Preface

We are in the midst of an organizational technological revolution. This is a revolution, not a transition, primarily because we are in a time of redefining and reconstituting the workplace and rethinking about what and how it means to do work. This historic period in time is marked as one in which forward-thinking organizations and the subsequent scholarship reconsider the what, when, where, why, and how questions of how work is accomplished, and more importantly, the inextricable influence and impact of technology in the workplace.

There is a seismic paradigmatic shift afoot for organizations and those who study them. This is not the dawn of the information age, but the accelerated push toward a new work paradigm; something I term the virtual work paradigm. New rules, language, artifacts, culture, beliefs, ideologies, jargon, assumptions, epistemologies, theories and methods of investigating organizations and those who work within them are quickly, and quietly, emerging. Some of the traditional applications to the virtual work environment are complementary; while others are severely incongruent to this new shape and form. New thoughts and methods of studying virtual work must emerge at a rapid pace to keep up with the quickly changing workplace.

This is indeed an exciting time for organizational scholars, especially those who conduct interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary organizational research. We are witnessing first-hand the third nameable era in organizational history. Briefly the eras are: the agrarian era; the industrial age; and currently, the information age. The information age is so radically different from the former two eras in that there is less reliance on an actual physical organization, and even less reliance on organizational members actually being together in the same space at the same time to accomplish work tasks. The information age era centers on connectivity—electronic connectivity facilitated by innovative communication technologies—rather than physicality. Connectivity, rather than physicality, allows for remote work, dislocated organizational presence, geographically dispersed members and boundary-less spatial and temporal structures. This is clearly a shift in thinking, working and understanding work, which are evident signs of a radical shift to a virtual work paradigm.

In my earlier book, Communication, Relationships and Practices in Virtual Work (2010), I offered the first social scientific definition of virtual work. At the time I thought:

Virtual work should be considered 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.

At the time of my earlier writing, I considered the concept of virtual work as complex and multidimensional with serious ecological considerations. I still do, and even more so today.

The title of this book, Virtual Work and Human Interaction Research, is inspired by the socio-humanistic interactions between humans, organizations, and technology. This intersection is becoming more normative and the overall spirit of this book is to serve as a methodological and research companion to the current and past scholarship emerging in virtual work. I believe that researchers and practitioners should work in concert to develop valid and rigorous methodological approaches and techniques to fully understand, describe and predict the virtual work environment and its organizational members. This book is a critical contribution to this effort.

This book brings together international and interdisciplinary scholars with diverse theoretical and methodological orientations, from a variety of legacy disciplines. This is an interdisciplinary and international project. My hope is that this book and the diverse contributions in this volume signal the importance of focusing on the broad opportunities the virtual work paradigm offers to researchers and practitioners worldwide and that spirited disciplinary and international conversations will continue around this topic.

This is an authoritative scholarly book that serves a specific purpose of advancing the conversation about virtual work research. Although this book may easily serve as an advanced undergraduate or graduate textbook, that was not my primary intention. My initial intention was motivated around shaping and contributing original scholarship to the area of virtual work research by bringing together international and interdisciplinary scholars focused in the emerging organizational domain of virtual work. I certainly welcome and encourage textbook adoption for training of the next generation of virtual work scholars and practitioners. I think this is a good resource for these populations.

The seventeen chapters that follow address a number of virtual work and human interaction research concerns including, but not limited to, the history of virtual work, research human interactivity around digital learning content, conducting virtual work experiments, virtual work environment’s impact on creativity, case studies in virtual work, and virtual work boundary management, along with other salient topics. The chapters reflect a broad mix of conceptual, empirical, methodological, and historical points of view related to virtual work.
ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book is organized into two sections, consisting of 17 chapters. The two sections are: “Virtual Work Human Interaction Research” and “Virtual Work Research Approaches and Methods.” The seventeen chapters embedded in the sections offer contemporary studies of virtual work, as well as the opportunities, dilemmas, complexities, methods, and approaches of studying virtual work.

Section 1: Virtual Work and Human Interaction Research

The chapters in this section offer quantitative and qualitative empirical studies of virtual work. The eight chapters in this section highlight current research in the virtual work environment.

Chapter 1, “The Way We Work: Past, Present, and Future”: Wang, in her chapter, provides a historical road map of the evolution of work in America and the impact of technology on this change. She calls attention to our embedded and innate assumptions about working in contemporary society and the impact these assumptions have on virtual work.

Chapter 2, “Shadowing Virtual Work Practices: Describing Subjects and Objects as Action Nets”: Engstrom advances the methodological technique of interpretative shadowing. He provides an explanation of the hybrid character of actions and then situates this approach by describing how shadowers can observe both immediate and virtual practices.

Chapter 3, “Teleworkers’ Boundary Management: Temporal, Spatial, and Expectation-Setting Strategies”: Fonner and Stache analyzed open-ended responses of virtual workers to identify the temporal and spatial strategies the virtual workers use to negotiate and manage work and home boundaries.

Chapter 4, “Thinking outside the Office: The Impact of Virtual Work on Creative Workers’ Attitudes”: Rubin and Spivack explore workplace factors that impact and ultimately reduce creativity in virtual work. Using secondary data, this chapter tests a number of hypotheses linking creative processes and autonomy with the virtual work environment.

Chapter 5, “Virtual Vines: Using Participatory Methods to Connect Virtual Work with Community-Based Practice”: LeGreco, Leonard, and Ferrier explore the surprising relationship between participatory research methods, community-focused practices, and virtual work. They offer a number of different conceptual and methodological approaches to participatory and community-based research.

Chapter 6, “Reply Timing and Emotional Strategy in Mobile Text Communications of Japanese Young People: Replies to Messages Conveying Four Different Emotions”: Kato, Kato, and Chida offer two studies examining the timing of replies to mobile text messages, particularly the behavior of waiting before replying. Emotion manipulation, individual differences and the time adjustment of replies were all uncovered in their results.

Chapter 7, “Australian Users’ Interactions with E-Services in a Virtual Environment”: In this chapter, Sandhu investigates the impact of the e-services system on users’ learning in a virtual work environment. Specifically, he addresses important characteristics of the e-learning user experience and the implications of this experience on the user’s attitudes and future use and adoption.

Chapter 8, “High-Touch Interactivity around Digital Learning Contents and Virtual Experiences: An Initial Exploration Built on Real-World Cases”: In this chapter, Hai-Jew examines contemporary cases in the utilization of digital contents and the virtual experiences for high-touch interactions. The chapter situates high-touch interactions within the context of higher education and highlights the inherent creative conflicts between the learners of this technology.
Section 2: Virtual Work Research Methods and Approaches

This section offers a variety of research methods and approaches applied to virtual work. The nine chapters in this section cover a broad spectrum of qualitative and quantitative approaches in virtual work.

Chapter 9, “The Role of Experiments in a Study of Virtual Groups”: Walker, Blanchard, and Burnett discuss the application of experimental methods in the study of virtual work groups. Opportunities, limitations and a research design example are provided in this chapter.

Chapter 10, “Grounded Theory Approaches to Research on Virtual Work: A Brief Primer”: Gibson and Webb provide broad coverage of the utility of employing grounded theory to the study of virtual work. A history of this approach, data collection techniques and analysis, and effective report writing of grounded theory situated in the virtual work environment is provided in this chapter.

Chapter 11, “Exploring Organizational Cultures through Virtual Survey Research”: Gilchrist and Sheldon discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using quantitative and qualitative survey research in virtual work. Survey research design, sample considerations, and analyses are explained in this chapter.

Chapter 12, “Conducting Effective Interviews about Virtual Work: Gathering and Analyzing Data Using a Grounded Theory Approach”: In this chapter, Kee and Thompson-Hayes offers interviewing as a viable research method in the study of virtual work. Various forms of interview techniques in the virtual work research are discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 13, “Virtual Matters: Exploring the Communicative Accomplishment of Virtual Work and Virtual Ethnography”: Nelson-Marsh develops a heuristic methodology embracing reflexivity as an initial start in employing ethnographic methods to the study of virtual work. Communication is privileged in this chapter, while underscoring the importance of closely considering virtual ethnographic research as a viable research approach.

Chapter 14, “Mapping a Typology for Identifying the Culturally-Related Challenges of Global Virtual Teams: A Research Perspective”: Zakaria, Amelinckx, and Wilemon detail the challenges of managing distributed projects by Global Virtual Teams (GVTs). Additionally, the authors highlight the research issues and challenges of studying global virtual teams.

Chapter 15, “Considering Phenomenology in Virtual Work Research”: Long and Glenn apply and modify traditional phenomenological research to the study of virtual work. The authors offer a mini-research design to illustrate the critical need of integrating phenomenology in virtual work research.

Chapter 16, “Case Study Findings from Human Interaction with Web E-Services: Qualitative Data Analysis”: Sandu offers the case study approach as a salient method in virtual work research. This chapter focuses on the qualitative data captured from human interactions with web e-services in a virtual work platform. Challenges and opportunities of using this method are addressed in this chapter.

Chapter 17, “Applying Dramaturgy in Virtual Work Research”: Long, Walton, and Brais explore the methodological opportunities and consequences of utilizing dramaturgy as a methodological approach in virtual work research. A brief history of dramaturgy as well as a mini-research design is offered in this chapter.

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REFERENCE