Virtual work is rapidly becoming an essential element in contemporary organizations. The traditional brick and mortar organizational structure is rapidly shifting to one that is dislocated, virtual and geographically dispersed. While the traditional structural work paradigm is characterized by face-to-face work with robust physically-present task and social interactions; this structure is rapidly surrendering to a more disjointed, rarely physically present, internet-based connected structure. This new work paradigm relies less upon physicality, but with a greater reliance on connectivity. Connectivity, both technological and interpersonal, is imperative to virtual work.

The increasing costs associated with working today are forcing organizations to rethink how work is accomplished across all industries and sectors. Due to the significant cost savings associated with virtual work (e.g. real estate, travel, supplies, space, capital expenses, etc.), organizations are embracing this new remotely-connected work structure. Organizations are recasting their thoughts about work design, employees, organizational place, space, and its members. Although the traditional ways of working with tethered employees to a physical campus or building, is still the most common organizational structure. These hierarchical physical structures are being replaced by a leaner, swifter, organic, time-sensitive, globally-focused, team-based, electronic aesthetic. This shifting organizational paradigm centers on the expanding and dominant use of information technologies as the key structural bedrock for virtual organizational functioning.

The virtual work paradigm has been spurred by local, national and global economics, societal changes with the use of technology, employees’ attitudes of increased individual agency, employee pressure for greater work autonomy, deliberate focus on work-life balance, and reliance for “on-demand” services rather than the standard business operating hours. Intertwine these factors with rapid globalization, outsourcing, right-sizing, off shoring, cross-cultural and (inter)national collaborations and the ability to connect remote individuals and teams, it leaves no doubt as to why the world of virtual work is fertile ground for applied and academic study.

Organizations are increasing their integration of communication technologies to facilitate the growing appetite by consumers, employees, stockholders and various constituents groups to work smarter, faster, more efficiently and with greater levels of information access. This hunger, contrasted with decreasing resources and calls for greater levels of accountability, creates an inherent conflict between various organizational stakeholders. Although the virtual work paradigm is an intriguing structural mandate that creates significant opportunities and new work arrangements. Virtual work also poses significant dilemmas and organizational issues, for organizations and employees working in this electronic terrain.

This book provides entrée into the exploration of the opportunities, benefits and costs associated with virtual work. The sixteen chapters that follow will address several communicative, relational and
DELINEATING VIRTUAL WORK

In centering this book on issues associated with virtual work, I am making clear distinctions between the virtual workplace, working virtually and virtual work. These concepts are certainly interrelated, interchangeable and often overlap in their descriptions. However, I think it is critical to identify, define, deconstruct, extrapolate and distinguish these concepts by their functions, usage and intent within the organization by organizational members.

First, the virtual workplace is broadly defined as a non-traditional workplace that is not located in the same physical space. Easily conceptualized, the virtual workplace is operationalized as two or more work spaces that are connected by internet-based technology, without regard to the bounded space or geographical co-located structures indicative of the traditional workplace. The virtual workplace allows employees to engage in work tasks away from an organizational campus. These tasks may be accomplished individually, collaboratively, but most often remotely. Employees are able to communicate and interact with one another regardless of their location in the world. The traditional workplace characterized by physical desks, corrals, telephones, offices and break rooms are replaced by smart phones, instant messaging, electronic mail, internet access and teleconferencing software. I consider the virtual workplace an organizational “noun” due to its alternative work arrangement. The virtual workplace, like traditional workplaces or objects, may be objectively observed and described. There is no inherent value placed on the virtual workplace initially; it is just another way of doing one’s work through a different configuration. The virtual workplace serves as a structural counter to the traditional workplace because employees are not physically tethered to a desk or cubicle. However, they are certainly tethered remotely through the electronic nature of the virtual workplace. A virtual workplace is increasing because it decreases unnecessary costs by integrating technological processes, people processes and online processes.

On the other hand, I consider working virtually an organizational “verb” due to its inherent action-oriented position. Working virtually indicates “doing” something. The most common term used in working virtually is teleworking. Teleworking has increased dramatically as communication technologies have become more advanced and less expensive (Leonardi, Treem and Jackson, 2010). Much like the virtual workplace, working virtually is an alternative work arrangement. One can work traditionally (face-to-face constant interaction) or work virtually (minimal physical face-to-face contact with peers, supervisors and subordinates). Working virtually is not necessarily value-free. One works virtually due to a number of antecedent and motivational issues: reduction in overhead, decreasing the costs of real estate, flexibility for greater work-life balance, right-sizing, becoming a leaner organization by extracting the costs of doing business associated with the physical workplace, moving toward a “greener” workspace by minimizing the carbon footprint via working virtually.
Finally, the concept of virtual work is much more complex to define and describe. I consider virtual work as both an organizational noun and verb. There are inherently objective and subjective components associated with virtual work. Virtual work is a value-laden, politically rich, nuanced form of organizational functioning that has significant ecological considerations and implications. Virtual work is complicated by the constant energy given to tasks, social concerns, informal and formal communication, labor (emotional, psychological and physical), impression management, face-saving techniques, virtual dramaturgy, managing up and down, motivating employees, rewarding and punishing virtual work behaviors, decision-making, socializing, organizational change, diversity issues, leading a virtual work team/group, etc. In essence, virtual work is work! In light of the electronic terrain, this virtual work is structurally complex due to the lack of nonverbal cues that are heavily relied upon and taken for granted in traditional face-to-face work arrangements.

Virtual work is much more than dislocated space. Virtual work is much more than just “doing” something. Virtual work is a state of being in a dislocated space operating under a new and emerging (and always changing) social contract between the organization and its members. Virtual work is political, social, economic, cultural, financial, legal and ecologically paradoxical. Virtual work can be viewed as tacit and overt, confusing and stable, local and global, rational and irrational, dynamic and static and fraught with similar tensions that enable and inhibit this emerging work arrangement. This book offers the first social scientific/humanistic definition of virtual work.

The title of this book, *Communication, Relationships and Practices*, is inspired by the socio-humanistic intersections between organizations, technology and humans that have typically been underserved in the research literature. By focusing our attention on extant communication theories, relational concepts and practices underpinning virtual work in contemporary society, my hope is that individuals will have more robust decision and sense making models about their engagement and management of this technological enterprise. Indeed, this is a great time to study organizations and how individuals engage and interact within and between them. I hope that this book adds a distinct perspective to the various conversations about organization and their rapid expansion in the virtual work terrain.

**ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK**

This book is organized into three sections with 16 chapters. The three sections are: communication in virtual work, relationships in virtual work and practices in virtual work. The sixteen chapters embedded in the sections will shed light on the opportunities, dilemmas, complexities and costs associated with virtual work.

**Section 1: Communication in Virtual Work**

The chapters in this section represent how communication explicitly and implicitly operates in virtual work. Communication is an embedded and essential theme in organizations and virtual work is no exception. The following five chapters illuminate the role and impact of communication in virtual work.

Chapter 1: Gibbs, Scott, Hoon Kim, & Kyong Lee in their chapter “Examining Tensions in Telework Polices”, studies workplace policies related to virtual work, with a specific focus on telework polices. The authors conducted a content analysis of 35 state government polices that revealed that telework
policies have underlying tensions between autonomy and control; as well as flexibility and rigidity. They found that most of the policies used these tensions productively by providing enough ambiguity for individual and organizational competing interests to co-exist.

Chapter 2: Harrison and Williams analyzed conflict in three inter-organizational teams in their study “Communication, Structural Links, and Conflict in Three Inter-Organizational Virtual Collaborations.” Their chapter identifies the various types of conflict in virtual teams, the role communication plays in these conflicts and they contextualize these conflicts in the social domain.

Chapter 3: In their chapter “Online Teaching as Virtual Work in the New (Political) Economy”, Schwartzman and Carlone critically examines the hidden costs of academic labor in online teaching in higher education. The authors explore the boundaries demarcating work from personal time; the relative invisibility of online labor, the cost-rewards associated with online instruction and the illusory empowerment of online students as consumers.

Chapter 4: In “The Ethical Implications of the Virtual Work Environment”, Byers examine four major ethical factors inherent to virtual work. The four factors are culture, trust, cross-cultural diversity and monitoring. The author advances a normative approach in this chapter by suggesting that the negative ethical consequences of virtual work can be countered by following appropriate guidelines.

Chapter 5: Long, Goodman and Clow in their chapter “The Electronic Panopticon: Organizational Surveillance in Virtual Work” explore the role surveillance in virtual work. The authors examine the theoretical underpinnings of the panopticon, work place surveillance, the practice of surveillance in virtual work ethical concerns of virtual surveillance and the implications of this virtual work management strategy.

Section 2: Relationships in Virtual Work

The chapters in this section cover relational issues in virtual work.

Chapter 6: Zhang and Poole in their chapter “Virtual Team Identity Construction and Boundary Maintenance” reports the results of a multiple case study which investigated how virtual teams appropriated multiple media to facilitate the construction of group identity and manage group boundaries. The chapter focuses on relationship within and between virtual teams. The authors found five processes that help shape group identity.

Chapter 7: In “Temporary Virtual Teams: An Empirical Examination of Team Development”, Connaughton, Williams, Linvill, O’Connor and Hayes highlights two common models of team development as a basis to illustrate the dearth of scholarship in virtual team development. Additionally, the authors present their findings from a study of global virtual team and advance a research agenda for scholars and pragmatic platform for practitioners working within and between virtual teams.

Chapter 8: “Status and Influence Processes in Virtual Teams and Mobile Collaboration” examine the effects of technological mechanisms of collaboration on the communication processes, relationships and practices of virtual teams. Ravlin reviews various theoretical approaches and prior empirical findings and posits that status processes and influence are maintained many times at the detriment of team effectiveness.

Chapter 9: In their chapter “Sense of Community in Professional Virtual Communities” Blanchard, Askay and Frear develop a model of how professional virtual communities facilitate a perception of community. Through support exchange, development of group identity and leveraging group norms, the
strength of professional communities are realized with increased occupational identification, occupational commitment, expanding professional networks and increased employee performance.

Chapter 10: Punyanunt-Carter and Hernandez closely examines a critical organizational leadership element of mentoring in their chapter “Virtual Mentoring.” The authors suggest that virtual mentoring is becoming the more preferred way to initiate mentor and protégé relationships in organizations due to time and space constraints. The authors provide limitations and implications of virtual mentoring in this chapter.

Chapter 11: Long, Boughton and Widener explore the implicit and tacit role of organizational politics in their chapter “Organizational Politics in Virtual Work”.

Section 3: Practices in Virtual Work

The chapters in this section cover practices in virtual work.

Chapter 12: Yungbluth and Hart examine how power dynamics are manifested in virtual work in their chapter “The Amplification of Power Dynamics in Virtual Work.” The authors present two case studies to illustrate decisions regarding the implementation of information and communication technologies and the implications of those choices. The cases presented reveal a complex view of how organizations seeking to increase participation through technology may find that their decisions actually stifle participation and active communication.

Chapter 13: In this chapter, Gilchrist explores engineers’ perceptions of relational limitations inherent to virtual work. “Engineers’ Perceptions of Relational Limitations Intrinsic to Virtual Work” studies engineers enrolled in a communication course whose primary work consists of virtual work. Results of the study reveal that virtual work is viewed as convenient and easy-to-use. However, there are several relational limitations associated with using this medium. Gilchrist additionally reports how engineers supplement their virtual work through a number of strategic methods.

Chapter 14: In “Power and Trust in the Virtual Workplace: Team Development as Communities of Practice”, Hanson, Engel and Gobes-Ryan suggest utilizing a communities of practice construct, an alternative research perspective, in understanding the construction of virtual teams and the power and trust issues in team behaviors and processes. They advance the communities of practice model through the use of a reflexive autoethnographic narrative, comprised of three case studies.

Chapter 15: Hai-Jew focuses on a multi-institutional common curricular-build project between four Midwest institutions in his chapter “Structuring a Local Virtual Work Ecology for a Collaborative, Multi-Institutional Higher Educational Project: A Case Study.” This chapter illustrates through the case study approach how bringing together experts from cross-functional domains via computer mediated technologies assisted in building an e-learning platform based on instructional design precepts. The chapter focuses on the socio-technical aspects important in structuring virtual work ecology.

Chapter 16: In “Aided System of Competence Management for Virtual Team Building Adapted to Specific Needs of Design Projects”, Schumacher, Stal-Le Cardinal and Bocquet present an Aided Competence Management for Virtual Team Building System (Aided CMVTB System) that permits it to be adapted not only to organizations but to design projects without a physical structure. This chapter gives broad insight to the field of Competence Management and Virtual Teams.
REFERENCES