuallers should be dedicated and have the perseverance to follow through in tasks; be able to motivate themselves personally to succeed; have sufficient self-management skills, and be action- and results-oriented in order to start working and completing tasks. Furthermore, as virtualling requires independent work activities, they need to be able to work alone and in isolation for prolonged periods of time. These basic things may be overlooked when exploring virtual working, but this may result in a less favourable or successful situation.

As a virtualler, I often find I need to explain what I do, how I do it, and justify that I am actually working and earning money as a “working adult”, although I am home-based. I get varied reactions when I present the concept to others, but mainly the confusion that one can work in such a way and still achieve results, or earn an income – when at home. It is discouraging at times, as I personally feel virtualing is very demanding because of all the possible distractions and things “going on” around me which I am drawn to, even though I have to work. I think virtualing may even be more demanding, as I am directly dependent on myself for every little bit of income generated, as opposed to having a stable 08:00 to 17:00 job and earning a salary at the end of the month, whether one takes lunch, leave, or not.

I think my working hours and responsibilities were more respected by friends and peers when I was still in traditional employment. My employers were also not afraid to take advantage of my willingness to take on more work responsibilities or work longer hours. It is interesting that I now mostly experience the opposite as a virtualler. Contractors and colleagues respect my personal/family time more. E-mail communication as opposed to telephonic interruptions also makes it a more favourable situation, as I can choose when or how to respond. Family and friends however do not have the same courtesy when it comes to my work or schedule. In the traditional work environments I was exposed to, I found it difficult to say “no” to my superiors or colleagues, and now I am challenged to do it with my family and friends.

Developing assertiveness was part of my journey. I had to learn to say no to family and friends, and also to say “no” to myself and delay that lunch date until I had completed my work tasks in order to benefit in the long term. I also had to learn to manage my time and priorities in such a way as to achieve the more balanced lifestyle I was striving for.

Today, I view virtualing as an integrated lifestyle. I regard work, family and general wellbeing as important to pursue this lifestyle. That includes healthy eating and regular exercise, which make me feel better (physically, emotionally and in terms of my self-confidence), and enable me to focus better on my work, and not become fatigued as easily. The better I look after myself in one dimension, the better I perform in the other. Sometimes when I need a break I would rather go for an afternoon gym session. Working

towards a better lifestyle increases my responsibility to ensure I manage my time and schedule optimally. As my kitchen is within close range, I am able to prepare fresh and healthy food and snacks throughout the day. Furthermore, I can spend quality time at home, which is more relaxing, friendly, and ergonomically more suitable as opposed to spending time in traffic, an unhealthy workplace and non-value-adding socialising with colleagues. As I also relocated to Zambia at the end of 2009, I am still, and even more so, able to operate virtually. Apart from the occasional technological crises, I am able to operate effectively with stakeholders in South Africa, America, India and Australia, as time during working hours is my own. My home office can be the most productive place for me to work and operate effectively under high pressure. It is spacious and comfortable, naturally lighted, especially welcoming with the early morning sun shining through the big window. It is cosy with a very comfortable office chair, large desk, many cupboards and book-case space, and a couch for guests and atmosphere. My desk, though not always the most tidy, has a nice size LCD-monitor, wireless keyboard and mouse, printer, a reading light and air conditioner for hot days. I have in a way arranged my physical environment and household to accommodate my working arrangements, and vice versa. I feel I am therefore able to focus on my work for prolonged periods of time, without much interference, and be productive most of the time.

However the situation is not always optimal. I do experience days or even weeks when my work motivation and productivity are low, as I assume both other virtualers and traditional workers also do. This happens especially during less stimulating assignments, when preparing for a holiday or returning from a long holiday, or when I am overloaded and not certain where to start and what to leave. As I am my own boss and can dictate my schedule as I wish, it is relatively easy to always find something else more interesting to do than, for example, to finish this research project. Sometimes I still battle to start doing the less enjoyable activities that I still need to do to earn an income. I have to work hard at motivating myself to get back into a working routine and focus on achieving targets and doing things that are less interesting and enjoyable. Setting easy milestones and rewards help, but as I am the one doing the allocations, decisions, and rewarding, it is not always as effective. I therefore regard personal dedication, discipline and motivation as critical for virtual success.

As over the past five years I have come to appreciate virtualising as part of my lifestyle, it ultimately is also part of my identity. I feel it provides me with a window of possibilities to explore in my daily life, as I am able to incorporate and pursue other ambitions, such as scrapbooking, my housewife role, photography, and travelling into my virtual portfolio. Not all of these activities necessarily bring me income, but I suppose they can if I choose or need them to be profitable. My transformation in how I view my virtualising symbolises growth towards achieving goals of dominance, being in control of my life, and finding inner peace, similar to those pursued by Bumblebee.

The flexibility provided by this type of set-up enables me to go on a “working holiday” and take long weekends without losing out on income generation when travelling long hours. I can also work from my laptop anywhere in the world over Wi-Fi or use an internet café with a flash drive to transfer and e-mail files. This enables me to travel with my partner for his business without losing too many work hours or having to put in leave. Smartphones, laptops, internet, Wi-Fi, Skype, tablets and other technological advancements make it possible to work from literally anywhere. Internet and communication technology enables me to work from the Victoria Falls, a cottage on Mozambique’s beach, or on the riverbanks overlooking the Zambezi. I find this ideal, as it helps to customise my work arrangements around my personal and lifestyle needs. Bumblebee too had to learn how to use electronic media for expression, so I make use of those available to me to deliver my work effectively and conveniently.

Often contracts also require me to work on clients’ premises on a more full-time basis. Though I enjoy the office interaction and sense of collaboration, these are undoubtedly more ineffective, inefficient and unproductive hours spent working. It always takes a while to settle and to start working, and I find most traditional office environments very distracting and noisy. My capacity and work hours are then also consumed by casual conversations and meetings. Some work environments are very structured, with a lot of politics and red tape, which I find unproductive and draining.

I also found that getting up, dressing, eating, and leaving home every morning at the same time just to sit in traffic, be in meetings and conversations the whole day and arriving home only after the peak traffic hour very frustrating. I suppose it frustrated me more because I

am used to living something closer to ideal in my “normal” life. I experience the structure, routine and culture in a way limiting my independent, proactive, and creative nature.

I am much more appreciative of my virtual arrangement after my previous two full-time contracts as I can definitely say that I am much more productive at home. However, sometimes one needs to engage with others, brainstorm and have meetings to get a decision or information in order to proceed, which is acceptable if it is not the only thing one does the whole day. I mostly find e-meetings to be more constructive, as they are focused to achieve a certain goal and drive an agenda, and then end. Personal or physical meetings are often railroaded with irrelevant questions and suggestions or sharing of personal experiences and frustrations. Virtually, one can e-mail less important questions or share more detailed information via e-mail, but not in a meeting forum where others are “present”.

The transition from traditional working arrangements to virtualing requires some getting used to. I had to cope with making sense from nothing, finding structure in chaos, and learning how to be my own boss and administrator. I think virtualing is ideal for me, as it promotes my uniqueness and entrepreneurial spirit. I am not sure I would be so free and healthy returning to a traditional working environment.

In conclusion, I experience working in the virtual work environment as an avenue with many possible side-paths – each filled with new opportunities. Mostly, I value the opportunity to succeed in what I set out to achieve in life. This enables the integration and involvedness of my total being - mind, body, and soul. Though more independent in my decisions and actions, I am extremely dependent on myself to maintain focus and work hard, since all the activities I incorporate into my virtual portfolio ultimately become part of my lifestyle and my identity. I choose it and create it. This is me, and this is my story – I am a virtualer, striving to build my virtual portfolio by integrating my “living life” and “earning a living”.

My autoethnography indicates transformation from a traditional office worker to a virtualer, albeit initially a virtualer who struggled with making virtualing effective and successful and battled to achieve the career and personal goals set out. Being of small size and feeling insignificant to the outer world, I had to transform into a strong character, fighting for

dominance, control, and a voice to prove to colleagues, friends, and herself that I was a competent and effective virtualler and person. I used e-media for communication, expression, and networking, taking risks in the process of pursuing goals. My autoethnography indicates my transformation into a virtualler with a healthier, more balanced, integrated lifestyle and experiences of inner peace and harmony with what I do, why, and how. Adopting something of Bumblebee's character enabled me to "go places" on my virtual journey, where other, often bigger, robots cannot.

### **3.4 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

The purpose of this chapter was to present the four key virtual narratives in the form of case studies. This introduced the four key participants, their unique situation and views that support the notion of uniqueness, as well as some similarities in experiences. The rationale for using narratives as well as fictional characters was also explained, along with a personal reflection on the general experiences. Each narrative gave insight on a different dimension of virtualing and the different factors virtuallers consider as important or struggle with, as well as highlighted some similarities. The next chapter will focus on these similarities by identifying key themes across the various cases and data sets gathered.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **THEMATIC RESULTS: VIRTUALLING AND THE VIRTUALLER**

#### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter presents the study's findings in themes and meaning units as an outcome of the phenomenological analysis. The themes and meaning units presented here aim to bring structure and coherence to the data and portray the essence of virtual experiences (Wertz, 2011). VRPs verbatim quotations and current literature are used to support arguments where needed. VRPs are referred to as VRP1-17 for confidentiality. However the 4 VRPs introduced in Chapter 3 will be referred to by their character names. They were originally VRP1 (Bob), VRP5 (Cindy), VRP14 (Alice), and VRP16 (Bumblebee).

The two key themes discussed in this chapter are experiences relating to virtualing, and those concerning the virtualer. Virtualing refers to factors in the virtual work context that influence working and operating virtually. Virtualer refers to virtual workers' personal experiences, individual requirements and the implications of virtualing. The multidimensional nature of experiences is evident in the multiple meanings, bidirectional relationships and some degree of overlap between themes and meaning units as they exist in the context Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) and Shaw (2010) regard as evident of a phenomenological study. Some light will be shed on the integrated nature of the virtual context, or phrased differently, virtualers while virtualing.

#### **4.2 VIRTUALLING**

##### **4.2.1 Physical co-location of work and home**

VRPs mainly conduct virtualing from their home environment, where they have a study or separate location for their office. Virtualing therefore implies the physical co-location of the work and home dimensions. They make use of various forms of technology to conduct virtual work and for online collaboration. Both benefits and challenges have been reported.

Considering the benefits, Virtualisers described themselves as “more relaxed” (VRP12), as their home environment is “friendly” (VP3). Factors adding to this preference include not being exposed to traffic, traffic stress, office politics, colds and flu in the office environment and eliminating socialisation time with colleagues and pointless meetings (VRP4, VRP9, VRP12, VRP17, Bumblebee, Cindy). Other benefits mentioned were flexibility, working in comfortable clothes, being in control of one’s schedule, enjoying healthier meals, a healthier, more balanced lifestyle, and having more time and energy to invest in personally meaningful activities (VRP4, VRP7, VRP9, VRP12, VRP17, Bumblebee, Cindy). Increased productivity results, as time and energy can be channelled where they add most value. Increased productivity resulting from virtualising has also been stated by Cascio (2000) and anticipated by Marvis and Hall (1994). Decreased travelling time and lower associated costs and stress for virtualisers have also been highlighted by others (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Hloma & Ortlepp, 2006).

Virtualising enables virtualisers to develop their own work schedules and ethic, as opposed to working overtime to “impress” others, or just because it is expected (VRP3). Work schedules are more flexible and suited to their natural tendencies of when they are more able to concentrate on work tasks. This also implies avoiding interruptions that would occur in the normal office environment (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). Flexibility in ones schedule enables them to spend the required time with children and family at times when it adds value (Bob, VRP2). Research supports that quality time with family may have a positive spill-over to work and promote well-being and work-life balance (Allis & O’Driscoll, 2008; Stevens *et al.*, 2007). Virtualisers also report increased flexibility, better work-life balance (Hill *et al.*, 1996), a better quality of life or lifestyle and lowered stress levels (Hloma & Ortlepp, 2006). Increased flexibility has also been shown to be positively related to work-life balance and to buffer negative effects from work overload, negative spill-over and stress resulting from not meeting family needs and a tight schedule (Golden, 2006; Hill *et al.*, 2001).

The absence of the related stress caused by factors such as a rigid schedule, traffic and other factors mentioned above may enable virtualisers to be psychologically more present in their work and not be distracted by getting their emotions in an unnecessary flux. Cindy

however mentioned that the type of stress experienced is different and requires different coping mechanisms and skills.

The physically co-located work and home environment also has challenging implications for virtualising. VRPs mainly report the family and home environment to be distracting in general. Work and home dimensions each place unique demands on VRPs. This poses challenges due to the possible contradiction in behavioural requirements in the different disciplines (VRP3). This is supported by Tietze (2002) who highlights potential conflict in the different discourses of work and home. Tietze (2002) argues that home represents love, and work symbolises profit, hence they require different behavioural patterns and norms.

Another highlighted challenge is the demanding nature of the family and home. VRPs state that the family, children, and other household activities require a certain degree of participation and immediate attention, which leaves work activities pending (VRP2, VRP3, VRP15). This is evident in the statement by VRP15 below:

*It is distracting to be at home in general. Work stops whenever the kids need something or something at home needs to be done, that takes over ... my children distract me from being a productive virtual worker.*

The co-location of “work” and “home” may therefore result in conflict. De Klerk and Mostert (2010) note that work-family conflict often occurs as participation in one’s work role is complicated by one’s participation in the family role, and vice versa. This is made more difficult in that virtualising implies constant connectivity and virtually always being at work, and not always being psychologically present in the home environment. Challenges invariably exist in managing the boundary between “working” and “being at home”. VRPs adopt various coping strategies to help segment work and home. Strategies include having a dedicated office space separate from the household activities to distance oneself from the distractions at home (VRP4); working towards explicit goals and according to a task list (VRP2, VRP17); good habits, disciplined scheduling and maintaining a regular schedule (VRP11). Other strategies adopted by VRPs are having an understanding with family members on interruptions (Alice) and visitors (VRP4), maintaining a regular schedule or weekly routine (VRP11, Cindy, Bumblebee), or dressing formally for work (VRP4). Bailey

and Kurland (2002) state that interruptions in the home environment are important factors in determining whether virtualising will be successful.

Tietze (2002) recommends that virtualisers negotiate and develop coping strategies with their family to accommodate the co-location of work and home. Such strategies are also supported by Lee and Steele (2009), as they state that to implement boundaries consciously facilitates keeping work and personal goals and activities separate. Whitehead and Kotze (2003) agree that proactive strategies such as planning and structuring one's week upfront are critical for balance. This is furthermore supported by Tietze, Musson and Scurry (2006), who found virtualisers to adapt quickly to the work-home co-location, and that spatial adjustments helped virtualisers to fulfil their work responsibilities. The increasing preference to operate virtually from a mobile or boundaryless office is in agreement with a publication by the General Services Administration (GSA 1995:11,12, in Hoffmann *et al.*, 2004:7), which states that changing social values and increased preference for a flexible lifestyle and improved family relationships are some of the key driving forces of virtualising.

#### **4.2.2 Boundarylessness in the mobile and virtual office**

Virtualising implies that work is done independently, across geographical boundaries, by using various electronic technologies. Though VRPs state that virtualising is mainly conducted in their home environment, they also work from other physical spaces such as hotel or business lounges, client sites or coffee shops. Virtual or electronic spaces used include cloud computing, electronic servers and e-network platforms. This implies that virtualising can be done physically or virtually from anywhere with modern and portable technology at a convenient time (Hill *et al.*, 2001). This is often referred to as the mobile or virtual office, as experienced and described by VRP17 below.

*A virtual office advantage is that your office doesn't need to exist in one single physical location ... A virtual office is a combination of the work that one or more individuals do in their home offices, as well as the telephone and web interaction with others in different locations.*

VRPs conduct their work mainly online, as they make extensive use of internet and mobile technology. Technology enables VRPs to conduct various work activities and offer diverse services virtually. Virtuallers who participated in the study stated that they provided IT support and development, consulting, training, recruitment, business development, publishing and music production. However factors such as the type of work and clients, interdependence of activities and need for support and infrastructure may influence the practicality or workability of virtualling (VRP3). Business opportunities are also created in that virtuallers have unique needs for services, products and career paths. Those identified by VRPs include improving electronic communication (VRP3) and online time reporting tools (VRP11). This is supported by Hoffmann (2002) who states that technology is changing how business is conducted and thus increasing the use of the virtual office in all professions. Mogale and Sutherland (2010) agree that service-related businesses are increasingly being conducted virtually, as they are not limited to physical boundaries. , Mockaitis and Butler (2012) state that virtuallers and virtual work teams work towards goals across physical boundaries. Mobile technology has furthermore been said to increase the boundaryless nature of conducting work (Marvis & Hall, 1994). These arguments attribute physical mobility to the virtual office and support the boundaryless nature of the virtual office.

The boundaryless nature of the virtual office is mirrored in this study in that VRPs were based in different countries and reported conducting business over international borders. VRP11 is based in the United States and his colleague in the Philippines. Bumblebee is based in Zambia and her clients in South Africa. Locations of other VRPs include India, Portugal, Monaco and different parts of South Africa.

#### **4.2.3 Virtual relationships and networks**

Though mobile technology is the main tool for virtualling, VRPs have also described it as impersonal, not always optimal and often associated with misunderstandings. VRP9 describes her experiences of the impact of e-communication tools.

*Yes we have so many different methods to communicate such as with instant messenger, telephonically or via email, but this can't ever replace the face to face*

*communication present within an office. Being a virtual worker you are unable to read body language, unable to see whether someone is having a rough day or is just very busy. These visible signals would usually indicate the method to approach a topic, or the way you interpret the message they are communicating to you.*

Misunderstanding messages is further complicated by virtualers often working with team members they do not know personally (have not met before) or with whom they do not have relationships. Kumar and Makarova (2008) make the comment that it is not easy to intervene publicly and electronic intervention, such as over e-mail, is complicated. Comments in an e-mail can easily be understood as abrupt or rude. No prescribed work methods or communication patterns exist for virtualing (Luthans, 2008), making it ever more challenging. Geographically dispersed virtual teams furthermore face challenges of potential cultural misunderstanding, not knowing each other, and time differences. However, methods can be incorporated and used to ensure all parties understand the communication and agree to requirements.

*I have been working with folks around the world too ... a colleague in the Philippines. I am in the U.S. There is about a 12 hour time difference ... The way we accommodate this is by scheduling our meetings to always be at about 8:00 (PM my time and AM their time). We meet via Skype and to minimise cultural/subjective meaning, every meeting is documented and immediately distributed to participants for correction/edits. It helps that this is a friend I work with and not simply a contractor relationship, but you are correct to understand how important effective communication is. I think having effective habits and consistent processes are how to manage that. (VRP11)*

Another challenge in building virtual networks is to ensure effective and constant communication and sharing of information, and proper feedback on performance and requirements. The importance thereof is also affirmed by Hoffmann *et al.* (2004) and Van Der Merwe (2007). VRPs regard the key to effective virtual relations to be frequent communication (VRP2), not over-committing oneself, and being honest about what one does and how one does it (VRP10). The work-related implications of ineffective communication of virtualing are clarified by VRP2 below.

*One of the big challenges ... you don't always get the rundown of what is going on at a client. If the team does not communicate constantly you run into great challenges if one of the team members bails out and does not answer calls or reply to emails. In a normal office environment you would be able to share information so much easier. The risk of not knowing what is going on would be lessened to a large extent.*

Trust is therefore central for virtual team success (Kirkman *et al.*, 2002). Kirkman *et al.*, (2002) concluded that trust is built virtually through consistent and reliable performance and feedback or communication. Misrepresentation of virtualers or colleagues may also be a possible risk, as Alice warns: *"anyone can get on the internet and say they do this or that"*. However, precautions to avoid risk may be necessary, and a simple agreement or contract can be put in place to protect oneself (Alice). The challenge of building relationships, trust, and effective communication in a virtual setting in view of physical, cultural and language barriers, has also been stated by others (Ebrahim *et al.*, 2009; Hyrkkänen *et al.*, 2007; Mogale & Sutherland, 2010). This is regarded as a central challenge for virtualing.

#### **4.2.4 E-resourcing and control**

Competent contractors or virtualers can be sourced electronically for specific contractual needs, irrespective of geographical location or full-time availability (e-resourcing). VRPs state the benefits of e-resourcing to include more compatible teams, a larger sourcing base (not limited to physical location), as well as the opportunity to utilise time zone differences, as stated in VRP11's comment below. This is supported by Van Der Merwe (2007) and Arthur *et al.* (2005) who refer to virtualers' transferrable competencies not being limited to time, space or organisation. This provides the opportunity to deliver higher-quality services by sourcing the right combination of skills and experience and to enhance team functioning, as well as optimal use of time differences.

*...Advantages can be many including the opportunity of more compatible teams (co-workers) when not limited by geographic concerns, staggering schedules can make productivity more efficient (i.e. developers can be finishing concepts during my*

*downtime to be available upon return)...colleague in the Philippines. I am in the U.S. there is about 12 hour time difference... (VRP11)*

E-resourcing also provides the opportunity for e-meetings to be arranged instantly, making quick response time and feedback possible. Modern technology enables more visually impactful messages (VRP8) and instant communication provides immediate feedback (Alice, VRP17). Hoffmann (2002) states that such virtual networks facilitate bringing people together electronically.

*...other benefit I did not anticipate prior involves reaction time. Online meetings can be pulled together much quicker. No one needs to allow for travel time, or getting physically dressed up, they just need to allow the time needed. A soft benefit, but more important than you might expect. (VRP11)*

E-platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter can be used to source data or as a marketing tool, by obtaining “likes” and “comments”. However, connecting to a global audience instantly requires virtualers to be responsible, controlled and disciplined in using the internet and not to overuse virtual tools and lose control of their own privacy and what they share (Alice, Bumblebee). Kumar and Makarova (2008) present the viewpoint that mobile phones are increasingly blurring the boundaries of what is private and what is public. In effect, people are sharing messages about their private behaviour, attitudes and emotions publicly in virtual space. VRP3 commented on the feeling of loss of privacy experienced:

*...the electronic facilities available for business purposes, has in fact added work load to such an extent that privacy becomes compromised. It therefore also means that the manager of the company, if applicable, must also exercise caution not to misuse 24/7 availability due to their work holistic nature.*

The use of modern technology and the perception of the benefits are not shared by all VRPs. Some regard technology and the efforts required for e-networking to be too time-consuming or restricting their privacy (Bob, VRP3). E-networking and e-exposure can be

overwhelming and easily result in misuse and rob one of work-life balance and privacy, as supported by Kumar and Makarova (2008).

VRPs furthermore make use of electronic data storage and file-sharing websites such as i-Cloud, Open Office, DropBox and other virtual spaces (Alice, VRP17). Though this is extremely convenient and documents can be accessed from any computer or location, making use of e-hosting also requires good security and protection from unauthorised access. The risk of unauthorised access to documents, electronic data security and mobile security are areas of concern and require improvement (see Lee, Lee, & Kim, 2013; and Yu, Wen, & Yan, 2012). Making back-ups to protect oneself from viruses, data loss or computer problems is critical to minimise risks involved in losing data (Cindy, VRP3).

Reliable technology (hardware and software) and a proper internet connection are required to access and use e-tools effectively and to operate virtually (Alice, Bumblebee, VRP12). Hoffmann (2004) refers to various forms of hardware and customisable software that can be used to enhance virtual effectiveness and communication. Regardless of the way in which the benefits of e-tools are documented, it is important to manage and control them appropriately. These findings support an article by Lee, Park, and Moon (2013), claiming that the most appropriate hardware and software need to be used or developed to ensure effective mobile operations. They also state that virtualisers should be trained and skilled in using the technology to ensure mobile office performance (Lee *et al.*, 2013).

### **4.3 VIRTUALLER**

#### **4.3.1 Role integration**

Role integration entails flexible or blurred boundaries between work and non-work activities and treating the different domains, work and non-work, as related or interrelated (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Lee & Steele, 2009). Role integration assists to minimise role conflict (Lee & Steele, 2009) and facilitates work-life balance, as virtualisers can invest equal time, energy and other resources in their different roles (Veiga, 2009). Virtualisers experience a degree of role integration due to the physical work-home co-location or integration (as explored in Section 4.2.1). As virtualisers are independent contractors, they

can use their flexibility to schedule their daily activities at their convenience and preference. VRP17 state that her flexibility gives her freedom to conduct her work with less stress, as it aligns to her lifestyle. This is different from traditional employment, where employees have fixed working hours and less flexibility and often have to schedule personal duties around their work responsibilities.

*Certainly freedom is the first word you hear, it is true that you are your own boss and that you organise your work less stressful, but at the end you must have the required results ... Virtual office workers are usually judged on what they produce rather than the time they actually spend producing it. You can set your schedules around your natural rhythms and lifestyle but you need to be motivated to focus! (VRP17)*

Virtualling offers the opportunity to decide one's priorities subjectively and where one chooses to invest time, energy and focus (VRP7). The merging or integration of roles and identities provides the opportunity to make virtualling a lifestyle decision by adopting a portfolio which they choose, design and adopt (Alice, Bumblebee, VRP8). A virtual portfolio can therefore include work-related and personal activities and priorities. The resulting virtual lifestyle enables virtualisers to work towards personal preferences and passions, and what VRP17 refers to as "natural rhythms". A successful virtualiser is therefore able to integrate the various demands of the integrated work and home environment and derive a sense of personal satisfaction from balancing diverse roles. This supports Marvis and Hall's (1994) argument that profiles in the new world of work entail integration of various activities and roles, including those of parent, employee and spouse. VRP8 explains how she takes advantage of the virtual situation and refers to her virtual portfolio to "what keeps her busy" as opposed to talking about her job or work, as would happen in a traditional context.

*I was a teacher (in a previous life) and now have 4 (four) kids of my own that I need to be available/flexible for so have had to work very hard at not being employed and tied down to someone else's schedule. I do bookkeeping for my husband's company as well as for a baby sanctuary that we founded six (6) years ago. In March I will add a writing job to the portfolio of what keeps me busy.*

Integrating one's work and personal identities by assuming a virtual lifestyle enables virtualers to adopt a holistic approach to working and dealing constructively with their personal preferences because of the integration of roles, identities and priorities. Adopting a virtual lifestyle inherently implies integrating work and home demands, but also considering what is of personal significance to oneself. This supports Tietze *et al.*'s (2006) findings that home-based workers are more effective at integrating their "work" and "life" roles, and that virtualing results in them being more involved with their domestic lives. This is built on in a study by Lee and Steele (2009) who report that acknowledgement of the non-work (family) dimension may be positively related to individual productivity. Marvis and Hall (1994) furthermore regard role integration and pursuing subjective goals as essential for boundarylessness, which has been shown to be associated with virtual working.

Role integration can however be challenging (Franks, Schurink, & Fourie, 2006). The blurring of role boundaries may cause confusion as to which role is assumed in the present, and hence increased inter-role interference or spill-over may result (Ashforth *et al.*, 2000; De Klerk & Mostert, 2010). Role conflict would also be more prominent if virtualers are not effective in managing the competing demands of work and home (Franks *et al.*, 2006).

Role integration challenges for virtualers typically entail focusing on work while daily household activities proceed and children need constant attention. Virtualing invariably has a bearing on virtualer's ability to invest the necessary time and energy in their home environment. This may be a potential source of role conflict; Franks *et al.* (2006) state that individuals do not have unlimited time, energy and emotional commitment to invest equally in all roles. VRPs reported it to be challenging (VRP2) and refer to having the right mindset (VRP12), "*getting your mind sorted*" (Bob), having psychological boundaries (Bumblebee) and overcoming the psychological block of being at work though being at home (Bob). Statements describing the related challenges as "*they (the family) don't always understand that even though you are home it does not mean you are available to them*" (VRP2); and "*it is hard to differentiate between the free time and the office time since work is always there virtually or physically*" (VRP17).

Ashforth *et al.* (2000) describe how flexible role boundaries can result in more frequent and unpredictable cross-role interruptions. The mental challenge for virtualers to switch between “work” and “home” is continuous and may be complicated by modern mobile technology, Smartphone’s and the associated perpetual connectivity, which we have seen can easily intrude on personal life and privacy. The outcome is potentially that virtualers may not always appear to be physically or psychologically present to family even when they need to be (Bumblebee), and let personal matters influence them while they are working. This supports what Ashforth *et al.* (2000) explained: that highly integrated roles often cause the integrity of the home or work domain to be compromised.

Ashforth *et al.* (2000) further state that there is a continuous challenge when roles are integrated, as found with virtualers, to create and maintain boundaries to minimise confusion and interruptions in order to achieve goals and maintain focus in a specific role, task, or domain. The current study results support this opinion in that VRPs adopt different physical strategies to create and maintain boundaries; some mention dressing formally for work, or having the office in a different location, whereas others reiterate personal competencies and attributes, such as personal motivation and dedication to making a difference. This supports findings by Ashforth *et al.* (2000) and Mirchandani (1998) that creating and maintaining role boundaries are a challenge for integrated roles and individuals defend their temporal or spatial boundaries in various ways. Virtualers report a constant battle to defend the boundary or perception that they are “working”, as others perceive the home environment not to be conducive to working (Alice, Bob, Bumblebee).

#### **4.3.2 Psychological mobility and boundarylessness**

The physical mobility and boundaryless nature of virtualing have been discussed in Section 4.2.2. However the physical and psychological dimensions, especially as they relate to one’s career, are interdependent (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). Both physical and psychological mobility are required for boundarylessness. Physical mobility considers the actual transition across boundaries (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006) and is evident in how virtualers work for different organisations, in different locations, and possibly across countries (Banai & Harry, 2004). This is furthermore relevant to virtualing, since virtualers are not limited to time or space to conduct their work effectively. Psychological mobility indicates the subjective side

of job mobility (Lazarova & Taylor, 2009), as it refers to individuals' perceptions of their own ability to make transitions between different jobs, professions or careers (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006; Vansteenkiste, Verbruggen, & Sels, 2013). Psychological mobility also refers to the subjective career goals individuals pursue in striving for personal achievement and meaning, which are often based on personal values or non-traditional ambitions (Stoltz, 2013; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006).

Psychological mobility and a boundaryless mindset refer to an enthusiastic attitude to initiating and sustaining active work-related relationships across different organisational and career boundaries (Verbruggen, 2012). It implies individuals who work for more than one employer or contractor, possibly across countries, and are proactive in adapting to environmental changes (Banai & Harry, 2004; Bird, 1994). This requires virtual services and businesses to grow and take advantage of new opportunities in different countries and industries, as well as identify the opportunities that exist in virtualising as well. VRPs demonstrated similar characteristics as those associated with psychological mobility and also anticipated by Hoffmann (2002) and Mogale and Sutherland (2010). This is evident in the findings; VRP8 adds new activities, roles and income opportunities to her virtual profile, which entails different functional areas (bookkeeping and writing); VRP11 is taking advantage of serving the virtual community with electronic time and activity reporting tools; and Alice produces electronic magazines for 'virtual' clients. VRP13 continuously researches virtual teams and publishes books on the topic to improve virtual managerial effectiveness. For other VRPs psychological mobility is demonstrated in expressing the need for increased flexibility, convenience and freedom in what they do and how they do it (Alice, Bumblebee, VRP2, VRP15, VRP17).

These virtual tools and explorations help to remove more possible barriers and to support functioning in the geographically dispersed, technologically driven world of virtual working. VRP3 identifies that improving electronic communication through various systems is in fact another opportunity yet to be explored. The virtual office is therefore in fact boundaryless in that business is physically mobile (Vansteenkiste *et al.*, 2013) and conducted from virtually anywhere, convenient to those conducting virtualising, and also provides opportunities for those who are proactive in exploring new ventures. However data also represents VRPs as

psychologically mobile in that VRPs explore various career opportunities and are self-directed in taking control of their careers (Vansteenkiste *et al.*, 2013).

Bob states that he has been doing “it” for so long that he does not foresee himself working differently. This may relate to the often limiting factors of psychological mobility; Vansteenkiste *et al.* (2013) found that psychologically mobile individuals may experience more constraints in the employment process. This is supported by Verbruggen (2012) who found that lower job and career satisfaction may result from a boundaryless mindset. It can be assumed that psychologically mobile individuals have other career ambitions that may leave them unfulfilled, but also undecided as to how to achieve their personal goals.

The need to be more boundaryless and adopt a more flexible lifestyle may drive many virtualisers in choosing virtualising as an alternative work method. Virtualisers can plan their schedules according to personal needs, which may include work-related activities resulting in financial income, and include activities associated with the household and family, as well as incorporate “other” activities related to personal interest or pleasure, for example exercising, socialising, hobbies, and getting one’s nails done. This is supported by Marvis and Hall (1994) who state that the boundaryless career entails different activities, of which some may not be income-generating. This may potentially also be a more satisfactory work alternative to virtualisers, as incorporating family activities and viewing their virtual portfolio or lifestyle in a more holistic manner has been stated to have a positive impact on work-life balance and overall satisfaction in various roles (Potgieter & Barnard, 2010). Literature shows that virtualising results in positive job satisfaction, productivity, job enrichment, balance, decreased stress, more flexibility and a healthier lifestyle (Baard & Thomas, 2010; Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Hloma & Ortlepp, 2006). Possibly reviewing life goals and aligning them to the virtual lifestyle may promote a sense of results orientation and alignment of energy investment to personally meaningful activities, which has been indicated as important for virtual success (Van Der Merwe, 2007; Whitehead & Kotze, 2003). Virtual success can hence be interpreted as virtualisers’ subjective career goal, which Verbruggen (2012) regards as an individualistic and personal orientation towards one’s career.

### 4.3.3 The virtual mindset

VRPs describe their virtual role as personally demanding. This refers to challenges to balance and integrate work-home responsibilities (VRP2), their virtual success being directly dependent on their inputs (Cindy) and working with constant flexibility, which also implies lack of structure and uncertainty (Bob, VRP2), as coping with loneliness and isolation (VRP10, VRP15) and having the right mindset (Bob, VRP12) and specific personal traits to succeed virtually. Others have also referred to the specific competencies or job traits required for virtualers to be successful (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Golden, 2006; Hloma & Ortlepp, 2006; Hoffmann *et al.*, 2004; Kirkman *et al.*, 2002; Stoltz *et al.*, 2013; Wang & Haggerty, 2009). The specific mindset dimensions for virtualers as identified in this study include flexibility and adaptability, self-discipline and motivation, emotional stability and lifelong learning orientation. Each of these virtual mindset dimensions will now be discussed.

#### ***i. Flexibility and adaptability***

VRPs share appreciation for the flexibility and freedom provided by virtualing, however they admit to the challenge experienced in coping with continuous change, lack of structure and lack of stability. The world of work has increasingly been said to change drastically in light of globalisation and technological advances and it has been said that individuals need to adapt accordingly to remain competitive and employable (Anderson *et al.*, 2006; Stoltz *et al.*, 2013; Wang & Haggerty, 2009). Resulting changes and requirements for individuals necessitate them to develop their career adaptability competence and to adapt continuously to the new work environment (Stoltz *et al.*, 2013). Briscoe and Hall (2006) support this in stating that adaptability and flexibility assist individuals to profile their career direction, potential and success. Golden (2006) agrees, saying that virtualers need to be skilled at using their flexibility to cope with increasing job demands and work exhaustion. Being flexible and adaptable, and making effective use of flexibility in the virtual context can in fact be said to support virtual career success.

Virtuallers, like small organisations and other virtual enterprises, can make optimal use of flexibility to optimise efficiency, operate cost-effectively and ensure adaptability and quick response to market changes or unique customer needs (Xie, 2012). Flexibility enables them to cope with change and uncertainty, varied customer expectations, alternating processes, delivery, internal capabilities and/or sources (Xie, 2012). Flexible virtuallers may be more responsive to changes in client and market requirements, account for change and uncertainty in a comprehensible manner and be prepared so as to not to be caught unprepared and by surprise. Flexibility can be viewed as a behavioural advantage and key strength of small (virtual) operations to enable alignment to external requirements (Xie, 2012).

Personal adaptability entails a willingness to explore, tolerance of uncertainty, coping with change (McArdle *et al.*, 2007) and willingness to change one's behaviour in response to environmental changes (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2003). It includes a sense of optimism, openness to learning, internal locus of control, being flexible and generalised self-efficacy (Fugate *et al.*, 2003; McArdle *et al.*, 2007). Personal adaptability has been shown to be positively related to emotional stability and customer performance (Echchakoui, 2013; Neff *et al.*, 2011). Personally adaptable individuals also proactively engage in setting goals and working to achieve psychological success (Hall & Chandler, 2005). The positive outcomes of adaptability are identified as important criteria to support virtual success.

Flexibility and adaptability may be important characteristics for virtuallers. However, as with other individual attributes, people differ with regard to their flexibility and adaptability orientation. Flexibility and adaptability have been identified as important for virtual team member success (Kirkman *et al.*, 2002), as well as virtual team management (Colfax, Santos, & Diego, 2009). Increased adaptability may also facilitate coping and buffer stress during times of change and uncertainty (Stoltz *et al.*, 2013). This is aligned to Wang and Haggerty's (2009) recommendation on virtual competence, in that they state that it would facilitate coping, communication and proactive behaviour in unfamiliar situations. As flexibility can be used skilfully for coping and buffering stressful demands (Golden, 2006), virtuallers can possibly also use it to control their work pace, which has been identified as an important criterium for virtuallers by Bailey and Kurland (2002).

## **ii. Self-discipline and motivation**

Virtuallers can be viewed as self-employed entrepreneurs and flexible contract workers who work from their home offices (Hoffmann *et al.*, 2004), hence they are solely responsible for their own virtual success. Being motivated and self-disciplined are therefore identified as critical for virtuallers to be proactive and make a success of virtualing. This aligns to Hloma and Ortlepp's (2006) presentation of important virtual competencies: self-discipline, self-sufficiency, high locus of control and time management.

Self-discipline is required for virtuallers to manage their work activities and schedules, and to perform the required duties, as virtuallers are often measured according to their outcomes and deliverables as opposed to their time (VRP17). Some VRP statements highlighting the need for self-discipline and motivation are the following: "*A person definitely needs to be very self-motivating and disciplined*" (VRP10); "*need to motivate yourself continuously*" (Bumblebee); "*You need to be disciplined to work every day when required*" (VRP4); "*discipline and strictness to maintain your goals*" (VRP17); "*most single trait required for success is discipline*" (Bob). Discipline also refers to managing the impact of the virtual work arrangement with regard to the home and family (VRP3); the no-work-no-pay (Bob, Cindy, VRP10) situation and working in isolation at times (VRP10).

In a concluding e-discussion, when Cindy was asked about her views on the requirements of self-discipline, will-power, perseverance and personal motivation, she replied:

*...my personal experience is that you cannot survive without these aforementioned qualities. They are absolutely critical. During rough patches or bad times, you have only yourself to pick yourself up off the ground ... as there is no one else to pep talk you.*

This is supported in Tietze *et al.*'s (2006) statement that virtuallers need to be self-sufficient and not dependent on colleagues for support or advice. This is critical, as virtuallers do not have social support from office colleagues or family or friends who can relate to virtualing and the challenges experienced. Bailey and Kurland (2002) agree that personal discipline

is critical for virtualising, and also state that individuals should have little need for face-to-face contact, but they do not link it to motivation to perform.

Motivation refers to internal and external factors that encourage action by influencing choice, effort and persistence (Locke & Latham, 2004). Motivated virtualisers will therefore acquire the required skills and abilities and use and apply them appropriately to improve performance (Locke & Latham, 2004). Quintela (2005) furthermore found that if individuals are motivated to achieve specific yet challenging work-related goals, they will not only perform well on the specific task, but also be motivated to perform well in other subsequent, distinct tasks (home-related activities), often referred to as motivational spill-over. Considering motivation and spill-over theory, it can be said that it is important for virtualisers to be motivated to achieve challenging goals virtually. This is supported by Van Der Merwe (2007) who identifies being focused on achieving goals as a key characteristic required for virtual workers. Motivation to learn has specifically been shown to have a positive impact on actual learning outcomes (Klein, Noe, & Wang, 2006). This confirms that a positive relationship exists between motivation, goal-setting, work-related outcomes, and performance (Quintela, 2005).

Self-discipline and motivation as a requirement for virtual success is aligned to Wang and Haggerty's (2009) proposal of virtual self-efficacy. They state that virtual self-efficacy refers to virtualisers' self-belief or motivation, which has a positive influence on their willingness to persist and undertake certain behaviour and actions in order to improve virtual communication or virtualising and overcome difficult situations.

### ***iii. Emotional stability and maturity***

Emotional stability refers to a positive attitude and the ability to remain calm, resilient when set-backs and negative emotions occur, even-tempered, in control of one's emotions, tolerant of stress, well-adjusted, self-confident, and able to cope with uncertainty (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Eychakoui, 2013; Rothmann & Coetzer, 2003; Neff *et al.*, 2011). Emotional maturity has been said to refer to emotional stability, social adaptability, self-confidence and independence, and is positively related to coping and adjusting to new environments (Sharma, 2012). Emotional stability and maturity are therefore identified as

critical for virtualers in that these characteristics will enable them to manage situations in a more mature and professional manner and facilitate coping in the virtual context. Unique virtual challenges, which may require virtualers to draw on their emotional stability and maturity, entail coping with loneliness and isolation (VRP9, VRP15), not having colleagues or social support (Cindy, VRP12), motivating oneself and continuing to believe in their abilities though set-backs happen (VRP2) and applying or learning different coping mechanisms to manage different stressors (Cindy, VRP10) amongs others. Others have also reported virtual challenges in coping with social isolation and stated that ideally virtualers should not have a high need for interpersonal contact (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Hloma & Ortlepp, 2006; Van Der Merwe, 2007).

Emotional stability and maturity have been identified as important for virtualers, as these qualities will provide them with the required self-regulatory skills to withstand stress, adjust to continuous changes and cope with challenging virtual demands. VRP9 supports this in stating the following:

*Feelings of isolation ... Need to be positive. It is so easy to fall into a negative slump when no one is around to boost you ... A person needs to be innovative in the sense that you need to be able to find your own workarounds for issues experienced that office employees might not be able to relate to.*

The urgent need for some form of emotional, interpersonal or social competence for virtual success has been noted by various other researchers. Mogale and Sutherland (2010) state that social-emotional capabilities are central for effective virtual team leadership; Kirkman *et al.* (2002) identify the need for virtualers to have a combination of technical and interpersonal skills for virtual success and Hloma and Ortlepp (2006) specifically name the ability to work independently, maturity, having an internal locus of control and a low need for interpersonal contact as important to cope virtually. Wang and Haggerty (2009) describe virtual social skills as one of three important competencies for effective virtualing. They explain that communication etiquette in virtual settings is different to traditional situations, and that virtual social skills enable virtualers to adjust their approaches accordingly to improve virtual communication, relationship building and coping in the virtual setting.

The importance and benefit of emotional stability for virtualisers are further supported in that emotional stability have been shown to relate positively to performance (Halim *et al.*, 2011). Positive relationships have also been shown between emotional intelligence, which entails emotional competence, emotional maturity and emotional sensitivity, and performance (Mishra & Mohapatra, 2010). Emotional stability along with self-leadership, which is defined as the ability to motivate and control one's own thoughts and behaviours (Mahembe, Engelbrecht, & De Kock, 2013), have been shown to help individuals recover from setbacks sooner and with more ease (Boss & Sims, 2008). This serves to support VRP3's recommendation that if organisations want to move towards virtualising, they should start with their senior personnel first, as they are more experienced, but also more mature.

#### ***iv. Continuous lifelong learning***

Continuous learning refers to the process of acquiring knowledge, skills, and abilities throughout one's day, life and career, in response to changes in client and market requirements (Schreuder & Coetzee, 2006). Continuous learning is increasingly becoming a requirement in today's global work environment (Stoltz *et al.*, 2013) and has also been identified as a source of competitiveness and economic growth (The World Bank, 2010). Learning is part of the modern world, as continuous technological advances are increasingly changing the way we do things and the e-tools we use in the process. Lifelong learning enables individuals to grow continuously and adapt to market changes and hence become more adaptable (Stoltz *et al.*, 2013). Likewise, lifelong learning is important for virtualisers, as they need to be proactive to adapt to modern changes and demands to remain competitive.

Staying abreast of changes is not viewed as a limitation by some virtualisers (Alice, Cindy, Bumblebee). However, others (VRP2, VRP12, VRP15) highlighted disappointments or challenges in networking, missing idea generation and office stimulation, and experiencing limits in career progression and plateauing. Though not directly related to continuous learning, it does imply challenges for lifelong learning in the virtual context. Though learning and development can be facilitated by internet resources and investing time in upskilling oneself, traditional career progression and climbing the corporate ladder may not be ideally suitable in the virtualising context. This is supported by Kurland and Egan's (1999)

finding that telecommuting entails fewer opportunities for interaction, learning by doing, brainstorming or asking others job-related questions.

Considering the virtual context and virtualers' dependence on self, it is regarded as important that a proactive approach be followed in acquiring new knowledge and skills and broadening opportunities. One has to keep challenging oneself in order not to stagnate and get bored, as VRP12 experienced. VRP2 explicitly states that she uses business breakfasts and other networking opportunities in this regard. Bob explains that though he has not studied formally after starting virtualing, he learns daily while virtualing. Virtualers furthermore learn by using the internet in reading articles, attending webinars, participating in discussion groups on LinkedIn and personally challenging themselves through setting development goals. This is evident in Cindy's narrative below.

*Keeping up with the market and up-skilling is not that difficult to do with the internet and today's technology. I regularly attend "webinars" for my industry and subscribe to a lot of related newsletters, blogs ... wonderful newsletters I get monthly is from a personal coaching company for entrepreneurs ... these publications are more about addressing and even identifying weaknesses one never gave thought of before and I guess it just lets you know that you are not alone in your challenges.*

The importance of lifelong learning for virtualers has also been highlighted by Van Der Merwe (2007), who specifically highlights that the continuous learning of people, communication and effective collaboration and technology skills are important to increase business results. Ebrahim *et al.* (2009) support the notion that virtualers and virtual teams can effectively use technology and e-collaboration to engage with experts, and gain and share knowledge instantly. They agree that this can result in a more productive and innovative situation, possibly with better and quicker results. Considering that virtual social skills and media or technological skills can be learned (Wang & Haggerty, 2009) and that virtual team members with extensive virtual team experience have positive experiences of knowledge sharing and cross-team learning (Mogale, 2009), it can be concluded that daily virtual operations are aligned to lifelong learning requirements. This is supported in that virtualers are continuously learning new ways of working, working with others, using new

technology, being open to experience and how to be effective and successful virtually (Webster & Staples, 2006).

#### **4.4 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter aimed to report the data and key meaning units as they relate to experiences of the phenomenon, as shared by VRPs in their e-narratives during e-communication. The two interrelated themes discussed entail virtualising and virtualiser. Findings were supported by VRPs' statements and other literature findings. It is evident from this chapter that the practical arrangement of virtualising influences virtualisers, and hence virtualisers require a specific mindset and traits to support virtual career success. The next chapter (Chapter 5) aims to make sense of the two themes discussed in presenting the psychological structure of the meaning units in the context of current career literature. Hence, I now move from reporting on the data to building theory.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE ENCHANTED JOURNEY FROM CO-LOCATION AND INTEGRATION TO IDENTIFICATION AND DISCOVERY

#### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter synthesises the themes of *virtualling* and *virtualler* in reflecting on theory and data and charting a way to construct a work identity of “*virtualness*”. This chapter thus moves from reporting on the results to theory building. In figure 5.1 below I provide a visual representation of how virtualness can be illustrated with the main themes that emerged from the data analysis.

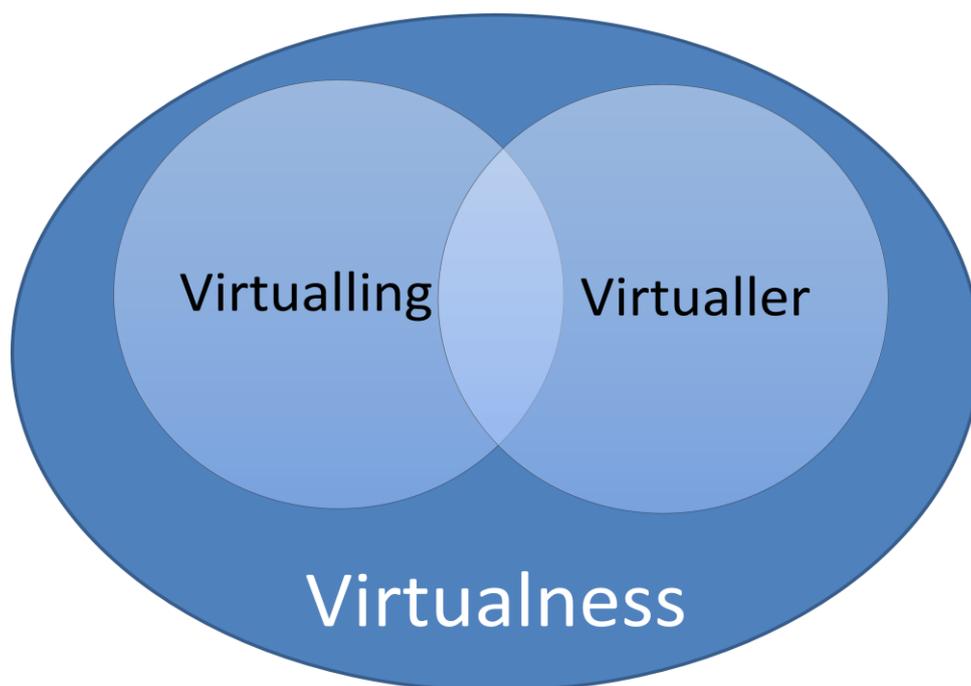


Figure 5.1: Interdependence of Global Themes

From figure 5.1 it is evident that virtuallers engage with virtual working activities (virtualling) in order to form a virtual lifestyle and virtual work identity. It is proposed that virtualling and the virtualler are interrelated, as the physical and psychological implications of the virtual context are integrated. The virtualler influences, and is influenced by, virtualling and the virtual context, and thus has an impact on creating and experiencing virtualness. This implies that virtualling influences the virtualler as well in his/her experiences of virtualness. The perception of virtualness, in turn, influences virtuallers' experiences and how they

conduct virtualling – both their perceptions of self, and the activities conducted on a daily basis during business operations. The bi-directional relationships and multiple meanings underlying experiences as presented in the psychological structure of the phenomenon align to the essence of phenomenology.

This chapter presents the re-integration of meaning units into a holistic and comprehensive picture of the phenomenon, virtualness. Virtualness is proposed to be constructed by the integration, merging and oneness of the unique work activities defined as virtualling, into a coherent whole, or work-based identity. This identity consists of the unique experiences of virtualers in their integrated work-home environment. The phenomenon presented of the integrated identity is referred to as *virtualness*. *Virtualness* exists in the integration of one's personal and professional roles, priorities, behaviours, identities and lifestyle. The hypothesis I present here is that virtualling is an ongoing lifestyle design process where virtualers are continuously striving for boundaryless employability in order to achieve authentic psychological identification as crafted by the uniqueness of virtual experiences.

Virtualness refers to the work identity of being a virtualer. This sense of being a virtualer entails crystallising one's authentic virtual experiences and requires identification with the virtual lifestyle and in the process continuously designing and shaping of the virtual self. It is suggested that the process of creating a virtual work identity is continually evolving as virtualers integrate virtualling into their daily lifestyle and authentically identify with the virtual culture and incorporate it into their self-concepts and personal identities. As virtualling is conducted "all over the show" (at home, on the cloud, and in the head), so virtualers are in the process of continuously designing their virtual lifestyle and identity in striving to find inner balance, identifying with what they are busy with and creating boundaryless opportunities for themselves. This implies merging to a developed frame of mind, one which cannot exist within one job, one company, or one country – virtualers' employability is forever being stretched and challenged, and they in turn are demanding similar progress and development in the market.

This chapter will present the virtualness hypothesis based on current market conditions, related literature, reflections and data analysis from this research journey. The specific concepts incorporated to conclude on virtualness include discussions on boundarylessness,

employability, psychological (career) success, and (career) identity. Before elaborating on each of these emerging concepts, the current employment situation, which led to the changes in the market and career, deserves elaboration.

### **5.1.1 The current employment situation**

The career context, psychological contract, and employment world as we once knew it are rapidly changing in the face of technological advancements, globalisation and unstable market conditions (Anderson *et al.*, 2006; Arthur *et al.*, 2005; Hall & Harrington, 2004; Hoffmann, 2002; Kayworth & Leidner, 2002; Kerr-Philips & Thomas, 2009; Kleynhans, 2006; Marvis & Hall, 1994; Lewis *et al.*, 2001; Luthans, 2008; Mogale & Sutherland, 2010; Viviers *et al.*, 2006). The employment market is forever in flux owing to these factors, resulting in a decline of career opportunities in traditional organisations (Briscoe, Hall, & DeMuth, 2006). Climbing the corporate ladder and job security as these were once known are no longer applicable in today's volatile and unstable conditions (Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003). The work environment is increasingly becoming more turbulent and volatile, requiring organisations and workers to be increasingly flexible and boundaryless and to develop constantly to stay competitive and abreast of changes (Anderson *et al.*, 2006; Hall & Harrington, 2004; Lewis *et al.*, 2001; Marvis & Hall, 1994; Stoltz *et al.*, 2013).

Consequently the employment context, career environment and social preferences are rapidly changing (Inkson, 2006) and change the way individuals view their careers, their career-related decisions and the career paths they follow. Modern career path decisions may entail consideration of subjective career goals such as the personal life stage, family status and work/life priorities (Crowley-Henry, 2007). The changing nature of careers has also been emphasised in career literature (Chudzikowski, 2012; Verbruggen, 2012). Individuals are largely tasked to take ownership of their careers, become more adaptable and resilient, adapt a boundaryless mindset and embark on lifelong learning in order to improve their employability (Stoltz *et al.*, 2013). This is also applicable in the virtual environment. The themes and sub-themes that will be discussed in this section align to how virtualisers are impacted by modern career changes with specific reference to the boundaryless and employability mindset required for virtualness. This impacts how the

virtual lifestyle is continuously shaped and designed in order to achieve authentic psychological identification and a coherent virtual career identity.

## **5.2 BOUNDARYLESSNESS**

Virtualness implies boundarylessness in how one views the virtual career and lifestyle; and being open to alternative ways of working and adopting a more holistic approach to one's career and lifestyle. Boundarylessness is important for virtual success in that it promotes a strong sense of identity which facilitates authentic identification with the virtual lifestyle.

### **5.2.1 The boundaryless mindset**

The boundaryless mindset refers to an identity that is characterised by independence of employer or organisation, being proactive in taking ownership and control of one's career, and exchanging competencies for remuneration across organisations, jobs or countries (Banai & Harry, 2004). The boundaryless mindset is therefore said to entail both physical mobility and psychological mobility or boundarylessness (Arthur *et al.*, 2005; De Bruin & Buchner, 2010; Briscoe *et al.*, 2006). Physical mobility represents career changes, which can be observed or measured (Chudzikowski, 2012) in that individuals move between and within organisations towards tangible or objective career goals (Sullivan, 2011; Verbruggen, 2012). Physical mobility, as explored in section 4.2, is evident in the virtual context in that virtualising entails working in different physical spaces and virtual spaces, often contracting for different employers, geographical locations and across borders. Referring to the virtual office as the mobile office further mirrors its physical boundaryless nature.

Psychological boundarylessness refers to individual attitudes to crossing different boundaries (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006) and identifying different and suitable career opportunities to pursue (Vansteenkiste *et al.*, 2013). Hence it implies a mindset of openness towards pursuing different work options, including non-traditional and new ways of working and career development (Marvis & Hall, 1994; Sullivan, 2011). Briscoe *et al.* (2006) describe the experiences of psychological boundarylessness as a comfortable, enthusiastic, preference for building and sustaining relationships and networks and pursuing career opportunities outside the traditional organisational structure. Virtualisers'

psychological mobility was explored and clarified in Section 4.3, with specific reference to role-blurring and integration of the work-home roles, and being flexible in exploring various career opportunities. This is supported by the conclusion that virtualising implies a more holistic orientation to one's career and lifestyle and working towards subjective goals by incorporating personally meaningful activities into the virtual portfolio.

*Boundarylessness* refers to the mindset, keenness and proactive approach to being boundaryless. The “ness”-suffix extends, broadens, and exemplifies the quality, state, or outcome (www.dictionary.com) of *boundaryless*. *Boundarylessness* depicts the core of the boundaryless mindset as deepened, entrenched into the value system and embodied into the individual who truly lives or acts out a *boundaryless* mindset. It can be referred to as a mindset without limits, similar to what virtualness offers, experiencing boundarylessness in its purest form, entrenched into one's value system, and potentially integrating it with one's identity. This will advance spontaneous decisions and further promote boundarylessness, resulting in a spiral of broadened thinking. The term boundarylessness describes the essence of virtualising. It entails moving seamlessly across different boundaries (Marvis & Hall, 1994), as if by second nature. This entails a pro-mobility mindset, working across physical and psychological boundaries without distress and is a natural occurrence in the everyday life of the virtualiser, interpreted as freedom by some VRPs. Being boundaryless and crossing boundaries can therefore be viewed as the art of virtualising, as virtualising is a non-traditional work method that requires openness to explore career opportunities outside and across various boundaries and comfort zones.

### **5.2.2 Boundarylessness competency requirements**

Not everyone can adopt a boundaryless mindset or pursue a boundaryless career (Briscoe *et al.*, 2006; Eby *et al.*, 2003; Marvis & Hall, 1994; Savickas *et al.*, 2009; Sullivan, 2011). Certain types of individuals and competencies are required for boundarylessness. Competencies required for a boundaryless mindset include self-directedness or pro-active boundary crossing, knowing why (using one's identity and personal values to motivate career direction), and knowing how and knowing who, also referred to as human and social capital (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Eby *et al.*, 2003; Inkson, 2006).

Self-directedness is a personal attribute (Potgieter, 2012) that refers to individuals' personal needs and preferences to accept responsibility for their own learning and career progress (De Bruin & De Bruin, 2011) and to adapt continuously and cope with the multitude of transitions in their working lives (Savickas *et al.*, 2009). It requires adaptability and flexibility, self-designing one's development (De Bruin & Buchner, 2010; Marvis & Hall, 1994) and has been shown to be positively related to intrinsic motivation, mobility and employability (Sullivan, 2011). It serves as a personal resource to support coping with career changes, progress, subjective success (Coetzee & Esterhuizen, 2010) and securing and maintaining employment (Potgieter, 2012).

*Knowing why* refers to an individual's identity, values, proactive personality, openness to experience, and having the necessary self-awareness, motivation and willingness to develop and try new things (Eby *et al.*, 2003; McArdle *et al.*, 2007). *Knowing who* refers to individuals' social capital as developed through networking and professional relationships (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994). *Knowing how* refers to human capital such as varied knowledge, skills and attributes, being open to continuous learning and proactive in seeking new development opportunities (Eby *et al.*, 2003). These competencies have been shown to predict career success, perceived internal marketability and perceived external marketability, which are related to a boundaryless mindset (Eby *et al.*, 2003).

### **5.2.3 Crafting virtual boundarylessness**

Virtualling implies operating across different physical and psychological boundaries, and hence this study has identified that virtualisers require the right mindset to ensure virtual success. Individuals with a boundaryless mindset are not only in control of their careers, but also proactively seek opportunities to improve their competencies continuously (Banai & Harry, 2004). They are adaptable and draw on their strong sense of identity and internal values to shape their career direction and success (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Their definition of success is internally or subjectively defined and may include the desire for challenge, work-life balance, and being authentic in their self-concept (Sullivan, 2011).

The boundaryless mindset therefore aligns to what has been assembled in the narratives and presented in previous chapters. Virtualisers thrive on flexibility and freedom and use these to incorporate personally satisfying activities into their virtual portfolio, as well as to pursue goals such as work-life balance and a healthier lifestyle. Already in 1994, Marvis and Hall presented the notion of work and non-work overlap and that people will look after their family and personal needs in order to obtain psychological success and balance, even if it means they need to work from home or take time off from work. Though virtualisers enjoy mobility by changing and choosing who they work for or what assignments or contracts they engage in (Briscoe *et al.*, 2006), they are not free from the necessity to earn an income, make a living (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2003), and provide for their families and retirement. Virtualisers admit to being solely responsible for their virtual success in ensuring continuous development, working towards goals and implementing strategies to achieve these goals, as defined by the notion of self-directedness.

Increased mobility as experienced in virtualising will furthermore stimulate further growth and challenge career perceptions and the personal significance these hold (Sullivan, 2011). This challenges virtualisers to engage in introspection and define their self-concept and identity, which will guide career and related decisions (Sullivan, 2011). Virtualisers are required to improve their competencies increasingly and engage proactively in seeking career opportunities. Boundarylessness has been identified as part of one's identity (Banai & Harry, 2004). I therefore argue that boundarylessness is a prerequisite for virtual success. Virtualness requires a proactive orientation to overcome physical and psychological boundaries in the process of seeking and creating new opportunities, globally. This is furthermore critical to cope with the daily transitions and uncertainty and improving marketability and employability in order ultimately to pursue more personally meaningful goals. The essence and implications of virtual boundarylessness are liberating and imply a sense of freedom from rigid rules and structures, something virtualisers value in their everyday lives. Boundarylessness is therefore argued to be central to virtualisers' world views, self-concept and identity, as this will enable authentically living the implied principles and values. Considering the benefits, it is not surprising that boundarylessness has been shown to have a positive impact on career mobility, employability and career success (Chudzikowski, 2012).

### **5.3 EMPLOYABILITY**

Employability relates to virtualness in that it promotes virtualers to proactively develop their competencies, to effectively adjust to changing demands, and integrate feedback into one's identity to further promote authentic identification with virtualness.

#### **5.3.1 Employability orientation**

Employability refers to possessing the required competencies, qualities and key skills and being capable and able to progress in the workplace, secure future employment and ensure career mobility (Lees, 2002). It exists separate from one's employment status, implying that one can be employable irrespective of paid (McArdle *et al.*, 2007), full-time, part-time or self-employment, making it appropriate to the virtual context, and is influenced by job and career-related experience and changes and how individuals cope with such change (Van Dam, 2004; Van Emmerik *et al.*, 2012; Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2009). Employability can be viewed as the outcome of continuous learning processes. Employability refers to an individual's ability to get and maintain employment and it is important for virtualers to be employable, as it refers to their ability to trade their competence or employability in return for income.

Employability orientation is an attitude or mindset associated with increased flexibility and adaptability, openness and initiative, proactively engaging in development activities, and changing one's behaviour in order to learn or improve one's competence or employability (Van Dam, 2004). People with an employability orientation engage to learn about market opportunities and skill requirements and proactively adapt and develop to improve themselves to enhance their future career opportunities (Fugate *et al.*, 2003). Hence it is positively related to career development potential and is a good indicator of performance (Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2009). It serves as a resource to facilitate adjustment and coping during times of change (Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2009), as it enhances coping efficacy, since individuals are more skilled and confident in interacting with the market for personal gain, and more adaptable to recognise and use opportunities (Burger, Crous, & Roodt, 2012; Fugate *et al.*, 2003).

The key competencies associated with employability, personal adaptability, career identity and human and social capital, have been proved to determine employability (Fugate *et al.*, 2003; Inkson, 2006; McArdle *et al.*, 2007). Personal adaptability comprises a boundaryless mindset and proactive personality; career identity includes career self-efficacy and identity awareness; human capital refers to competencies and social capital refers to networking and social support (Fugate *et al.*, 2003; McArdle *et al.*, 2007). The building blocks for employability therefore align to those for boundarylessness and are defined in Section 5.2.2. The only criteria not elaborated on are career identity; however boundarylessness has been said to be part of a persons' identity. A career identity is a dynamic construct based on a person's self-perception of his/her experiences, personal meanings, work expectations, role centrality, job involvement and organisational identification (Bothma & Roodt, 2012; De Braine & Roodt, 2011). Identity is crystallised through transition in one's career, growing and experiencing new things, progressing through work-related challenges, and clarifying life roles (Gal & Kjærgaard, 2009; Saayman & Crafford, 2011). Hence a strong career identity is important to steer career-related decisions, identifying and pursuing goals and opportunities (McArdle *et al.*, 2007). (Career identity as it relates to virtualising will be explored in more detail later in this chapter.)

Employability and each of its dimensions independently and coherently facilitate adaptive work behaviour and assist individuals in identifying and realising career opportunities (Fugate *et al.*, 2003). Highly employable individuals are therefore said to have high self-esteem, be comfortable with uncertainty and more adaptable in novel situations (McArdle *et al.*, 2007). Employability and employability orientation are thus identified as critical for virtualisers to support coping, development and success.

### **5.3.2 Striving towards virtual employability**

Employability in the virtual context is evident in virtualisers' employer-independent human capital, which is accumulated across time and boundaries (Van Der Merwe, 2007) and in that virtualising promotes employability in the continuous learning that is associated with virtual environment and continuous change and adjustment requirements. Employability, boundarylessness and career success are also shown to be related (Arthur *et al.*, 2005) and important for virtual success. Accumulation of experience, knowledge and

competencies has been shown to be characteristic of boundarylessness (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994) as well as optimised by technology in the virtual environment (Bird, 1994). The accumulation of experience, knowledge and competencies are in fact also defined by what is meant by the term employability.

An employability orientation will assist virtualisers to develop themselves and acquire the required competencies and experience to respond effectively and flexibly to fast-changing market demands. Being highly employable will further assist virtualisers to face the changes and uncertainty experienced in the virtual work environment comfortably and enable them to be more adaptable to changing circumstances and still proceed to explore career opportunities without self-doubt. Self-doubt may have a negative impact on virtualisers' performance if they are not mentally strong enough to cope with the increased uncertainty and fluctuating demands. This is the case especially since employability promotes mental well-being and cognitive, behavioural and affective adjustment that are affected by unemployment or work-related changes (Fugate *et al.*, 2003; McArdle *et al.*, 2007).

Virtualisers who are highly employable will appraise the meaning of events, integrate the feedback they receive aligned to their personal goals and identity and formulate specific coping strategies accordingly (Fugate *et al.*, 2003). As Fugate *et al.*, (2003) state, they will not feel threatened by job loss, career transitions, instability, uncertainty, or the normal contractual start and ending, but will rather proactively grasp these as opportunities to realise goals. Highly employable virtualisers are expected to be proactive in reducing uncertainty by seeking career alternatives, pursuing wider variety opportunities, and/or changing and adapting their own thoughts and behaviours in order to optimise situational outcomes (Fugate *et al.*, 2003). Adaptable and employable virtualisers will react proactively to immediate needs in the home environment, as well as work-related demands, and react accordingly to get the desired results, or achieve specific goals.

Being adaptable and flexible are key personal characteristics of VRPs identified as critical for succeeding in the virtual work environment, as discussed in Chapter 4. Considering the literature on personal adaptability, one could assume that virtualisers who possess personal adaptability will be willing to adjust to the fluctuating demands of the integrated work and home environment, and proactively engage in finding solutions to overcome small setbacks

in the home environment, with regard to their work or career, as well as embark on continuous learning initiatives in order to ensure they are better off after set-backs and remain marketable and employable in order to pursue such a career. One VRP specifically referred to the need to be creative in managing oneself and dealing with specific situations. Adaptable virtualisers will be proactive in, and able to change their own thoughts, approaches, behaviours, schedules and skill sets in order to react according to immediate needs to get the desired results or achieve specific goals to enhance virtual success.

I argue that employability is critical for virtualisers, as the specific behavioural attributes related to it aligns to virtualisers' requirements as described in Section 4.2.3, as well as what has been deemed important for a boundaryless mindset, as described in Section 5.2. It is therefore proposed that virtualisers should be orientated towards boundaryless employability – improving their abilities across career boundaries in order to seek international opportunities and serve clients in different areas across borders. Virtualisers seeking *boundaryless employability* will be proactive in working to achieve such goals. They will ground their career self-efficacy and career identity on personal introspection, self-awareness and motivation, as opposed to relying on a single employer or organisation as reference (McArdle *et al.*, 2007; Sullivan, 2011). They also use personal goals, various life roles and experiences as point of reference, as these provide a more personal, but more stable alternative or guide. Introspection in searching for these deep-rooted answers increases self-awareness as well as identity awareness. They will constantly adapt and develop new competencies, and learn how to cope with the multitude of transitions in their work and everyday lives (Savickas *et al.*, 2009). This is the case especially since these changes and challenges are expected to increase in light of modern economic activity. I argue that boundaryless employability is a strategic mindset towards long-term security, building competence and outperforming competitors (on a global scale). It is only through adopting such a mindset and incorporating it into one's identity that one can truly live out *boundaryless employability* – as required for virtual success.

The virtual profile for such a career orientation would include the various personal attributes mentioned, but it will also include personal preferences and importance for one's personal, home and family life –skills and knowledge as well as “other” preferences. Development of

or in any of one's life roles or activities might in the long term add value to one's profile and employability.

## **5.4 VIRTUAL SUCCESS**

Virtualling presents a non-traditional alternative to the office environment characterised by a physical office space, working hours and behavioural norms, amongst others. This document explained experiences relating to the virtual context with frequent reference to the traditional work context. It cannot be assumed that measures of career success relevant to the traditional employment context would apply to virtualling. Career success measures are defined as the goal or outcomes of career-related activities, events or experiences (Arthur *et al.*, 2005). Career outcomes can be differentiated as objective and subjective. Objective measures of career success entail external, tangible and measurable factors of achievement, such as financial and occupational status, and are often based on a social comparison or a shared interpretation of the outcome or measure (Arthur *et al.*, 2005; De Bruin & Buchner, 2010). Individuals working towards such objective or material rewards typically view work as a job, a means to an end, and hence derive little satisfaction from their work-related activities (Van Zyl, Deacon, & Rothman, 2010). It is therefore argued that objective measures of success may not be most appropriate in measuring virtual success. However, the interdependence and bi-directional influence of objective and subjective success (Sullivan & Arthur, 2009) are acknowledged. This section focuses specifically on the subjective career measures as they are relevant to and accommodated by the virtual context.

### **5.4.1 Virtual success: a subjective perspective**

Career success measures relevant to the virtual context can be referred to as personally defined, psychological or subjective measures of career success. Pursuing subjective success implies psychological meaningfulness and that one derives meaning from one's work-related activities (Van Zyl *et al.*, 2010). It emphasises psychological attributes, subjective work experiences, career satisfaction, life satisfaction, happiness in the workplace and general happiness in life (Coetzee, Bergh, & Schreuder, 2010; Van Dam, 2004). Marvis and Hall (1994) state that subjective success is found in one's life work,

which stretches over jobs, organisations and personal roles. This mirrors career satisfaction in that personal goals and values can be regarded as valuable activities to be pursued as part of a working portfolio and have a positive impact on general life satisfaction and happiness (Coetzee *et al.*, 2010; Dries, Pepermans, & Carlier, 2008). Such an integrated working portfolio is pursued in the virtual context. Virtuallers' portfolios and daily activities have been shown to include personal, work-related and other meaningful activities. Career goals in the subjective, boundaryless, and virtual career can therefore entail anything personally meaningful. This motivates that the virtual profile encompasses one's life work. Investment in living out subjective goals in the virtual profile can in fact align to the notions of boundarylessness and entail improving employability as it aligns to progressing towards achievement of psychologically meaningful activities defined by personal measures of subjective success. Subjective measures of success in the virtual context can include access to learning, the importance of time, the importance of work, time with family, personal time (Arthur *et al.*, 2005; De Bruin & Buchner, 2010), work-life balance and a healthier lifestyle. Perceived career satisfaction and perceived marketability may also serve as criteria for career success (Eby *et al.*, 2003).

#### **5.4.2 Defining virtual success criteria**

Virtuallers' personal career goals and subjective meanings are created and shaped as they engage in their work, career and other life goals and move between assignments (Savickas, 2010). Savickas (2010) states that a career carries meaning throughout one's life course, over a series of positions, activities and progressive milestones, and is therefore unique to each individual. As virtuallers and their careers grow and progress in stages, their personal experiences comprehensively build meaning in their lives and careers (Savickas, 2010). It can therefore be argued that virtuallers create meaning in their everyday lives by engaging in personally meaningful activities encompassing their virtual profile, containing both work and non-work activities, and growing in the process and stages, which in turn increases their sense of psychological success. This aligns to Hall and Chandler's (2005) proposal that the subjective career provides a sense of purpose or internal motivation, not driven by extrinsic rewards, and hence relates positively to subjective career measures such as job satisfaction, self-awareness, adaptability, learning and other individual-level factors.

Virtuallers should embark on introspection and self-assessment to clarify what activities are personally meaningful to them, and what criteria or measures will signify their personal experiences of career satisfaction and success. It is important that the newly formed measures of subjective career success resemble virtuallers' personal career aspirations and ambitions, as well as the different values they place on each (Arthur *et al.*, 2005). Marvis and Hall (1994) state that this will also ensure that their future career decisions and aspirations are grounded on personal values, identity and subjective career ambitions (Marvis & Hall, 1994). It is recommended that virtuallers also identify goals that will increase their employability and be proactive at pursuing those goals. Such subjective definitions, factors and goals are more realistic, feasible and aligned to the virtual context. The virtual lifestyle is about working towards these subjective and personal goals that are unique to each virtualer, and are not easily achievable in the traditional working context.

## **5.5 INTEGRATING IDENTITY**

Identity is an over-arching mental reflection of oneself and refers to one's self-understanding and self-perceived values, beliefs, attributes, self-concept, life and work roles, and accumulated experiences (Bothma & Roodt, 2012; De Braine & Roodt, 2011). One's identity is continuously defined and re-defined in interaction with the environment, different contexts, other people and various life experiences (Adams & Crafford, 2012; Gal & Kjærgaard, 2009; Lloyd, Roodt, & Odendaal, 2011). In this section I first explain the career identity dynamic, and then explain how the virtual career identity can be designed.

### **5.5.1 Understanding the career identity dynamic**

Identity is crystallised through identification with prominent roles, contexts, social groups and professions with which one can relate (Lloyd *et al.*, 2011). The degree of identification can be viewed on a continuum from strong to weak (Bothma & Roodt, 2012); however the stronger the identification, the more likely it is that individuals may regard the dimension as an extension of self. Consequently psychological oneness with the dimension and association with the dimension are incorporated into the individual's identity (Lloyd *et al.*, 2011). The work and home roles and domains are the most prominent for individuals (De

Klerk & Mostert, 2010); they will have a stronger impact on identification and identity formation. Strong identification with a work-role implies a strong correlation or integration of the work-role and one's identity (Van Zyl *et al.*, 2010). As individuals are unique and place different importance on different roles, they are influenced differently during identity formation and decision-making. Identification with one's career and the development of a career identity will also be different for individuals. A career identity refers to a person's work-related expectations and values (Bothma & Roodt, 2012) and the degree of identification with his work, organisation or career (De Braine & Roodt, 2011). It serves as compass to guide career-related decisions and behaviours, has an impact on work-related outcomes (Bothma & Roodt, 2012) and motivates employability and career-related changes (Fugate *et al.*, 2003).

In the calling model of career success, Hall and Chandler (2005) propose that individuals who set meaningful goals aligned to their sense of purpose, and who invest the necessary energy and effort in achieving those goals, will achieve objective success, subjective success, and external recognition. The model further explains that feedback from significant others assists to facilitate identity change (Hall & Chandler, 2005). The outcomes may result in increased self-awareness, identity development and self-confidence, which further reinforce the meaningfulness and purpose of the career or goals pursued (Hall & Chandler, 2005). It is important to note that identity is developed and crystallised in a continuous process based on feedback from those with whom the individual strongly associates or identifies. Developing identity is therefore a continuous process of exploring, gaining feedback and reflecting on the experience.

### **5.5.2 Designing a virtual career identity**

It is suggested that as virtualisers engage in virtualising they will start to assume a virtual career identity, which is developed and crystallised in interaction with the virtual environment, and experience psychological oneness with the virtual lifestyle. Increased identification with the virtual career and lifestyle will promote experiences of psychological meaningfulness, engagement and identity expression in daily virtual activities (Burger *et al.*, 2012; Van Zyl *et al.*, 2010). Burger *et al.* (2012) state that this will result in increased feelings of belonging, being more comfortable with the environment and experiencing more

creativity in one's work. Virtualisers' psychological identification or experience of oneness with virtualising is the essence of virtualness. The virtual career identity or virtualness is developed based on virtualisers' virtual experiences and becoming more intertwined in the various integrated and virtual roles. As identity is always developing, so virtualness is a continuous process of crystallising one's personal, career and virtual self or identity and authentically identifying with virtualising.

It is proposed that the boundaryless employability orientation will eventually become part of virtualisers' career identity, as the basic principles and requirements of these constructs are critical for virtual success. As personal identity colours the way we view the world and ourselves in the world, the boundaryless employability mindset influences virtualisers' approach to their virtual career opportunities. Such views and preferences can only be spontaneous and proactive if one truly adopts or authentically identifies with boundarylessness and employability as part of one's personal orientation, and in effect incorporates it into one's identity. It is proposed that this forms the bases for virtualness.

Authentic identification with virtualising, its requirements and characteristics, will decrease conflict experienced within the virtualiser because of being more flexible and comfortable in the virtual role and context. Authentic identification with the personal elements of virtualising is also critical as virtualisers strive towards different end-goals, such as a healthier lifestyle, more positive experiences, creating a more relaxing home environment and incorporating recreational activities (Oosthuizen & Mostert, 2010). The virtual portfolio can therefore be viewed as a lifestyle decision, as many virtualisers pursue lifestyle factors as goals. Virtualness therefore entails a more holistic experience comprising all life's spheres into one identity, which facilitates meaningfulness, subjective success and identity expression.

Developing identity in the virtual environment therefore entails a continuous lifestyle design process, where virtualisers are constantly developing their virtual portfolio or lifestyle, in striving for a better identity fit. The more congruent the identity to their current situation, the less conflict will be experienced, and the more motivated virtualisers will be to improve their employability, as indicated earlier.

## **5.6 CONCLUDING ON VIRTUALNESS**

Exploring virtualness is a continuous journey of discovering the virtual self, the virtual context, and who the virtual self is in relation to the context. Virtuallers react differently to the challenges and opportunities that exist virtually, and they engage differently with other virtuallers, through e-tools and other platforms. Their learning, growth and development of a virtual career identity are dependent on their identification and psychological oneness with the virtual environment.

In this chapter I presented the concept of virtualness as the virtual career identity of virtuallers pursuing boundaryless employability, in striving for psychological success. The pursuit of boundarylessness requires self-directedness in identifying opportunities and goals and crafting one's own career journey towards psychological or virtual success. It is critical that virtuallers strive for employability and are proactive in adapting to changes, crystallising their career identity and improving their human and social capital in the process. It is important for virtuallers to be able to motivate themselves with goals; hence developing subjective, personally inspiring and meaningful goals will support achieving psychological success.

It is proposed that virtualness is a continuous process of self-discovery and identity formation, which results in an ongoing lifestyle design process where feedback from the virtual context, virtual roles, interpretations of psychological success, and orientations towards boundaryless employability are constantly integrated into a coherent and more comprehensive identity.

## **5.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

In this chapter I presented the abstract psychological structure of the phenomenon as derived from the phenomenological analysis. I aimed to build theory by aligning the virtual context to current career literature and related virtualness to a boundaryless mindset, employability orientation, psychological success and career identity. The hypothesis I presented is that virtualness is an ongoing lifestyle design process where virtuallers are continuously striving for boundaryless employability in order to achieve authentic

psychological identification as crafted by the uniqueness of virtual experiences. With this chapter I conclude the presentation of findings and the resulting hypothesis. The next chapter entails the summary and conclusion of this dissertation.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS**

#### **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter I aim to provide an overview of the study's conclusions and contributions, a discussion on the study's boundaries or limitations, followed by recommendations for future research. I conclude this chapter with personal reflections.

#### **6.2 CONCLUSION AND CONTRIBUTIONS**

##### **6.2.1 Study orientation**

In the motivation and background of this study I shed light on the changing employment context and the growing need for the globalisation of career opportunities, increased competitiveness and competence, and individuals being more opportunistic and flexible to accommodate customer and market changes. I discussed virtual work as a new work mode where virtualers make optimal use of modern technological advances to conduct work effectively from their home environment. This resembles social changes in the modern economy, as individuals show an increasing need for flexibility and work-home balance among others. I proposed virtualing as a possible solution to accommodate the current flux of change; however highlighted that it remains an unexplored area of research, especially in the completely virtual context.

I therefore aimed to capture the essence of work experiences in a completely virtual context in this study. Participants to this study not only varied in profession but were also from diverse geographical locations. The approaches I adopted in sourcing participants and collecting data were completely virtual. This enabled me to study virtual experiences in as natural a way as possible. I thereby presented a new way of conducting qualitative research virtually. As my sample group entailed completely virtual workers as opposed to teleworkers, flexible or contingent workers, my research study is also unique in its kind.

As I conducted this study in a relatively new area of study and employed a novel working method, I either changed or introduced a few words to ease interpretation and expression. I provided a glossary in the beginning of the document; however I defined and explained words as they are introduced in the text. The glossary also contains phrases related to working in the modern technological world; I am not certain of the existence of phrases or words such as e-communication, e-exposure, and e-resourcing, but I found them suitable in this context. I introduced three key terms as they relate to this study:

- *Virtuallers* – virtual workers
- *Virtualling* – work conducted virtually and in the virtual context
- *Virtualness* – the virtual lifestyle and integrated virtual career identity.

Adopting a phenomenological orientation promoted increased understanding of the subjective meanings hidden in unique experiences of the virtual phenomenon. This exposed a deeper level of appreciation for complex experiences and the multidimensional meanings hidden in reflection on experiences. This in turn promoted acknowledgement of the significance of individual experiences and observed the thread of meanings across different narratives and virtuallers in order to understand virtualness – the abstract psychological structure of the virtual phenomenon.

In presenting the data in phases gave me the opportunity to engage the reader in sharing the virtual experiences and analysis process. I shared virtual cases in Chapter 3 to provide readers a holistic understanding of experiences; in Chapter 4 I discussed the key meaning units of experiences in the virtual context and in Chapter 5 I presented the psychological and abstract structure of the unfolding phenomenon.

By incorporating an autoethnography not only gave me, the researcher, a voice as participant, but added richness in interpreting and reflecting on the meaningfulness of experiences shared. It enabled me to reflect on and extract practical lessons from narratives and experiences that are appropriate to the virtual context, as I also fulfilled roles of insider or virtualler. My autoethnography was in most cases supported or triangulated by other findings.

## 6.2.2 Study findings

I discussed specific themes as they relate to virtualising, the virtual context and working virtually, and the virtualiser, or virtual worker, in Chapter 4. Data were mostly supported by that found in other studies either conducted specifically in the virtual context or from an industrial psychology background.

I found that experiences of virtualising were mainly shared among virtualisers who participated in the study; however uniqueness in experiences was also evident. Experiences related to challenges and benefits of the virtual situation. Some participants chose to focus more on the practical or objective benefits of the arrangements, and typically kept work and home separate. Other participants focused more on their lifestyle changes and the unique personal challenges relating to virtualising and I assumed that these individuals' work and personal roles were more integrated. This difference may also resemble individual preferences, values and possibly their parenting responsibilities, which were not explored further.

The phenomenological meaning-making and analysis process assisted me to present integrated themes, further deepening the complexity of the multidimensional nature of virtual experiences:

- The physical co-location of work and home has a direct influence on how virtualisers approach, manage and integrate their work and home roles. Though challenges exist with separating or balancing work-home responsibilities, virtualisers also experience challenges with integrating the diverse responsibilities and roles. However benefits of both have also been reported.
- The boundaryless mindset has been associated with virtualising and virtualisers. This entails an identity characterised by physical and psychological mobility. The physical mobility or boundaryless nature of the virtual office implies that virtualisers are open to crossing physical boundaries with regard to their work location, working for different contractors, and using e-tools to conduct their work.
- Psychological mobility or boundarylessness is also characteristic of virtualisers in that they are open to explore opportunities outside their normal work or career.

Boundarylessness is also presented in that virtualers integrate various work-related, family and other activities into their virtual portfolio.

- Practical benefits from sourcing virtualers electronically have been highlighted; however it was found that building trust and effective relationships was a challenge. Other benefits are the optimisation of time differences in geographically dispersed teams and recruiting functional experts internationally. Although communication technology is used extensively, this is not the most effective way to ensure a constant status update, building relationships or trust, and virtualers do struggle with experiences of isolation and loneliness and being distant from colleagues.
- The virtual mindset required to enable effective virtual coping and virtual success has been highlighted. In this regard flexibility and adaptability, self-discipline and motivation, emotional stability and maturity, and continuous and lifelong learning are essential. It is believed that such a mindset will enable virtualers to cope with psychological and practical challenges in the virtual context.
- The key mindset dimensions align to those required for a boundaryless mindset, as well as for employability orientation. It was proposed that virtualness entails striving for boundaryless employability, which implies continuously developing the self and creating boundaryless career opportunities for themselves. This involves crossing various physical (international) and psychological (professional or career) boundaries. Boundaryless employability was concluded to be critical for virtual success.
- Virtual success was explored in that success criteria in the traditional career and organisational structure are not appropriate in the new non-traditional and virtual career. Virtual success criteria were said to include pursuing personally meaningful goals as relating to one's lifestyle and other life ambitions.
- It was further concluded that in order to pursue boundaryless employability and virtual success, virtualers should authentically identify with virtualing and incorporate it into their virtual career identity, referred to as virtualness.

### 6.2.3 Hypothesis

In grappling with the psychological significance of virtual experiences, I conceptualised virtualising as the abstract structure of the unfolding virtual phenomenon. The multilayeredness of meaning units was interpreted with a phenomenological orientation in the context of current organisational and career psychology literature to present the abstract concept of virtualness. The hypothesis presented in concluding this study was as follows:

***Virtualness is an ongoing lifestyle design process where virtualisers are continuously striving for boundaryless employability in order to achieve authentic psychological identification as crafted by the uniqueness of virtual experiences.***

### 6.3 CURRENT STUDY BOUNDARIES

I believe the boundaries or limitations of this study underlie its strengths. The first limitation relates to the subjectiveness intertwined in conducting a qualitative phenomenological study incorporating an autoethnography. Though I believe I was authentic throughout, my subjectivity may have surfaced from the onset of the study, in e-discussions with VRPs, in interpreting and making sense of the data, and in presenting the data and psychological structure. This also creates limitations of the generalisability of the findings. It therefore deserves mention that, aligned to my ontological views, statements in this document are not intended to be the absolute truth, but only a presentation of how others view and experience reality or interpret the truth. I also acknowledge that someone with other pre-understandings and orientations may observe other themes and underlying dimensions, which I may have overlooked.

Another study boundary was my experience and skill in conducting research. This yielded challenges in designing the study and consciously deciding on the boundaries and in overcoming challenges in approaching and sourcing VRPs. This was not optimal and I used different tools and techniques I deemed appropriate in the process to get the quality data I desired. My approach in the initial contact, probing electronically and integrating different

experiences, may have lacked skill and insight and may have limited the scope of data collected.

The availability of literature in the study's context and the themes I identified were also not optimal and I used various peer-reviewed journal articles across disciplines to support arguments.

#### **6.4 FUTURE STUDY BOUNDARYLESSNESS**

This study focused on completely virtual workers, mostly virtual entrepreneurs or individuals responsible for their own virtual businesses, income and contracts. Comparison studies between completely virtual workers and full-time virtualers who are permanent contractors may yield interesting results. The sample group was deliberately broad, entailing anyone willing to participate who met the sample criteria, the result being a wide variety of experiences, each sourcing from a different virtual path and history. Possibly future studies can focus on different virtualers contracting on the same project team or request new virtualers to diarise their experiences weekly to assess the process of developing virtualness. A new virtualer conducting an autoethnography on his/her virtual journey from the onset may also yield high-quality results.

The current study was broad in asking about experiences of virtualing and did not focus attention on how experiences change over the virtual journey. The broad study scope makes specific inferences difficult. Possibly future studies could focus specifically on the following;

- Changing needs of virtualers as technology and service users
- Stimulation and continuous learning in the virtual context
- Correlation study between performance, productivity and virtualing
- Experiences and coping with loneliness and isolation in the virtual context
- Boundary management and/or balancing work-life demands in the co-located work-home environment
- Virtualers' changes in lifestyle, values, and preferences
- The process of constructing a virtual career identity; virtual role integration; virtual identity formation

- Differences between virtualisers with parenting responsibilities and those without
- Changing roles of virtual men, husbands, or fathers, since virtualising
- Organisational performance measures pre- and post-virtualising
- Subjective experiences of success, satisfaction, productivity, efficiency, engagement, adjustment in the virtual context, compared to traditional employment (pre and post).

As phenomenology regards individual contributions as significant, possibly content analysis could be applied to the current data to determine the frequency of experiences, for example work-related versus personal experiences to determine which are most prominent. Similar studies can also be approached from a different philosophy of science to either validate or challenge findings in this study.

## **6.5 CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS**

My initial aim of conducting this research was to be boundaryless in studying the relatively unexplored completely virtual work experiences. I hoped that taking on the broad scope of virtual experiences would enhance understanding and insight into the phenomenon, and secondly provide input for more specific studies for future research. Reflecting back, I realise that I have mostly been successful in achieving these goals. While acknowledging that I could have designed the study differently, I do believe the current design was most effective in the end.

In integrating an autoethnography I too could have a voice and participate in the study. This increased my engagement and transparency throughout the study, but may also be the source of bias in the presentation of findings. Researcher predispositions and competence have often been said to influence the research journey and outcomes; throughout the study I struggled with giving myself voice in using the autoethnography and giving myself credit for being a worthy contributor, as well as for accurately expressing in writing the insights gained through deepened understanding of the phenomenon. However the research journey also shaped and transformed me into a fighting robot, determined to push through and prove myself. In mirroring Bumblebee, I initially struggled with effectively using e-media in conducting research in the most natural virtual setting possible, expressing myself optimally, and being comfortable in conducting research this way. However I do believe I

have transformed into a more experienced researcher, especially in the virtual context, pushing boundaries on how research can be done, and what is most appropriate in the new world of work.

Despite being small, feelings of insignificance on this journey and in the presentation of findings do not surface in personally reflecting on the quality of this product. I truly hope that this research will inspire other virtualers to seek their dominance and inner peace; to appreciate virtualing for its opportunities and personal value, and to pursue a virtual lifestyle or virtualness. I hope they use the information to understand their experiences and context better and that this will facilitate growth.

I hope that this study will be used by the scientific community as a stepping stone into studying the field of virtual work in more depth. I therefore wish that this study will encourage other researchers to adopt a Bumblebee character in conducting research in a more boundaryless fashion, to take risks and to go where other (bigger) researchers cannot or will not go. I furthermore anticipate that the study's findings will be used by the scientific community and virtualers, and that they will share the appreciation of the phenomenon. The study outcome resulted in the formulation of a new hypothesis, which presents a new point of departure for future research, which I truly hope will be explored further by others.

This research journey has enabled me to gain a deeper sense of consciousness of the phenomenon under study, more specifically with regard to virtualing, the virtualer and virtualness. I believe this study highlights important areas of these dimensions. However more research is needed to gain deeper insight into the completely virtual context.

## **6.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

With this chapter I conclude the study: *Working Virtually: A Phenomenological and Autoethnographical Inquiry*. In this chapter I highlighted the study's key conclusions and contributions as they related to the study orientations, the study findings, and the hypothesis presented. I discussed the current boundaries of the conclusions and contributions, with insights and recommendations for future research on the virtual phenomenon. I concluded this chapter and study with personal reflections.

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