


2016

# Factors that Affect Job Satisfaction and Work Outcomes of Virtual Workers

Regina Marice Willis  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Regina Willis

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Walden University  
2016

Abstract

Factors that Affect Job Satisfaction and Work Outcomes of Virtual Workers

by

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MBA, Bethel University, 2010

MA, Bethel University, 2009

BS, Bethel College, 2006

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Management

Walden University

November 2016

## Abstract

Employing a virtual workforce has become a common practice among technically advanced and globally competitive organizations. Yet there is limited information regarding factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to address the problem by exploring the lived experiences of virtual workers. Principles of Bandura's self-efficacy theory and Maslow's needs theory formed the conceptual framework. Babbie's sampling strategy and social media were used to obtain 26 participants among the target population of virtual workers. By distributing an online questionnaire, data were collected and analyzed through open coding techniques. As the data were analyzed, common themes emerged. The themes affecting job satisfaction of virtual workers included work and life balance, isolation and belonging, flexibility, resource efficiency, and trust and respect. The themes affecting work outcomes of virtual workers included training and technical support, communication, and workplace distractions. Findings indicated that job satisfaction and work outcomes might vary according to the self-efficacy level, needs, and virtual competencies of the individual virtual worker. Findings may contribute to positive social change by educating individuals on the benefits and challenges of the virtual workplace. Managers may reference the study outcomes when seeking to improve hiring processes, enhance training and technological support, and assess relevant virtual competencies. Employees may consider the study outcomes when determining whether virtual work arrangements align with their professional and personal goals.

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## Dedication

This study is dedicated to my family and my amazing husband. My family has supported me through each educational endeavor with faith in my abilities, encouragement, and patience. Al Willis, who is not only my husband, but my colleague and mentor, has been a consistent source of strength, wisdom, and reassurance. I could not have achieved this goal without his continued support and encouragement. Most of all, this study is dedicated to my parents because they were the ones that shaped my life from the very beginning. My dad, Bobby Allen, taught me to take things as they come, work hard, and laugh as much as possible. My mother, Martha Monasco, has been a constant source of strength. She has always encouraged me to reach for my goals and never give up. As I reflect upon this accomplishment, I am grateful for the opportunity to be a lifelong scholar and will strive to meet the expectations of my family, friends, coworkers, and my alma mater, Walden University.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to those individuals who have supported me throughout my educational journey. From the beginning, I was inspired by the energy of the Walden community. Upon attending my first residency, I realized that making a positive impact on society is not just a slogan at Walden University, but a commitment to make the world a better place. Professors such as Dr. David Gould, Dr. Robert Levasseur, and Dr. Robert Kilmer exemplify the mission of Walden University by ensuring that Walden scholars receive constructive feedback and encouragement.

I also received a tremendous amount of support from Dr. Mark Wood, who allowed me to reference his dissertation as we chose a similar research methodology and design. Finally, I must acknowledge the following individuals as each responded promptly when copies of their articles and statistical data were requested; Dr. Kate Lister, Dr. Kristie Rogers, Dr. Kathryn Fonner, Dr. Stuart Belle, Dr. Stephanie Smith, and Dr. Tammy Allen. By referencing to their research, I was able to establish the foundation of my study and provide ideas to resolve a real world problem within the virtual workplace.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Virtual work arrangements have gained recognition as a common organizational structure (Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015; Bentley et al., 2016; Maher & Bedawy, 2015). Using high-speed Internet and technology, organizations and workers are overcoming the limitations of physical space, time zones, and geographical locations (Raghuram & Fang, 2014; Smith, Patmos, & Pitts, 2015; Wheatley, 2012). Although organizations have recognized significant benefits from virtual work arrangements, there is limited qualitative documentation regarding the factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers. Therefore, the ability to successfully manage and lead virtual workers may be compromised (Bartel, Wrzesniewski, & Wiesenfeld, 2012; Bentley et al., 2016; Davis & Cates, 2013; Greer & Payne, 2014; Maher & Bedawy, 2015; Moriarty, 2014; Smith et al., 2015). I maintained that organizations would risk a decline in productivity and sustainability if this problem was not resolved (Allen et al., 2015; Bartel et al., 2012; Bentley et al., 2016; Dahlstrom, 2013; Davis & Cates, 2013). To address the problem, I explored the lived experiences of virtual workers by conducting a qualitative phenomenological study. Within this chapter, I present the background of the study and establish the existence of a real-world problem within the virtual workplace. I explain the purpose of this study and present the research questions that guided the study. I include an overview of the conceptual framework and define the nature of the study, key terms, assumptions, scope, delimitations, limitations, and possible weaknesses that could have affected the study outcomes. Finally, I conclude this

chapter by emphasizing why this study is significant to practice, theory, and positive social change.

### **Background of the Study**

Employing a virtual workforce has become a common practice among technically advanced and globally competitive organizations (Korzynski, 2013; Maher & Bedawy, 2015; Mulki & Jaramillo, 2011; Raghuram & Fang, 2014). A virtual workforce consists of workers usually referred to as teleworkers, remote workers, or virtual workers (Linden, 2014). Within this study, the term *virtual worker* is used hereafter to distinguish workers that perform job responsibilities from an offsite location (Busch, Nash, & Bell, 2011; Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). Rather than commuting to a brick-and-mortar building, virtual workers depend heavily on technology to share knowledge, conduct business, and perform job responsibilities. High-speed Internet and appropriate technology can transform any location into a virtual workplace that is conveniently open for business anytime and anywhere. For example, virtual workers may choose their car, a home office, an airport lounge, a hotel lobby, or the local coffee shop as an appropriate location to conduct business (Bartel et al., 2012; Bentley et al., 2016; Davis & Cates, 2013; Lister, 2011; Mulki & Jaramillo, 2011; Raghuram & Fang, 2014).

Researchers and practitioners have attributed the growth of the virtual workplace to advances in technology, a borderless global market, the need to expand talent pools, the emphasis placed on providing a healthy and flexible work-life balance for employees, the pressure to lessen the cost of doing business and increase profit margins, and, finally, the social responsibility of preserving natural resources and protecting the environment

(Allen et al., 2015; Davis & Cates, 2013; Korzynski, 2013; Raghuram & Fang, 2014).

Although there are significant benefits and opportunities associated with the idea of a virtual workplace, Lister and Harnish (2011), authors of *The State of Telework in the US*, posited that managerial attitudes and organizational culture may not have evolved as quickly as today's dynamic workplace.

While Lister and Harnish (2011) noted a slow progression toward organizations fully embracing the idea of a virtual workplace, researchers have expected the number of virtual workers within the United States to increase (Maher & Bedawy, 2015). For example, in June 2015, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics published the results of the 2014 American Time Use Survey, which indicated that 23% of United States workers performed a portion of their responsibilities from home. In January 2016, Global Workplace Analytics published their latest teleworking research and found that at least half of the United States workforce holds a job they could perform in a virtual capacity. Even more notable was the Global Workplace Analytics' claim that 80% to 90% of American workers would like to work from home at least 2 or 3 days per week. Global Workplace Analytics also found that Fortune 1000 global companies have been designing their organizational structure around the concept of a virtual workplace as many workers are already performing job responsibilities away from the traditional office setting.

Chen and Hew (2015) reviewed 29 empirical studies to identify theories and factors that could explain how organizations use technology to share knowledge and conduct business. Chen and Hew found consensus among the study participants in that geographically and globally dispersed organizations favor the flexibility of a virtual

workplace as opposed to traditional collocated environments. On the other hand, Chen and Hew drew attention to the need for future studies on the personal, social, and organizational factors that could influence the intentions and ability of the individual virtual worker to successfully share knowledge and perform job responsibilities. Personal factors included trust, self-efficacy, and the individual worker's perception of their own ability to adapt to working through technology. The main social themes were perceived respect, connectedness to the organization, and the virtual workers' comfort level with using technology to share knowledge with other workers and perform job responsibilities. Finally, Chen and Hew posited that organizational factors included the incentive of personal rewards or recognition. As workers receive knowledge through technology, there is a higher likelihood of the worker feeling motivated if their contribution is recognized and rewarded.

Greer and Payne (2014) studied the challenges inherent to the nature of virtual work arrangements and found that some managers do not realize the unique differences between managing collocated and virtual workers. The authors also noted that some organizations have implemented virtual work arrangements without addressing the need for a cultural shift, establishing clearly defined operating procedures, and ensuring adequate organizational support is in place for virtual workers (Bentley et al., 2016). Along similar lines, Maher and Bedawy (2015) studied the core practices of managing virtual workers and concluded that some managers do not understand the challenges of the virtual workplace nor the stark differences between managing collocated and virtual workers. Bartel et al. (2012) studied how the nature of the virtual workplace affects the



job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers. Although the benefits of the virtual workplace are notable, Bartel et al. concluded that some virtual workers may not feel connected to the organization and struggle to establish a high level of organizational identity. Organizational identity is a perception or feeling that occurs when workers, coworkers, and supervisors form sustainable relationships. When a worker identifies with an organization, words such as *I* and *mine* transform into *we* and *ours* (Rogers & Ashforth, 2014). Researchers have cited organizational identity as an overarching theme that affects job satisfaction and work outcomes because workers who connect and identify with an organization are more likely to take ownership of job tasks and perform well in autonomous work environments (Allen et al., 2015; Bailey et al., 2011; Davis & Cates, 2013; Greer & Payne, 2014; Morley, Cormican, & Folan, 2015; Mulki & Jaramillo, 2011; Nurmi, 2011).

Fonner and Roloff (2010, 2012) found a sense of commitment, pride in one's work, and individual accountability tend to develop when an employee identifies with an organization or a group of people. Moreover, researchers have argued that organizational identity can be indicative of turnover rates and how well workers fulfill obligations and represent the organization within society (Bartel et al., 2012; Moser & Axtell, 2015). In contrast, workers who do not adjust well to virtual work environments may feel disconnected, experience loneliness, and struggle to perform well in autonomous environments (Busch et al., 2011; Davis & Cates, 2013). Other researchers highlighted the differences between collocated and virtual workplaces and cited virtual workplace isolation as a predominant challenge that has not been sufficiently researched or resolved

(Allen et al., 2015; Bartel et al., 2012; Davis & Cates, 2013; Maher & Bedawy, 2015; Mulki & Jaramillo, 2011).

Dahlstrom (2013) studied how virtual workers relate to their organizations when there is little personal contact or face-to-face interaction. Dahlstrom found that isolation was a major theme that affected the job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers. Dahlstrom concluded that researchers still knew little about how virtual workers relate to an organization and suggested future research to uncover strategies that promote a stronger sense of community between virtual workers and organizations. Bartel et al. (2012) found that working in an isolated environment can hinder an individual's ability to forge relationships with coworkers and establish respect among peers. Davis and Cates (2013) maintained that some virtual workers have expressed concern over limited visibility to supervisors, high stress levels, and the possibility of being overlooked for promotions and career advancement. Moreover, some virtual workers have questioned whether their ideas and commitment to the organization were taken seriously (Bailey et al., 2011; Bartel et al., 2012; Bloom, Liang, Roberts, & Ying, 2013; Davis & Cates, 2013; Mulki & Jaramillo, 2011).

Even though researchers have acknowledged the challenges of virtual work, Fonner and Roloff (2010, 2012) presented a different perspective and maintained that some workers thrive when working offsite and find the autonomous nature of virtual work to be energizing and fulfilling. These workers do not see isolation as a barrier, but as a means of boundary control that lessens interruptions and distractions. As I have discussed thoroughly in Chapter 2, Bentley et al. (2016) studied how social support

affects the wellbeing of virtual workers by surveying participants from 28 New Zealand companies and arrived at a similar conclusion. Bentley et al. contested that a worker's perception of organizational support can be indicative of how they experience isolation. Bentley et al. posited that if a worker feels valued and their social, personal, and technical needs are met, there is a higher probability the worker will enjoy a sense of autonomy instead of struggling to overcome the perception of social or professional isolation. Conversely, Bentley et al. cautioned that some virtual workers are not successful and that managers are faced with the challenge of determining who is best suited to work in a potentially isolating environment. Bentley et al. concluded that researchers should broaden the scope of exploration on the topic of virtual work. Bentley et al.'s ideas included measuring how high intensity virtual workers achieve work outcomes and how different industry sectors, job types, job roles, and work–life conflicts affect the success of virtual workers. With Bentley et al.'s research being recently published, it is reasonable to argue that more research is needed on the virtual workplace.

Pyöriä (2011) further noted the importance of changing the mental paradigm among managers charged with leading virtual workplace initiatives. As virtual work arrangements are a departure from what constitutes a traditional workplace, the practice and application of management should shift from managing hours and the physical presence of employees to managing performance and work outcomes. Pyöriä argued that managers can lessen the possibility of virtual workers feeling isolated by promoting a healthy balance of social engagement and establishing clearly defined performance expectations. Nurmi (2011) surmised the perception of isolation varies among individuals

and depends on the worker's individual coping strategies and how well managers and workers adjust to distributed work arrangements. Nurmi concluded the future challenge of researchers is to explore how the isolating nature of virtual work arrangements can affect the job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers.

In reviewing the literature, I found numerous studies conducted on the benefits and challenges of the virtual workplace. An example is Davis and Cates's (2013) quantitative study directed toward understanding the relationship between isolation and engagements among teleworkers. Through an extensive literature review, Davis and Cates found that few researchers have studied the relationship between isolation and the engagement of virtual workers. Upon further observation, the differences between virtual and collocated workplaces proved to be another opportunity for additional research. Recognizing the need to further explore variables that could enhance job satisfaction and improve work outcomes among virtual workers, Davis and Cates encouraged future studies directed toward understanding the individual worker and what management styles work best when managing an often unseen workforce.

Additionally, Davis and Cates (2013) maintained that managers could explore variables such as job satisfaction, work outcomes, and the mediating role of virtual workplace isolation through the lens of theoretical principles. For example, Maslow's (1943, 1954) needs theory was suggested as the framework for exploring the correlation between social relationships and human motivation. Nurmi (2011) concluded that more research is needed at the individual level in order to fully understand how virtual workers cope with an environment that could be isolating or lonely. Through a review of

literature, Wang and Haggerty (2011) emphasized the individual worker as being the most critical element in the success of the virtual workplace. Wang and Haggerty further posited that scholars should conduct more studies to identify what competencies, traits, skills, and knowledge workers need to succeed in an autonomous work environment.

Finally, my own observations as a director of virtual and geographically dispersed workers contributed to the scope of this study. From a management perspective, it is important to explore the factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers. With virtual work becoming increasingly popular, the results of this study can address the gap in literature on the topic of virtual work. Over the extent of my research, I have found that numerous studies on the challenges of virtualization, but most were quantitative in nature and did not delve into the personal experiences of individual virtual worker (Nurmi, 2011; Wan, Haggerty, & Wang, 2015; Wang & Haggerty, 2011). Bartel et al. (2012) contributed that by giving the individual virtual worker an opportunity to voice their opinions, researchers may gather rich data and gain a fresh perspective on the topic of understanding the virtual workplace.

Through this study, I expanded upon Bartel et al.'s (2012) study of the virtual workplace by taking a qualitative phenomenological approach. With few qualitative studies conducted on the factors that affect the job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers, I saw an opportunity to add to the limited amount of existing literature and suggest implications for the field of management and provide ideas for future research. With Bandura's (1977) and Maslow's (1943) theories as the conceptual framework, the conclusions of this study may lend ideas on how an individual worker's

level of self-efficacy or motivational needs may affect their ability to successfully achieve expected work outcomes in an environment where opportunities for social interaction with supervisors and coworkers tends to be limited. Managers may find the results of this study informative and especially useful when seeking to understand the differing nature of virtual work and factors that affect the job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers (Greer & Payne, 2014; Maher & Bedawy, 2015; Morley et al., 2015; Nurmi 2011; Wan et al., 2015; Wang & Haggerty, 2011).

### **Problem Statement**

The general problem was that organizations would risk a decline in productivity and sustainability if the factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers were not thoroughly explored (Allen et al., 2015; Bartel et al., 2012; Bentley et al., 2016; Dahlstrom, 2013; Davis & Cates, 2013). The specific problem was the limited documented information regarding the factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers; therefore, managers' ability to successfully manage and lead virtual workers may be compromised (Maher & Bedawy, 2015). Within the literature, this problem was evident, as most studies on the virtual workplace have been conducted at the organizational or technological level (Wan et al., 2015; Wang & Haggerty, 2011). With few studies conducted at the individual level, I chose to study the problem by exploring the lived experiences of virtual workers (Bartel et al., 2012; Bentley et al., 2016; Davis & Cates, 2013; Morley et al., 2015; Mulki & Jaramillo, 2011; Wan et al., 2015; Wang & Haggerty, 2011). Maher and Bedawy (2015) found that despite current research on managing a virtual workforce, there was a gap in the literature regarding the

daily challenges inherent in the virtual workplace. Other researchers arrived at similar conclusions and, although they acknowledged the benefits of the virtual workplace, they suggested more research dedicated to understanding the dynamics of the virtual workplace (Dahlstrom, 2013; Kossek, Thompson, & Lautsch, 2015; Lister & Harnish, 2011; Maher & Bedawy, 2015; Mulki & Jaramillo, 2011; Nurmi 2011).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of individual virtual workers. Observing rapid developments within the virtual workplace, Maher and Bedawy (2015) credited such progress to technology. However, these developments may affect the job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers. Bartel et al. (2012) posited that while job responsibilities of virtual workers often mirror those of collocated workers, there are defining differences in the workplace environment. Lister and Harnish (2011) studied the trend toward virtualization and questioned whether managerial attitudes and organizational culture have evolved in accordance with the modern workplace.

Wang and Haggerty (2011) focused on the virtual workplace and found that few researchers have addressed the most critical element of organizational success: the individual worker. By taking a qualitative phenomenological approach, I accomplished the purpose of this study and explored the research problem from the virtual workers' perspective. Positive change may occur as managers can gain a better understanding of the factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers. Managers may find the results of this study useful when seeking ways to improve virtual worker

hiring processes, enhance training and technological support, and evaluate the importance of individual virtual competencies.

### **Research Questions**

For this study, I chose an online questionnaire as the research instrument and took advantage of Survey Planet's free online research templates and hosting service. From two overarching research questions, I shaped the scope of this study and used the questionnaire to address the research problem by exploring the lived experiences of current or previous virtual workers who met the criteria of the study.

The two overarching research questions were as follows:

RQ1: What are the factors, derived from lived experiences that affect the job satisfaction of virtual workers?

RQ2: What are the factors, derived from lived experiences that affect the work outcomes of virtual workers?

The online questionnaire consisted primarily of 16 semistructured questions derived from the two overarching research questions (Appendix A). I focused Questions 1 through 4 on obtaining demographic information and directed Questions 5 through 11 toward understanding the participants' virtual work history such as their tenure as a virtual worker, current employment status, virtual job type, industry sector, the primary location of virtual work, number of days worked virtually per week, and their primary virtual workplace setting. I purposely structured Questions 12 through 16 in a manner that would address both Research Questions 1 and 2.



Through the use of Survey Planet's free online research tools, I was able to create a questionnaire that was easy for the participants to navigate, and the software automatically generated a pie chart for each demographic and work history element. By having a visual representation of the data, I was able to ensure that all participants met the study criteria and review their personal and professional background by simply reviewing the results web page. Based on the depth and quality of the participants' responses to the following 16 research questions, my decision to use an online questionnaire as the research instrument as Rowley (2012) outlined proved to be successful.

The online questionnaire consisted of the following questions:

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your ethnic background?
4. What is your highest level of education?
5. Do you have at least 13 months of virtual work experience that has taken place within the past 5 years?
6. How long have you worked or did you work in a virtual capacity?
7. Are you currently employed as a virtual worker?
8. If your response to Question 7 was "yes," what industry sector(s) do you perform virtual job responsibilities in? If your response to Question 7 was "no," what industry sector(s) did you perform virtual job responsibilities in?
9. What type of job do you perform or did you perform as a virtual worker?

10. Where do you or did you perform the majority of your virtual job responsibilities? At home, on the road, or some other location?
11. How many days per week do you or did you work in a virtual capacity?
12. Based on your lived experiences as a virtual worker, what factors affect or have affected your job satisfaction and work outcomes? Please explain your answer.
13. Please describe your knowledge, skills, and abilities to communicate, socialize, and complete virtual job responsibilities through the use of technology. Please explain how these factors affect or have affected your job satisfaction and work outcomes.
14. Please describe your level of self-efficacy (confidence in your abilities) and how this affects or has affected your job satisfaction and work outcomes as a virtual worker.
15. As a human being, does working in a virtual capacity contribute to the fulfillment of your needs (food, shelter, security, sense of belonging, achievement, creativity, and autonomy)? Please explain how this affects or has affected your job satisfaction and work outcomes.
16. Although it is not required, feel free to provide any information that will help others understand the benefits and challenges of virtual work.

As I reviewed the participants' answers to the questions, I was not disappointed as the majority of participants submitted paragraphs with up to seven sentences of meaningful information. During the initial review, I reflected on Bampton, Cowton, and

Downs's (2013) suggestion for researchers to consider the use of electronic questionnaires when conducting qualitative research. While the results of this qualitative study may not be indicative of all data gathered by electronic means, I was able to contribute to the literature and provide study outcomes that practitioners, individuals considered virtual work arrangements, and future researchers can reference. To show my gratitude, I sent pilot study participants and main study participants a \$5.00 Starbucks gift card, and they will receive an electronic copy of this research study.

### **Conceptual Framework**

As I addressed the research problem from the individual participant's perspective, I structured the conceptual framework around the principles of Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory and Maslow's (1943) needs theory. I based my decision on the premise that both theories are phenomenological in nature and scholars have referenced them within the study of performance and human motivation (Korzynski, 2013; Tay & Diener, 2011). Researchers have explored the principles of Bandura's and Maslow's theories as a means of understanding how working in a virtual capacity can affect an individual's progress in achieving the higher order need of self-efficacy (Nicklin & Williams, 2011; Soni, 2013). Introduced in 1977, Bandura's theory was based on the principle that self-efficacy is performance based and a good indicator of how an individual experiences and observes the world around them (Zimmerman, 2000).

Self-efficacy is generally strengthened through worldly experiences, the observation of others, and by overcoming challenges (Bandura, 1982; Moriarty, 2014; Nicklin & Williams, 2011; Park & John, 2014; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Drawing from

Bandura's (1977) theory, Kacmar, Andrews, Harris, and Tepper (2013) studied the mediating role of ethical leadership on work outcomes and surmised that people develop work skills and habits, social competencies, and self-efficacy by paying attention to the actions and behaviors of others. I found Kacmar et al.'s (2013) conclusion to be particularly interesting because working in a virtual environment may limit opportunities for full-time virtual workers to observe the actions and behaviors of other workers.

Wood and Bandura (1989) emphasized three aspects of self-efficacy that could explain why some virtual workers are more productive in an autonomous environment and experience a higher level of job satisfaction than others do. First, the aspect of mobilization explores why individuals who possess similar competencies may approach tasks and opportunities differently (Wang & Haggerty, 2011). From a managerial standpoint, understanding the factors that contribute to an employee's ability to mobilize skills and knowledge could determine whether an employee will succeed in a virtual environment (Wang & Haggerty, 2011). Next, self-efficacy is dynamic in nature and continues to develop as an individual experiences life and the world in general (Bandura, 1982). In turn, as an individual's self-efficacy develops, it is reasonable to expect their skill level, knowledge, and confidence to increase accordingly (Bandura, 1982; Moriarty, 2014; Nicklin & Williams, 2011; Park & John, 2014; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Chen and Hew (2015) argued that individuals with a high level of self-efficacy tend to learn quickly, adapt well to change, and are usually motivated to establish and achieve personal goals. Greer and Payne (2014) studied the challenge of virtual work and concluded that organizations should consider measuring the self-efficacy level of current and potential

virtual workers and reference the outcomes when determining who is best suited to work in a virtual environment.

Soni (2013) maintained that employee engagement is another way to build skills and increase the self-efficacy and motivation of virtual workers. Soni found that employee engagement is correlated with job satisfaction, motivation, and organizational identity. Organizations such as IBM, Aetna, and Charles Schwab have reported that effective training programs have been critical to the success and engagement of virtual workers (Busch et al., 2011). Park and John (2014) noted distinct areas of focus as the third aspect and surmised that the assessment of how well an individual performs specific tasks, solves problems, and adjusts to changing environments could help managers understand the factors that affect the job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers (O'Neill et al., 2014).

Similar to Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory, Maslow (1943) theorized that people are motivated by the fulfillment of five basic human needs: physiological, security, social, esteem, and self-actualization. Maslow positioned these needs in a hierarchical order of progression and argued that people are motivated to achieve and maintain satisfaction at each level (Soni, 2013). As each level is fulfilled, Maslow found that an individual's focus generally shifts toward the next level. According to Maslow, this progression continues until the ultimate need of self-actualization is fulfilled (Kellerman, 2013; Korzynski, 2013). Although similar to Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory, Maslow described self-actualization as a psychological progression toward the realm of fulfillment as a human being (Carland, Carland, & Carland, 1995). Maslow

theorized that self-actualization is correlated with self-efficacy, which Bandura described as one's belief in their abilities. Throughout the literature, researchers have supported the correlation between the fulfillment of an individual's needs and their ability to successfully perform job responsibilities, solve problems, adapt to changing environments, and attain a high level of personal and professional satisfaction (Kaur, 2013; Soni, 2013; Tay & Diener, 2011).

Barns and Pressey (2012) argued the fulfillment of higher order needs such as understanding, confidence, and self-efficacy is critical to the success of virtual workers. While technology has advanced the realm of business, managers are challenged to keep virtual employees motivated and engaged without the benefit of face-to-face interaction (Greer & Payne, 2014; Maher & Bedawy, 2015; Soni, 2013). Bartel et al. (2012) found that if higher order needs go unfilled, virtual workers may lack the confidence to succeed in an autonomous environment. This could result in a low level of job satisfaction, motivation, and organizational identity. Kacmar et al. (2013) argued that while successful virtual workers may gravitate toward an autonomous environment, this does not mean that predictability and certainty are not important factors. Kacmar et al. found that when workers are unsure of their future, they may begin to worry and their sense of self-efficacy is compromised. Davis and Cates (2013) offered that Maslow's theory is relevant and applicable to the modern workplace. Through the study of Maslow's principles, managers may discover a relationship between need fulfillment, job satisfaction, and positive work outcomes.

As changes occur within the workplace, Korzynski (2013) argued that an individual's work environment can influence their level of job satisfaction and motivation. Korzynski surmised that social interaction contributes heavily to an individual's motivation and sense of belonging. For those working in a virtual capacity, networking may lack personal connectedness and consist mainly of telephone conversations and conference calls, instant messaging, text messaging, e-mail, video sessions, and social media platforms such as Facebook or LinkedIn. Wang and Haggerty (2011) noted the trend toward electronic communication and suggested that individual media and social skills are necessary competencies of virtual workers. Korzynski advised that with more employees working in a virtual context, managers should encourage online activities that lead to a high level of job satisfaction and motivation.

Korzynski's (2013) findings correlated with Bartel et al.'s (2012) research on the relationship between physical isolation and job satisfaction, perceived respect, and organizational identity of virtual workers. Realizing the rapid pace of technological developments, Bartel et al. established correlations between virtual workplace isolation, organizational identity, and job satisfaction. Korzynski put forth that Bandura's (1977) and Maslow's (1943) theories can serve as the basis to explore the challenges of virtual work. Discussed further in Chapter 2, managers can use the theoretical principles of Bandura and Maslow as the framework for strategies that will encourage the individual worker's progression toward a high level of self-efficacy.

### **Nature of the Study**

For this study, I decided to use a qualitative phenomenological approach because I wanted to explore and understand the research phenomenon from the participants' point of view, as Englander described (2012). According to Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas (2013), qualitative researchers share a common goal of maximizing resources to obtain the richest information possible among individuals who have firsthand experience or knowledge regarding the research problem. In Chapter 3, I rationalize why I decided to conduct a qualitative study instead of using a quantitative or mixed methodology. Furthermore, I identify my role as the researcher and explain why and how I went about purposefully selecting study participants from the target population of virtual workers, following from Palinkas et al. (2015).

For this study, I chose to hand code the data. First, I used the technique of open coding to categorize the participants' responses and practiced horizontalization as all data were considered important and valuable information. After categorizing the data, I performed axial coding, which allowed common themes to emerge naturally (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Throughout the axial coding process, I conducted a constant comparative analysis by highlighting the significance of each theme and comparing the results of this study with the findings of other researchers. As described by Merriam and Tisdell (2015), researchers may conduct a constant comparison by reviewing other research strategies and the outcomes of previously conducted studies. Watts (2014) explained that coding research data can be both descriptive and interpretive in nature. To make sense of the data coding process, I viewed the open coding as the descriptive phase



as the data were put into perspective and categorized. Following, I considered axial coding as the interpretative phase where significant themes and new ideas began to emerge among the data. As I reviewed the participants' responses, I realized the quality and relevance of their lived experiences and how managers could reference this study when seeking to learn more about the benefits and challenges of leading a virtual workforce.

As a manager of virtual and geographical workers, I appreciated the participants' openness and willingness to share their experiences, perceptions, and opinions. Through this study, I was able to explore the research problem and provide meaningful information that could be especially beneficial to managers seeking to understand factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers. Long and Glenn (2012) found the complex environment of virtual workplace to be fertile ground for qualitative phenomenological studies.

### **Definitions**

*Collocated workers:* Anyone who works at the same physical location as other team members. These workers are generally visible and have direct communication with coworkers and supervisors (Golden & Schoenleber, 2014).

*Emoticons:* An emoticon is a typed symbol, letter, or character that represents human emotion. Emoticons are popular forms of expression used in electronic communication (Bampton et al., 2013).

*Globalization:* Conable (2014) studied the global shift in how people think and conduct business. Conable found the term globalization has a variety of meanings. For

this study, the term globalization refers to a borderless integration of economies, knowledge, cultures, power, and ideologies spurred by technological advancements and the needs of society.

*Isolated virtual worker:* A worker who performs their job responsibilities outside a traditional collocated environment and relies mainly on technology as the main source of communication and venue for performing job responsibilities. As isolation is a perception, a virtual worker may consider themselves to be isolated due to not being visibly present and having limited social interaction and face-to-face engagement with supervisors, coworkers, and peers (Maher & Bedawy, 2015).

*Isolation:* A psychological perception or feeling thought to occur when one's need for support, acknowledgement, and social and emotional engagement is not met (Mulki & Jaramillo, 2011). Isolation has been cited as a predominant challenge associated with virtual workplace arrangements (Bartel et al., 2012).

*Job performance:* Comprises the extent in which an employee's contribution to the goals of the organization aligns with the expected outcomes associated with the employee's assigned role, task, or responsibility (Zablah, Franke, Brown, & Bartholomew, 2012).

*Job satisfaction:* Pomirleanu and Mariadoss (2015) described job satisfaction as an emotional state or frame of mind that is relative to a specific job situation or job environment. Pomirleanu and Mariadoss further noted the measurement of job satisfaction is particularly important to organizations because an employee's level of job

satisfaction could be linked to turnover intentions, performance, and organizational commitment.

*Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory:* Maslow (1943) theorized that human beings are motivated by five basic needs: (a) physiological, (b) security, (c) social, (d) esteem, and (e) self-actualization. Maslow positioned each need by level of importance and people are inherently “motivated by the desire to achieve or maintain the various conditions which these basic satisfactions rest and by certain intellectual desires” (p. 18).

*Organizational identification:* According to Martin, Johnson, and French (2011), organization identification is the perceptual response experienced by an individual's integration with an organization's history, mission, goals, and culture. Organizational identification can be demonstrated in the employee's characteristics, job satisfaction, commitment, performance, behaviors, attire, and verbiage (Bartel et al., 2012).

*Self-efficacy theory:* Developed by Bandura in 1977 (Zimmerman, 2000), the theory of self-efficacy measures how different levels of motivation, confidence, and belief in one's capabilities can affect performance and the ability to overcome challenges and adjust to changing environments (Bandura, 1982; Lam & Lau, 2012; Moriarty, 2014; Park & John, 2014; Wood & Bandura, 1989).

*Virtual worker:* A virtual worker is someone who completes job responsibilities virtually using technology. A virtual worker may have a home office or work at other geographically dispersed locations. A virtual worker generally works without direct supervision and may not hold traditional business hours (Bartel et al., 2012; Davis & Cates, 2013; Mulki & Jaramillo, 2011).

*Virtual workplace arrangements:* This work structure is based on the widespread use of technology as a means of achieving goals and objectives, communicating and transferring knowledge, and operating from dispersed locations. Virtual workplace arrangements have become increasingly popular among organizations that are seeking to operate on a global scale, conserve financial and natural resources, and capitalize on the skills and knowledge of workers, regardless of proximity (Davis & Cates, 2013; Maher & Bedawy, 2015).

*Work-life balance:* The ability to balance one's professional and personal commitments and desires. Having a work-life balance has been cited as a significant factor that can affect one's perception of whether they are able to give the necessary attention to their work or career and things they enjoy such as family time, exercise, and hobbies (Kossek et al., 2015).

### **Assumptions**

Throughout the process of conducting this study, I remained mindful of several assumptions. First, I assumed that a qualitative phenomenological approach was appropriate for studying the research problem and achieving the purpose of the study. I considered this a reasonable assumption because it is not uncommon for researchers to combine a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological design to learn more about a phenomenon, experience, or perception (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Secondly, after studying the research strategy of Phellas, Bloch, and Seale (2011), I assumed that using an online questionnaire as the research instrument was an appropriate and effective method for obtaining data from geographically dispersed participants

Additionally, I assumed that by using a semistructured questionnaire, the participants would have the freedom to reflect on their lived experiences and answer each research question to the best of their ability (Bampton et al., 2013; Gergen, 2014). Although, in the beginning phase of my research strategy, I had reservations about conducting a qualitative study by electronic means, this assumption was satisfied as I received rich, meaningful data that exceeded my expectations. As I found a limited amount of qualitative phenomenological studies previously conducted on the virtual workplace from the individual workers' perspective, I assumed that managers of virtual workers would benefit from the outcomes of this study (Ross & Vasantha, 2014). Most importantly, I assumed that my research efforts would influence the field of management and I would make a positive contribution to society, as the outcomes of this study will be published in academic and professional venues.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

Snelson (2016) described the importance of aligning the scope and delimitations as a critical step in the research process. As suggested by Snelson, I considered the scope and delimitations as another opportunity to ensure the feasibility and the focus of the study. Therefore, I narrowed the scope by purposefully selecting 26 participants from the target population of virtual workers who I expected to have firsthand experience with the research phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015). Discussed further in Chapter 3, I limited the sample size to a manageable number because I focused on obtaining content that was rich and meaningful. Moreover, I remained mindful of the importance of reaching data saturation and decided that a sample size of 26 participants would provide enough data to

achieve the purpose of the study and data saturation would occur, following the example of previous studies (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012; Cho & Lee, 2014; Elo et al., 2014; Englander, 2012). Although my assumptions were correct and data saturation was reached early in the analysis process, I did not want to overlook any information that could be significant to the study outcomes or future research. Therefore, I treated all 26 data sets as being equal and significant to the study outcomes.

Another important delimitation was the targeted population and the criteria for participating in the study. For this study, the target population was virtual workers and the criteria for participation were as follows: the participants had to be at least 18 years old and must currently work or have worked up to 3 days per week in a virtual capacity for 13 months or longer within the past 5 years. I chose to include participants who had worked virtually at least 3 days per week over a span of 13 months because within that time frame, I expected the workers to be capable of reflecting on factors that affect their job satisfaction and work outcomes. Furthermore, as I wanted to obtain relevant data, I decided the participants' virtual work experience must have occurred within the past 5 years of conducting this study. I also expected that most people could intentionally recollect significant feelings, perceptions, and experiences that have occurred within the past 5 years (Holland & Kensinger, 2010). According to Grysman, Fivush, Merrill, and Graci (2016), much recollection of events depends on the individual's level of experience and how they were affected emotionally.

To further support my decision to require the participants' virtual work experience to have occurred in the past 5 years, I studied the evolution of the virtual

workplace and highlighted new technologies that are connecting virtual workers as never before, such as electronic communication tools, social networking platforms, and data transparency through cloud storage (Gilson, Maynard, Young, Vartiainen, & Hakonen, 2015). Based on Gilson et al.'s (2015) assessment, the technological developments that have occurred within the past few years justify the need to research emerging themes and opportunities inherent of the virtual workplace. I also considered the emphasis placed on virtual work arrangements since 2010. For example, in March 2010, President Obama supported virtual work initiatives by hosting a forum that highlighted the benefits of flexible work arrangements and ways to recruit, employ, and maintain the employment of talented individuals (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). Later within the same year, Congress passed the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010, which requires government agencies to establish policies regarding the implementation of virtual work arrangements (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2014).

As I followed the principles of Babbie's (2010) snowball sampling strategy to obtain an adequate sample from within the target population, I did not limit the scope of the study to a particular industry. By capitalizing on my established professional relationships and by taking advantage of social media, I received referrals and volunteers for participation from individuals who work among automotive, higher education, financial and banking, telecommunication, consulting, and technology industry sectors. Reaching out to a broad range of industry sectors increased the likelihood of obtaining a diversified sample of participants. To lessen the possibility of bias, I decided to exclude family members, friends, and coworkers from the study because they are aware of my

career field. To strengthen the study outcomes and improve the likelihood of transferability, I obtained demographic information from the participants such as age, gender, ethnicity, and level of education. To increase opportunities for transferability, the online questionnaire included questions regarding the tenure and timeframe of virtual work, current employment status, industry sector, type of work, location where the majority of virtual work occurs or occurred, and the number of days per week worked virtually.

When reviewing the literature, I found that while researchers have focused heavily on the virtual workplace, most studies were quantitative in nature and were conducted at the organizational or technological level. This stands to reason, as the virtual workplace is now an accepted workplace mode and technology continues to change at a rapid pace (Maher & Bedawy, 2015). Within the implications for practice and conclusions, I found plenty of suggestions for future research on the phenomenon of the virtual workplace. However, I have limited the scope of this study to exploring the factors that affect the job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers. I also limited the conceptual framework to include principles of Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory and Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs theory. I chose these theories because Bandura's theory of self-efficacy is performance based and Maslow's theory is based on human motivation. Although, the results of my study may not be transferable to other workplace environments, I highlighted Bandura and Maslow because the field of management can benefit from revisiting these timeless principles (Jerome, 2013).



## **Limitations**

Prior to conducting research, I acknowledged potential limitations that could negatively affect the trustworthiness of the study outcomes (O'Brien, Harris, Beckman, Reed, & Cook, 2014). Based on my assessment, I noted the following limitations: a relatively small sample size, the participants' geographical location, limited time and financial resources, the inability to host face-to-face interviews, my own bias, ensuring the feasibility of the study, and the subjectivity of conducting a qualitative phenomenological study. To address these limitations, I reviewed the literature, weighed the advantages and disadvantages of my chosen research strategy, and took appropriate steps to mitigate any issues that could negatively affect the study outcomes.

My decision to conduct research among a sample size of 26 participants posed a limitation because their responses may not represent the opinions of all virtual workers. In reviewing academic literature and similar qualitative studies, I found that sampling strategies should be designed around the purpose and expected outcome of the study, available resources, and who or what will be affected (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012; Cho & Lee, 2014; Elo et al., 2014). Gergen (2014) encouraged researchers to select a sample size that will yield a cluster of underlying meanings, themes, and patterns among the participants' responses.

Regardless of the number of participants, Fusch and Ness (2015) contributed that data saturation should be the ultimate goal of qualitative researchers. Data saturation can be determined by evaluating whether the same results would be obtained if another researcher were to duplicate the study. Fusch and Ness highlighted that regardless of the

sample size, the researcher must be diligent to ensure the research questions are clearly defined and address the research problem. Discussed further in this section and in Chapter 3, I relied heavily on the pilot study participants to provide feedback that would ensure the research questions were appropriate for resolving the research problem.

Interestingly, much like the virtual workplace, the participants' geographical location prohibited face-to-face interaction. As the participants were referrals and volunteers, I was not in control of where they lived and did not have the time and resources to conduct face-to-face interviews. Therefore, I chose to distribute an online questionnaire by using Survey Planet, which is an online company offering basic research tools at no charge to academic researchers and practitioners. Although conducting qualitative research electronically has been sharply scrutinized, I found the use of an online questionnaire that consisted of semistructured questions adequate for this study (Bampton et al., 2013; Cope, 2014). Moreover, by using Survey Planet's free research tools, I had a date and time stamped transcription to enhance accuracy in reporting.

Even though an online questionnaire was my resolution to the previously mentioned limitations, I was concerned about the inability to interpret body language and facial expressions (Moore, McKee, & McLoughlin, 2015). Cassell and Symon (2004) studied the use of electronic interviews and cautioned that a number of communications may transpire to ensure clarification among participant responses. This could involve phone conversations, video chats, or e-mail exchanges. Regardless, the ultimate goal is to ensure the trustworthiness of the study is established. Within the literature, I found that researchers are becoming more comfortable with Internet-based research (Cunningham et

al., 2015; Hejar, 2016). On the other hand, the ability to accurately construe expression and tone requires a high level of skill and attention to detail. For example, Bampton et al. (2013) argued that researchers can identify expressions and verbal tones within electronic content by concentrating on emoticons, punctuation, letter case, and adjectives. For this study, I found Bampton et al.'s assessment to be accurate and I relied on the suggestions of Cassell and Symon to clarify the participants' intended response as needed.

Researchers have referred to this technique as member checking. In Chapter 3, I discuss the value of member checking and how I used this technique while conducting the pilot study.

To ensure the credibility of the study, I had to continually acknowledge my own bias throughout the research process (Elo et al., 2014). To overcome this limitation, I disclosed my experience as a director of virtual workers in the background section and I diligently bracketed my ideas and perceptions (Berger, 2013; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; Padilla-Diaz, 2015; Zitomer & Goodwin, 2014). To avoid leading the participants, I constructed the online questionnaire with semistructured questions. In the literature, researchers use semistructured questions for a number of reasons. First, with qualitative research, the ultimate goal is for the participant to describe the research phenomenon from their point of view. Secondly, the researcher may be seeking to open dialogue with study participants and allow them to elaborate on their perceptions and feelings. Finally, the researcher may introduce semistructured questions as the pathway to obtaining richly detailed information (Gergen, 2014; Palinkas et al., 2015). By using semistructured

questions, I was able to achieve each of these goals, arrive at data saturation, and present themes that are significant to the field of management, practice, and society.

As previously mentioned, I conducted a pilot study to ensure the study was feasible and the outcomes would be trustworthy. Orsmond and Cohn (2015) maintained that a pilot study can save researchers time and effort. Based on the pilot study participants' feedback, I was able to make small changes to ensure the online questionnaire addressed the research problem and achieved the purpose of the study. By conducting the pilot study, I was given the opportunity to ensure the instructions were easy to understand and the research instrument was easy to navigate (Orsmond & Cohn, 2015). Finally, my choice of using a qualitative phenomenological approach posed a significant limitation. In reviewing the literature, the rigor and subjectivity of qualitative research has been a topic of much debate (Cope, 2014). This debate stems from the idea that qualitative research does not produce solid facts as with quantitative studies (Anderson, 2010; Ramadhan, 2015).

According to Ramadhan (2015), researchers choose a qualitative approach when seeking to explain experiences, perceptions, ideas, and opinions. Cho and Lee (2014) arrived at a similar conclusion by describing qualitative research as a holistic approach to deriving subjective information that addresses a specific phenomenon. Upon review of this limitation, I based the decision to conduct a qualitative phenomenological study on Wan et al.'s (2015) argument for the necessity of future research directed toward understanding the virtual workplace from the individual workers' perspective. Although

limitations were present, this study is important to the field of management and I have made a significant contribution to practice, theory, and society.

### **Significance of the Study**

#### **Significance to Practice**

This study was significant to practice because I added to the limited amount of documented information regarding factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers. In review of data provided by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) and Global Workplace Analytics (2016), I foresee more organizations taking advantage of virtual work arrangements. Therefore, it is important to understand key factors that affect an organization's most critical asset: the individual worker (Wang & Haggerty, 2011). Wang and Haggerty (2011) studied the virtual workplace and found that researchers have given considerable attention to understanding the technological and structural aspects of the virtual workplace. However, Wang and Haggerty cautioned that little research has been directed toward understanding the individual virtual worker. After performing an extensive review of literature, Wang and Haggerty concluded that little is known about the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to ensure the success of the individual virtual worker. I consider the inclusion of Bandura's (1977) and Maslow's (1954) theoretical principles within this study to be of paramount significance to practice.

Jerome (2013) found that some practitioners consider theories such as Maslow's (1954) needs theory to be outdated. However, I along with Jerome do not subscribe to this ideology and propose that understanding an individual's needs is timeless and a critical element of organizational success. Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy is

equally significant to practice because contributing to the development of an individual's self-efficacy and belief in their own abilities could greatly affect organizational sustainability. Maher and Bedawy (2015) argued that more studies should be focused on understanding core management practices that are dedicated to ensuring the success of virtual workers. By exploring and describing the lived experiences of current and previous virtual workers, I have made a significant contribution to practice by deriving rich data that can help organizations understand the factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014). Finally, after collecting, analyzing, and summarizing the data, each participant received a summary of the study results. Although distributing the summary to the study participants was a small contribution, Bandura pointed out that people learn from observation. Therefore, by creating awareness and enlightening the study participants, I took an important step toward increasing the knowledge of the virtual workforce.

### **Significance to Theory**

As suggested by Lam and Lau (2012), workplace environments may affect people in different ways. Drawing from this idea, I chose to explore factors derived from the participants' lived experiences through the lens of Bandura's (1977) and Maslow's (1943) human behavior and motivation theories. I considered both theories to be appropriate for this study as Bandura's theory is performance based and Maslow's theory is directed toward understanding how people are motivated. Although similar in nature, each of these theories can be applied to the exploration of human perceptions and reactions to experiences, observations, and environments. For example, the principles of

these theories might explain why Davis and Cates (2013) concluded that workplace isolation negatively affects the performance of virtual workers. However, in contrast, Fonner and Roloff (2010, 2012) contributed that virtual workers experience a higher level of job satisfaction when working in an isolated environment because office distractions and interruptions are minimized.

This study is significant to theory because within the literature, researchers argued that theoretical applications can be used to foster understanding within the field of academia and the field of management. Through my research efforts, I have made a significant contribution to theory by drawing attention to the influence of theoretical approaches on managerial applications used in today's workplace. For example, Bandura's and Maslow's theories can serve as a reference for managers seeking to understand the human need of belonging and how to engage and motivate virtual workers (Korzynski, 2013). Through the study and the application of these theories, managers could explore the challenges of virtual work from the worker's perspective. Managers could reference Bandura's theory to better understand how experiences, communication, constructive criticism, and mentoring can greatly affect the performance of virtual workers (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014). Another idea is for managers to reference Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory as a means of understanding how the fulfillment of needs can influence the individual worker's level of motivation (Liu, Wang, Liao, & Shi, 2014).

### **Significance to Social Change**

The literature suggested that virtual work arrangements are good for the environment, organizations, and society (Maher & Bedawy, 2015). According to the U.S.

General Services Administration (2015), organizations offering virtual work arrangements can expect to save natural resources and increase organizational sustainability. The administration further suggested that workers benefit from virtual work arrangements by saving money and commute time. Workers are also able to increase productivity without sacrificing the quality of life. Linden (2014) found that virtual work is conducive for individuals with physical, sensory, or cognitive disabilities because the need to commute to a physical location is mitigated. Linden emphasized that virtual work benefits disabled individuals who need consistent access to medical supplies. The ability to work from home can minimize barriers caused by pain-related issues and allow disabled individuals to have gainful employment.

Although significant benefits are associated with virtual work, Wang and Haggerty (2011) asserted that not everyone is capable of working in a virtual environment. As Wang and Haggerty explored the challenges of virtual work, they found that individual virtual competencies are a critical element that affects job satisfaction and performance. These competencies were defined as virtual self-efficacy, virtual media skills, and virtual social skills. When conducting research, Wang and Haggerty theorized that individuals possessing individual virtual competencies are more likely to be effective within the virtual workplace. In Chapter 2, I describe and explain how each individual virtual competency can affect the job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers.

As the number of virtual workers is projected to increase, future research conducted on the dynamics of the virtual workplace is significant to positive social change (Lister & Harnish, 2011). Kossek (2016) studied how people define work-life



boundaries while working and living in a digital age. Kossek argued that while technology has mobilized work and society, there is a greater opportunity for blurred boundaries between the professional and personal aspects of life. Kossek noted that although organizations are offering flexible work arrangements, workers may be expected to work unusual hours and have less autonomy than expected. Ross and Vasantha (2014) studied the relationship between stress and work-life balance and suggested that one's work environment affects many aspects of life, such as emotional well-being, stress levels, self-efficacy, health conditions, and job satisfaction and stability. In review of Ross and Vasantha's assessment, there is a high probability for the changes in the workplace to be closely related to changes in society.

Kossek, Valcour, and Lirio's (2014) study was directed toward understanding what practices can ensure a sustainable virtual workforce. In review of the data, Kossek et al. surmised that social engagement, a healthy work-life balance, and the continual development of self-efficacy are factors that contribute to the well-being of virtual workers. With work being a major theme of life, I chose to focus my research efforts on resolving a problem that exists within the virtual workplace. Through this study, I have made a significant contribution to society by highlighting the following benefits of the virtual workplace: saves natural resources, time, and money for both workers and organizations; promotes the opportunity for work-life balance; and allows individuals with disabilities to be self-sufficient.

## Summary

Within this chapter, I introduced the research phenomenon by establishing the statistical, academic, and practical background of the study. From this information, I presented a real-world problem within the virtual workplace and explained why resolving the problem was significant to the field of management. I discussed the purpose of the study and highlighted the overarching research questions that shaped the study. I addressed my assumptions and outlined the scope and delimitations of the study. Following, I disclosed possible limitations and how each was addressed. Finally, I emphasized the significance of this study and how I have made an important contribution to practice, theory, and society.

Within Chapter 2, I present the results of an exhaustive literature review and establish a real-world problem within the virtual workplace. I explain how I went about gathering and organizing articles, statistical data, and relevant information that supported the existence of the research problem. Following, I define the conceptual framework and explained how these principles related to the research phenomenon. In Chapter 3, I justify my decision to conduct a qualitative, phenomenological study and why I chose an online questionnaire as the research instrument. I describe my role as the researcher and explain why purposefully selecting participants from the target population of virtual workers was appropriate for accomplishing the purpose of the study. Following, I outlined my data collection and analysis plan and concluded Chapter 3 by discussing the precautions taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the study and adhere to the highest ethical standards in research. In Chapter 4, I highlight the importance of conducting a pilot study and discuss

how the participants' chosen research setting contributed to the meaningfulness of the data. I included a demographic review and outlined the data collection and analysis process. I concluded Chapter 4 by explaining how I established the trustworthiness of the study outcomes. Finally, within Chapter 5, I discuss my interpretation of the data and explain my strategy for mitigating any limitations that could have negatively affected the study outcomes. I conclude Chapter 5 by making recommendations for future research, discussing the implications for practice, theory, and practice.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The general problem in this study was that organizations risk a decline in productivity and sustainability if the factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers are not thoroughly explored (Allen et al., 2015; Bartel et al., 2012; Bentley et al., 2016; Dahlstrom, 2013; Davis & Cates, 2013). The specific problem was the limited documented information regarding the factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers; therefore, the ability to successfully manage and lead virtual workers may be compromised (Maher & Bedawy, 2015). The purpose of this study was to address the problem by exploring the lived experiences of individual virtual workers.

To understand the challenges and opportunities associated with the phenomenon of the virtual workplace, I performed an exhaustive review of literature, which resulted in approximately 200 supporting documents. Along with expanding my knowledge base, I found plenty of recently published articles to establish the background of this study. Within the literature, I also found that researchers have focused heavily on the understanding the virtual workplace, but most concluded that more research is warranted. As I read and studied the results put forth by other researchers, I found that few qualitative phenomenological studies were directed toward exploring the lived experiences of virtual workers. I also noticed a gap within the literature directed toward exploring the differences between virtual and collocated work environments.

As I reviewed academic literature, business news, and industry statistics, I began to question whether the paradigm of managers has evolved as quickly as the virtual

workplace. This was a consistent trend within the literature as researchers often concluded by suggesting the need for more research conducted from the individual virtual worker's perspective. Moreover, researchers such as Jerome (2013) maintained the theoretical principles of Bandura (1977) and Maslow (1943) could be used as lens to explore the needs and professional development of the individual virtual worker. As I progressed through the literature review, I gained confidence in my decision to explore factors that affect the job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers.

Although each step of the research process was important, I considered the literature review to be the foundation for establishing a real-world problem within the virtual workplace. Along with finding relevant articles published by well-respected professors and practitioners such as Dr. Kossek, Dr. Allen, and Dr. Bell, I found data published by industry researchers such as Dr. Lister, who is the president of Global Workplace Analytics. I also exchanged e-mails with these key individuals and was able to ask questions regarding the direction of my research efforts. As I reviewed their ideas for future research and projections for an increase in the number of virtual workers, I realized the significance of resolving the research problem by adding to the limited amount of qualitative studies conducted on the factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers.

In the upcoming section, I explain my literature review strategy, which included the search engines used to access online libraries, research databases, and websites. I provide key search terms, the method of data retrieval, and the process for organizing and storing the articles and information used to support the exploration of the research

problem. Further, in this chapter, I explain how I formed the conceptual framework around the principles of Bandura (1977) and Maslow (1943). Finally, I justified the need to address the research problem by providing an extensive summation of current literature.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

To gain a better perspective of the research phenomenon, I explored online academic libraries, databases, and statistics from WorldatWork, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the U.S. General Services Administration, the Global Workplace Analytics, and the Telework Research Network. I also reviewed business articles and current workplace developments published by MIT Sloan School of Management and the *Journal of Technology Management and Innovation*. I studied the progression of the virtual workplace by visiting business news websites such as Forbes and the Huffington Post. I also took into account the results of case studies published by *Harvard Business Review* and relevant dissertations. When reviewing the literature and relevant dissertations, I paid attention to the reference listings and selected current articles that could also be used to support my ideas.

During my literature review and search for supporting information, I obtained data that aligned with academic requirements. I found the work of other researchers to be instrumental to explaining the history and progression of virtualization, establishing the background of my study, and tracing the origin of theoretical principles. While I was performing the literature review, I was able to find a large number of scholarly and industry-related articles and statistics that were published within the past 5 years.

Moreover, I was able to collect more than enough articles to justify addressing the research problem. I also found Walden University's and Bethel University's online libraries to be critical resources for this study. Within these libraries, I explored the following databases: Academic Search Premier, Business Source Premier, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, CINAHL with Full Text, Literary Reference Center, OmniFile Full Text Select, and PsycArticles.

Criteria for online library searches consisted of key words, Boolean/Phrase, full text, references available, publication date range when possible, peer reviewed, full text, and abstract available. Additional literature searches were conducted through the following research databases: Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, ProQuest, Academia, and ResearchGate. Four Google Scholar alerts were put in place to monitor the Internet for relevant articles published within the last 5 years that contained key words, terms, and phrases. I also joined the virtual communities of ResearchGate and Academia and received notifications when new articles relevant to the research phenomenon were published.

As the articles were retrieved, I determined the credibility of the author and reviewed the date of publication, the title, the abstract, the key words, the suggestions for future research, and implications for practice. All relevant articles were organized in individually titled folders and saved by the following criteria: the year of publication, the author's last name, and the article title. I tracked the relevance of each article by creating lists in Microsoft Word for each folder. Creating the lists helped me manage a large number of articles and I included the most critical information: the APA reference of

each article, key words, terms, and phrases, and a brief explanation of how the article related to the study. By listing this information, I saved time and was able to review articles as needed.

Whether searching for academic articles, dissertations, statistics, or business news publications, I restricted all searches to a 5-year date range and used the following keywords, terms, and phrases within each database: *virtual workplace isolation, organizational identity, workplace loneliness, Bandura, Maslow, managing virtual teams, personality and performance, work outcomes, job satisfaction of virtual workers, virtual workers, telework, self-efficacy, virtual competencies, virtualization, autonomy, motivation, and professional training*. By establishing specific criteria to guide the literature search, I was able to retrieve supportive data and relevant scholarly literature from well over 100 sources. Within the references section, at least 85% of the peer-reviewed articles were published within the last 5 years and were concluded with suggestions for future research on the research problem. Additionally, I referenced data from eight reliable government websites and six seminal books written by highly regarded theorists such as Bandura, Giorgi, Maslow, Husserl, Lazarsfeld, and Moustakas. As I reviewed these books, a correlation was formed between my expected outcomes of this study and the principles of Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory and Maslow's (1943) needs theory. From these observations, I was able to rationalize and shape the conceptual framework of this study.



## Conceptual Framework

### Self-Efficacy Theory

Bandura (1977) introduced self-efficacy as the missing element of most cognitive social theories. Bandura posited that self-efficacy is defined by an individual's confidence in their abilities to meet expectations and achieve goals (Mulki & Jaramillo, 2011). Bandura (1986) claimed that self-efficacy is developed by the influence of external factors such as experiences, observations, constructive criticism, and the encouragement of others. Zimmerman (2000) suggested that self-efficacy correlates with performance and can be applied to any type of work setting or activity. Moriarty (2014) concurred by proposing the measurement of self-efficacy can be used as a good indicator of how much effort and time an individual is willing to invest in learning, overcoming challenges, and reaching or exceeding expectations. Moriarty explained that due to the predictive power of self-efficacy, Bandura's (1986) theory has been applied to the disciplines of business, mathematics, social studies, and literacy.

Lunenburg (2011) supported Bandura's (1977, 1986) and Moriarty's (2014) conclusions and cited past experience as the best indicator of future performance. Purvanova (2014) surveyed 376 virtual workers from 18 organizations that employ virtual teams. Purvanova concluded that measurements of organizational commitment and overall job satisfaction were generally higher if the worker possessed a high level of self-efficacy. IBM, Boeing, Hewlett Packard, Deloitte & Touche, and Best Buy are some of the companies that have benefited from virtual work arrangements. Each of these companies have credited the success of virtual teams to hiring qualified and experienced

individuals that possess complementary skills and are good problem solvers (Purvanova, 2014).

Along similar lines, Bartel et al. (2012) noted that experienced virtual workers tend to have a higher level of self-esteem as opposed to recently hired virtual workers. This aligns with Bandura's (1986) assumption that experiences and observations can greatly affect an individual's level of self-efficacy and their ability to adjust to changing environments. Kacmar et al. (2013) studied the relationship of ethical leadership and employee outcomes by surveying 136 pairs of managers and employees working in a semiautonomous branch of the United States government. The data were collected over a 3-month timeframe and the branch director recruited participants by sending out an e-mail. The e-mail disclosed the purpose of the study and assured participants of confidentiality and requested their voluntary participation. In using Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, Kacmar et al. found that employees learn from each other and that observation contributes to the development of ethical values and social skills.

Critical to working in an autonomous environment, Kacmar et al. (2103) concluded that workers that practice self-evaluation tend to be more motivated to become successful. Additionally, Kacmar et al. noted these individuals are more likely to figure out ways to solve problems and achieve work outcomes without direct supervision. The data from Kacmar et al.'s study could be used to support the idea that self-efficacious individuals may be more successful because they have the ability to adapt to changing environments. This conclusion builds upon Lunenburg's (2011) argument regarding the relevance of leadership and management practices when considering the development of

self-efficacy among employees. Researchers have suggested that managers can motivate virtual workers by implementing ongoing professional development and mentoring programs and by establishing clearly defined job expectations (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014).

Mulki and Jaramillo (2011) measured how workplace isolation, the employees' level of self-efficacy, and different management styles influence the job satisfaction and performance of virtual salespeople. Through this study, Mulki and Jaramillo hypothesized that self-efficacy negatively related to workplace isolation. Responses were gathered from 346 salespeople within the pharmaceutical field. Mulki and Jaramillo found that people with high levels of self-efficacy tend to be strong critical thinkers and capable of thriving in autonomous environments. Much like Bandura (1977), Mulki and Jaramillo concluded that self-efficacy can be indicative of an individual's performance and ability to manage through challenging situations. Bandura's self-efficacy theory relates to the present study and the research questions because I conducted the study at the individual level. As an individual, the participants were able to describe how their level of self-efficacy has affected their job satisfaction and work outcomes. Furthermore, principles of Maslow's (1943) needs theory correlate with Bandura's ideas because Maslow posited the possible of an individual reaching the pivotal level of self-efficacy depends largely on whether their basic needs have been fulfilled.

### **Hierarchy of Needs Theory**

Understanding how people are motivated has eluded theorists, psychologists, and managers for many years (Soni, 2013). Maslow (1943) introduced the hierarchy of needs

theory as a possible solution to the mystery of human motivation and behavior. Although Maslow's ideas have been criticized as being outdated for the modern workplace, Jerome (2013) concluded that Maslow's need theory is timeless and relevant in every sector of business. Data from Kacmar et al.'s (2013) study on the effect of ethical leadership practices supports the idea that most workers have an inherent need to feel confident about their future and their contribution to an organization. Despite differing opinions regarding Maslow's needs theory, most theorists and practitioners would agree that highly motivated individuals are a critical element to ensuring the quality and sustainability of an organization (Kaur, 2013; Soni, 2013; Tay & Diener, 2011). Most would further agree that individuals with a high level of motivation generally require less direct supervision, have a higher likelihood of successfully adapting to challenging environments, and are better positioned to achieve or exceed expectations (Kaur, 2013; Lombardo & Mierzwa, 2012; Soni, 2013; Tay & Diener, 2011).

For example, Lam and Lau (2012) conducted an empirical study to determine how the perception of loneliness affected the performance and motivation of 532 teachers working within the private and public school system of Macao. Based on the results, Lam and Lau contended that lonely workers struggle to achieve personal satisfaction and are likely to lack self-esteem and a high level of motivation. Lam and Lau also agreed with Maslow's rationalization that individuals need social interaction and seek to fulfill the need of belonging. Without the fulfillment of belonging, the possibility of poor performance and job associated stress threatens productivity and the organizational

identity of workers. Finally, Lam and Lau encouraged future research be conducted on the relationship between professional isolation and performance.

In researching employee engagement, Soni (2013) found that employee motivation is often driven by social engagement and the sense of belonging. In a review of Maslow's needs theory, Soni determined that some organizations attempt to drive individual performance by offering pay increases and other extrinsic incentives. Although, this practice may fulfill the lower level needs of being able to provide a home and achieve financial stability, a void may remain within the realm of higher level needs such as social engagement and the employees' sense of purpose. Soni cautioned that as the modern workplace moves toward virtualization, managers must place more emphasis on connecting and engaging with employees to bolster organizational identity and job satisfaction.

In studying how management styles influence the job satisfaction of virtual workers, Lombardo and Mierzwa (2012) implemented the principles of Maslow's theory to analyze employee commitment and motivation. Lombardo and Mierzwa theorized that when managers encourage meaningful and diverse work assignments, the job satisfaction, engagement, and organizational citizenship and commitment of virtual workers is evident. With telecommuting continuing to gain momentum, Lombardo and Mierzwa concluded that future research is needed to develop virtual management and employee training programs that positively influence motivation and organizational commitment.

Lastly, after performing two field studies on the effects of professional isolation on the perceived respect of virtual workers, Bartel et al. (2012) recognized motivation as

being a direct result of an individual's perception of how well they identify with an organization and their perception of acceptance among peers and supervisors. Moreover, Bartel et al. argued that organizational identity is a strong motivator and found that individuals who feel connected to the organization experience a higher level of job satisfaction and motivation. In contrast, a lack of organizational identity can lead to the perception of isolation and low job satisfaction. To establish organizational identity among virtual workers, Bartel et al. concluded that managers should avoid mimicking direct supervision practices that are often associated with collocated environments. Instead, managers can fulfill the need of belonging by ensuring that virtual workers have an opportunity to establish and maintain strong social and physiological ties to the organization and their peers. After reviewing the literature, I decided the principles of Maslow's (1943) needs theory were well suited for this study as I chose to explore the lived experiences of individual virtual workers. Through the application of Maslow's needs theory, I contributed to the current literature and offered insight that might explain why understanding the individual worker's needs is a critical element to ensuring a high level of job satisfaction and positive work outcomes.

### **Literature Review**

Employing virtual workers is one way that organizations are meeting the demands of global competition, recruiting highly skilled individuals, overcoming financial constraints, and protecting natural resources (Bentley et al., 2016; Lister & Harnish, 2011; Moser & Axtell, 2015; Mulki & Jaramillo, 2011). Today, virtual work arrangements are common and with appropriate technology, some job responsibilities can

be performed anywhere and at any time (Bartel et al., 2012; Belle, Burley, & Long, 2015; Bentley et al., 2016; Davis & Cates, 2013; Greer & Payne, 2014). These responsibilities may mirror those required of collocated workers, yet the nature of virtual work arrangements is a departure from the traditional office prototype (Bartel et al., 2012; Maher & Bedawy, 2015; Montoya, Massey, & Lockwood, 2011; Sardeshmukh, Sharma, & Golden, 2012). Researchers have suggested that although changes have occurred in when, how, and where work can be conducted, management paradigms, practices, and strategies have not evolved as quickly (Greer & Payne, 2014). Hoch and Kozlowski (2014) asserted that while global competition and advances in technology have positioned virtual work as an integral structure, managers and virtual workers may struggle to adapt to the nature of virtual work.

Greer and Payne (2014) discovered that some organizations allow employees to work offsite without first addressing the benefits and challenges associated with virtual work arrangements. This practice can have a negative effect on the job satisfaction and motivation of virtual workers because they may not know what to expect. Researchers at Stanford University found that some managers assume virtual workers are aware of possible challenges like isolation and limited social interaction with coworkers (Bloom et al., 2013). In studying a large Chinese travel agency, managers were surprised when some virtual workers expressed dissatisfaction with virtual work arrangements. The workers requested to return to the office and cited the lack of social interaction with coworkers, feelings of loneliness, and the inability to cope with the isolating nature of virtual work as primary reasons (Bloom et al., 2013).

In reviewing the literature, I found only a few qualitative studies conducted on the factors that influence the job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers (Davis & Cates, 2013; Greer & Payne, 2014; Maher & Bedawy, 2015; Moriarty, 2014). I also learned that managers and workers struggle to adapt to the nature of virtual work, especially if there has not been adequate training, clear expectations established, or strategies incorporated to ensure a high level of connectivity and support (Bartel et al., 2012; Greer & Payne, 2014; Lautsch & Kossek, 2011).

Through an extensive literature review, I gained a better understanding of the topics considered to be most significant to the success of the virtual workplace. Within the upcoming sections of this chapter, I explained the perception of job satisfaction, described the nature of virtual work, and defined common characteristics of a virtual worker. Finally, based on existing literature, I highlighted key factors that could affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers. I found the most prominent factors to be individual virtual competencies, motivation, organizational identity, and autonomy. According to the existing literature, researchers found that each of these factors can affect the virtual worker's job satisfaction and work outcomes, yet could be compromised if the worker feels isolated or disconnected from the organization. As I chose to conduct a qualitative phenomenological study, I questioned the possibility of unknown factors and decided to explore the lived experiences of virtual workers.

### **Job Satisfaction**

Job satisfaction is a term used to describe an emotional state or the perception that occurs when an individual appraises the aspects of their job (Bentley et al., 2016; Sageer,



Rafat, & Agarwal, 2012). Bentley et al. (2016) studied ways that organizations can increase the job satisfaction of virtual workers. The study was conducted among 28 New Zealand companies that employed virtual workers. The sample size consisted of 804 participants with 53% being male and 47% being female. The majority of participants were married and the average age was around 31 years old. The participants were permanent employees that work full-time in a virtual capacity. Bentley et al.'s (2016) study was consistent with the scope of my study as I was seeking to understand the research phenomenon from the virtual worker's perspective. However, Bentley et al.'s study was quantitative in nature and limited by a cross-sectional design. Bentley et al.'s study was also weakened as most of the participants were low-intensity workers, meaning they did not consistently work three or more days per week as a virtual worker. However, Bentley et al. produced data to support the idea that not all virtual workers experience isolation in a negative manner and argued that much depends on the level of organizational support perceived by the worker. Bentley et al. concluded that if a worker feels valued and their social, personal, and technical needs are met, there is a higher probability the worker will enjoy a sense of autonomy instead of struggling to overcome the perception of social or professional isolation. Conversely, Bentley et al. cautioned that some workers are not successful working in a virtual capacity and that management is faced with the challenge of discerning which workers are best suited to work in socially isolating environments.

Bentley et al. (2016) concluded the study with recommendations for more research on the lived experiences of high intensity workers who perform job

responsibilities in a virtual environment three or more days per week. With virtual work becoming a major organizational trend, Bentley et al. found that research conducted on understanding the factors that affect the job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers will become increasingly important. Bentley et al. also suggested that researchers broaden the number of variables that could be related to the success of virtual workers. Some of Bentley et al.'s ideas included the measurement of family-life conflicts, the exploration of virtual work within different industry sectors, and reviewing how job types and the virtual worker's role within the organization could affect work outcomes.

Dahlstrom (2013) studied the effects of virtual work and found that job satisfaction is a critical component that influences how well an individual performs job responsibilities, their decision to remain with an organization, and their level of organizational commitment. Dahlstrom noted discrepancies within the literature regarding the level of job satisfaction experienced by virtual workers and argued for more emphasis on understanding the dynamics of virtual work. Dahlstrom offered that managers may not fully understand the needs of virtual workers. Therefore, it can be challenging to ensure that virtual workers thrive in an autonomous and possibly isolating environment.

Some researchers have argued that flexibility and being able to work from home promotes a higher level of job satisfaction among virtual workers (Wheatley, 2012). Nevertheless, some researchers have argued that lower levels of job satisfaction have resulted from limited social interactions with supervisors and coworkers and the perception of isolation (Davis & Cates, 2013). To better understand the conflicting

evidence regarding the effectiveness of virtual work arrangements, Wheatley (2012) performed an “empirical analysis comprised of descriptive and panel regression analysis of 17 waves of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) between 1993 and 2009” (p. 225). During this timeframe, Wheatley sought to determine the changes that occurred within the virtual workplace, how male and female virtual workers managed their time, and how working at home affects job satisfaction level.

Within the data, Wheatley (2012) noted an increase in the number of organizations offering virtual work arrangements. One of Wheatley’s most prominent observations was that more organizations were offering virtual work arrangements, even though most did not have formal processes and procedures in place. Therefore, the opportunity for confusion was evident, which consequently has been cited as having a negative effect on job satisfaction and work outcomes. Even more concerning is that Greer and Payne (2014) and Bentley et al. (2016) arrived at a similar conclusion when conducting studies on the virtual workplace four to 5 years later. Based on the observations of these researchers, it is arguable that some organizations are implementing virtual work arrangements without a clearly defined strategy.

Although Wheatley (2012) highlighted an obvious need for organizational improvement, significant benefits derived from virtual work arrangements were evident. According to the data found in the BHPS, Wheatley surmised that most virtual workers experienced an adequate level of job satisfaction. Within the data, Wheatley found that autonomy, the ability to balance family, household, and work needs, no commute time, fewer distractions, and less stress were the most notable contributors to job satisfaction.

When exploring the time use of men and women, Wheatley posited that women appeared to struggle with time management and the separation of work and household responsibilities. This was attributed to women taking on the role of the primary caregiver in the home. Conversely, men were observed as spending more time doing paid work and seemed to experience fewer interruptions.

As Wheatley (2012) reflected on the data, he agreeably highlighted both opportunities and challenges within the virtual workplace. He argued that overall, virtual workers experience a higher level of job satisfaction than collocated workers. Mothers, especially, seemed to be the most satisfied with the flexibility of working at home. However, Wheatley surmised that virtual workers face the following challenges; difficulty balancing work and personal time, limited technology experience, fewer opportunities to interact with supervisors and coworkers, the perception of isolation, career stagnation, and concerns of being overlooked for promotions. Finally, practitioners and researchers have an opportunity to improve the virtual workplace by building upon Wheatley's thorough analysis of time-use and satisfaction among virtual workers.

Through the lens of social exchange theory, Pomirleanu and Mariadoss (2015) performed a quantitative study to measure the drivers of job satisfaction and the relationship of organizational support, trust, and job satisfaction. Introduced by Homans (1958), and later expanded upon by Blau (1964), social exchange theory is based on the principle that actions, behaviors, attitudes, feelings, and perceptions are the result of a physiological exchange between two individuals (Chen & Hew, 2015). From a managerial aspect, as managers offer organizational support, training, compensation, and

communication, an intangible exchange occurs as workers reciprocate through performance, job satisfaction, trust, and organizational commitment (Jerome, 2013). Pomirleanu and Mariadoss chose to explore the theoretical concepts of social exchange by selecting 157 remote sales representatives within the health care industry. Findings from the study were consistent with the assumption that organizational support is often reciprocated by the level of trust, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction experienced by the worker. Finally, Pomirleanu and Mariadoss maintained that job satisfaction can be increased by managers establishing a supportive physiological presence, yet avoiding excessive micro-management techniques which may threaten the self-efficacy and proactive behaviors of virtual workers.

Maier and Bedawy (2015) performed a qualitative study of the core practices of managing virtual employees and found the job satisfaction of virtual workers can be affected by the physiological distance from their manager. Maier and Bedawy stressed that managers can increase job satisfaction and help virtual workers overcome isolation by establishing networking opportunities, setting clearly defined goals, and offering training that builds the competencies needed to succeed in a virtual environment. Berry (2011) studied the effectiveness of virtual teams and found that physical separation from supervisors and coworkers is a major challenge that can affect productivity and job satisfaction. In reviewing academic literature, Berry maintained that some virtual workers may not be productive or satisfied with virtual work arrangements because they feel isolated or detached from other workers. To enhance effectiveness and job satisfaction of virtual workers, Berry concluded that managers should realize that managing virtual

workers requires different skill sets, competencies, and expertise. Other managerial necessities include establishing a high level of technical support, promoting consistent communication, and providing a friendly and supportive atmosphere.

Finally, in reviewing the literature on the relationship of job satisfaction and virtual work, Wang and Haggerty (2011) found that most research has been conducted at the organizational and technological level. Wang and Haggerty maintained that although managerial responsibilities and technology are critical topics of study, more researchers should explore the individual worker's responsibility in ensuring their own competencies align with the needs of the organization. Researchers have found the nature of virtual work to be complex, yet virtual workers possessing the desire to increase their knowledge base and embrace opportunities to develop competencies tend to experience a higher level of job satisfaction, have proficient time management skills, and achieve expected work outcomes. The first step to ensuring job satisfaction and expected work outcomes is for managers and workers to realize the complexities and challenges associated with the nature of virtual work arrangements (Bloom et al., 2013).

### **The Nature of Virtual Work**

Researchers have described the concept of virtual work as work done outside a collocated workplace environment, such as a home office or other geographically convenient locations (Dahlstrom, 2013; Gajendran, Harrison, & Delaney-Klinger, 2014). Bentley et al. (2016) suggested that virtual work is usually conducted without personal interaction with supervisors and coworkers. Lautsch and Kossek (2011) added that virtual workers usually fulfill job responsibilities, communicate, and connect with supervisors

and coworkers through the technology of computers, cell phones, video conferencing, shared databases, and company Intranets. Although advances in technology have affected organizations and people in positive ways, managers may find it challenging to change customary management practices and manage workers and communicate mainly through technology. Even with a host of electronic communication tools such as the option to host a Google Hangout and use AnyMeeting for web conferencing, some managers and workers find the separation factor has jeopardized the connectedness of actually being there (Bartel et al., 2012; Moser & Axtell, 2015; Sardeshmukh et al., 2012).

Moser and Axtell (2015) studied the nature and complexities of virtual work and argued that regardless of technical advancements, social interaction is an important element that is difficult to replicate in virtual workplace settings. Moser and Axtell (2015) further noted that virtual communication can hinder an individual's ability to interpret social cues and engage with supervisors and co-workers. Soni (2013) looked at a 12-point Gallup questionnaire and reviewed various studies and surveys to better understand how employee engagement affects productivity. Soni (2013) surmised that as more organizations implement technology and virtual work arrangements, there will be a greater need to engage employees and establish their sense of organizational identity. Belle et al. (2015) recognized the challenges of establishing organizational belonging among virtual workers and noted the integral relationship with engagement, productivity, and performance. Glikson and Erez (2013) studied social norms in virtual work among participants from five different countries and found that participants with a low level of organizational identity may begin to feel lonely and isolated. The isolating nature of

virtual work presented an opportunity for managers to examine and improve core management practices that meet the needs of today's diverse workplace (Maher & Bedawy, 2015).

Davis and Cates (2013) investigated the relationship of workplace isolation and the engagement of virtual workers by using a correlation research design. Davis and Cates (2013) extended the study to determine if workplace isolation and the gender of virtual workers were related. The study population was comprised of 472 virtual workers with approximately 60% being women and 40% being men. Davis and Cates (2013) did not reveal the industry sector or mention a particular organization, but rather discussed recruiting the participants by posting an announcement through electronic mail. As the participants responded electronically with their consent to participate in the study, they were e-mailed a survey link. The survey results were gathered using Zoomerang.com and then analyzed.

Davis and Cates (2013) concluded that workplace isolation does affect employee engagement. Managerial implications included the suggestion that workers will become disengaged from the organization if they do not experience human interaction. Finally, Davis and Cates (2013) did not find that gender affects the level of workplace isolation experienced. That portion of the study was inconclusive, but they felt confident in suggesting that isolation is a major factor that can affect the success of virtual work arrangements. Since the number of virtual workers is expected to increase, Davis and Cates (2013) argued that workplace isolation and the possibility for limited employee engagement are critical problems within the virtual workplace.



Through a previous study, Fonner and Roloff (2010, 2012) uncovered discrepancies within the literature regarding the benefits and challenges of virtual work. Fonner and Roloff (2010, 2012) analyzed the relationship between virtual work and job satisfaction by using a multiple mediation approach and a path analysis. Babbie's (2010) snowball strategy was used to recruit 192 participants through two telework websites and by e-mailing personal contacts and the alumni of a mid-sized university. Robinson (2014) compared Babbie's (2010) strategy to a referral process for selecting qualified candidates based on the suggestion of other participants. Fonner and Roloff (2010, 2012) used data from the study to link the flexibility and autonomous nature of virtual work to high performance and job satisfaction of virtual workers. Findings from the study also supported the notion that collocated workers may contend with office distractions, office politics, unnecessary meetings, and background noise, whereas virtual workers may have more control over their work environment (Van Yperen, Rietzschel, & De Jonge, 2014). Fonner and Roloff (2010, 2012) posited the frequency of information exchange and the individual virtual worker's competence and reliance on technology are determining factors in whether the nature of virtual work is conducive to job satisfaction.

Wang and Haggerty (2011) studied the relationship between individual virtual competencies and the work outcomes of virtual workers. A review of academic literature led to the conclusion that most research on virtual work has been performed at the organizational, technical, or social level. Wang and Haggerty (2011) discovered the most critical element of virtual work, *the individual worker*, has gone understudied. Through an empirical study on virtual work, Wang and Haggerty (2011) distributed an online

survey and collected data from 199 participants. The participants were alumni of a North American business school and were all knowledge-based workers who use computers to perform their jobs. Wang and Haggerty (2011) hypothesized that individual virtual competence is an essential characteristic of successful virtual workers and supervisors. Data from the study was used to support the assumption that individuals with higher levels of individual virtual competencies are more likely to perform better in an autonomous environment than those with low levels of individual virtual competencies. Wang and Haggerty (2011) defined the construct of individual virtual competencies as an individual's knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) to function and communicate with others in virtual and technical capacity. Going further, Wang and Haggerty (2011) argued that KSAs are determined by the measurement of virtual self-efficacy, virtual media skills, and virtual social skills.

In reviewing the literature, there are supportive and opposing views on the topic of virtualization. Most researchers and business professionals agree that virtual work arrangements could be the answer to many organizational woes and the demands of globalization (Maher & Bedawy, 2015). Upon Nilles (1976) coining the phrase *telework* in response to the oil crisis of the 1970s, researchers have sought to better understand the complexities and nature of the virtual workplace. As an organization is comprised of people, Wang and Haggerty's (2011) study of individual virtual competencies could lend a significant amount of insight to both managers and workers. The following subsection, *The Virtual Worker*, includes an explanation of how an individual's level of virtual competencies could be indicative of their ability to work in a virtual workplace

environment (Wang & Haggerty, 2011). After performing a constant comparative analysis throughout the literature review process, I decided to incorporate a research question that addressed how virtual competencies influence job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers.

### **The Virtual Worker**

Surveys conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013), and Global Workplace Analytics and the Telework Research Network (2013) have been referenced to suggest an increase in the number of virtual workers. Busch et al. (2011) found that well-known organizations such as Aetna, Charles Schwab, CitiGroup, Cisco Systems, and Prudential offer virtual work arrangements to at least 50% of their workforce. Greer and Payne (2014) asserted that in 2012, 23% of the United States workforce performed at least some of their work from home. Hoch and Kozlowski (2014) projected the use of teams working under some degree of virtuality will increase to 80% within companies employing a minimum of 10,000 employees. The virtuality of teams means that some job responsibilities may be performed by team members from different cultural backgrounds and across geographically dispersed locations and time zones (Gould, 1997). In leading Stanford University's telework experiment, Bloom et al. (2013) found the number of virtual workers within the United States had more than tripled since 1980. They also learned that virtual work arrangements span a variety of employment sectors such as sales, real estate, management, and software engineers. Although study results were promising, Bloom et al. (2013) concluded that virtual work is not well suited for

everyone and only highly disciplined individuals tend to succeed in a virtual environment.

Upon a review of academic literature and business statistics, most scholars agree that virtualization has transformed the workplace. Yet, defining the ideal virtual workers and determining who is best suited to work in a virtual environment has presented a unique challenge for managers (Wang & Haggerty, 2011). Davis and Cates (2013) noted the demographic similarities among virtual workers and found most to be well-educated professionals who work independently or as part of a global team. Virtual workers usually depend heavily on technology such as computers, cell phones, or video conferencing to perform job responsibilities and communicate with supervisors and co-workers (Gazor, 2012). Due to the technological nature of virtual work, researchers have suggested that only individuals with specific characteristics and skills are suited for virtual work (Wang & Haggerty, 2011). Maher and Bedawy (2015) explored the basic profile of successful virtual workers and found the necessity of individual virtual competencies to be a consistent theme throughout academic literature. Through studying the emergence of the virtual workplace, Wang and Haggerty (2011) theorized that successful virtual workers must possess adequate individual virtual competencies in order to succeed. Within the following sections, I explained how individual virtual competencies could significantly affect the job satisfaction and motivation of virtual workers.

### **Individual Virtual Competencies**

To offer a thorough explanation, Wang and Haggerty (2011) categorized the construct of virtual competency into the dimensions of virtual self-efficacy, virtual media skills, and virtual social skills. Building on Wang's and Haggerty's rationalization, Busch et al. (2011) conducted a case study of nine prominent organizations and found that some managers assume the same skills and competencies of traditional workers will suffice in a virtual environment. Busch et al. (2011) concluded that more emphasis should be placed on developing the individual competencies of virtual workers and managers. Realizing the dynamic nature of virtual work, Hoch and Kozlowski (2014) used a field sample of 101 virtual teams to evaluate how traditional leadership styles, structures, and support affect the performance of virtual workers.

In reviewing the data, Hoch and Kozlowski (2014) found distinct differences between leading virtual workers and traditional, collocated workers. Hoch and Kozlowski (2014) also referenced statistical data to demonstrate the increased number of organizations offering virtual work arrangements. While the statistics could be used to support the argument that virtual work arrangements are being successfully implemented, Hoch and Kozlowski (2014) considered the limited amount of research directed toward virtual workplace leadership. After reviewing the literature and available data, Hoch and Kozlowski (2014) suggested that virtual workplace managers should explore alternative work strategies that build upon transformational leadership practices and open management communication. Hoch and Kozlowski (2014) recommended future research

directed toward understanding how self-leadership and self-management can affect the job satisfaction and performance of virtual workers.

Maher and Bedawy (2015) studied the core practices needed to lead virtual workers and found that significant progress has been made because organizations are realizing the differences among traditional and virtual workplace settings. Some organizations have seen a higher level of job satisfaction among virtual workers by implementing training programs that build the key competencies needed to be a successful virtual worker (Greer & Payne, 2014). Researchers have concluded that levels of virtual self-efficacy, virtual media skills, and virtual social skills may be indicative of how well a virtual worker is motivated, adapts to isolating environments, and experiences long-term job satisfaction (Busch et al., 2011; Greer & Payne, 2014; Maher & Bedawy, 2015; Wang & Haggerty, 2011).

### **Virtual Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy, a performance based principle of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, has been defined as confidence in one's knowledge, skills, and resources to achieve specific outcomes (Moriarty, 2014). According to Moriarty (2014), Bandura's theory has been applied to a wide range of subject areas including education and management. In Moriarty's (2014) *Mathematics for Initial Teacher Education Students* project, the framework of self-efficacy was used to measure a teacher's level of self-confidence when teaching others how to solve mathematical problems. Through this study, Moriarty (2014) concluded that teachers with a low level of self-efficacy tend to struggle with teaching mathematics and blamed their lack of ability on anxieties, limited

knowledge, or improper training. Moriarty's (2014) final assessment aligned with Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy being linked to an individual's performance and their willingness to invest time and effort in learning alternative methods of instruction.

Moriarty's (2014) study of the predictive power of self-efficacy could be mirrored within the field of management. In measuring a worker's level of self-efficacy, managers may be able to predict whether a worker has the fortitude to solve problems, efficiently manage time, and meet expected job outcomes without direct supervision and face to face interaction. Managers could follow Moriarty's research model to pinpoint key competencies of successful virtual workers and use this knowledge to create training plans for other potential virtual workers. This practice could lead to increased job satisfaction and achieved work outcomes.

Realizing the shift toward virtual work arrangements, Maher and Bedawy (2015) qualitatively explored the core practices, challenges, and opportunities associated with managing virtual workers. Maher and Bedawy (2015) maintained that self-efficacy was a consistent theme throughout academic literature and credited this trend to the decentralized nature of virtual work. As face to face interaction may be limited, Maher and Bedawy (2015) asserted that virtual workers should possess a high degree of technical competence and the wherewithal to solve problems and efficiently manage time and resources. Maher and Bedawy (2015) further noted that self-efficacious individuals tend to like autonomous environments because it gives them a higher sense of control. Yet, the same sense of control could be crippling for individuals with low self-efficacy. Maher and Bedawy (2015) further learned that although research on virtualization is

plenteous, a significant gap remains in understanding how to help virtual workers overcome the feeling of isolation. This is a critical issue because researchers have argued that job satisfaction is relative to the virtual workers' perceived physiological distance from the supervisor. Maher and Bedawy (2015) concluded that organizations are looking for managers to bolster self-efficacy by establishing core practices, setting clear goals, ensuring regular communication, and developing strategies that strengthen relationships regardless of geographical distance.

### **Virtual Media Skills**

Due to technological advancements, the way people work and communicate has changed (Waldeck, Durante, Helmuth, and Marcia, 2012). Amid the changes within the workplace, Davis and Cates (2013) found that not everyone is capable of adapting to the virtual workplace. Researchers have found various reasons why this problem exists, yet there is a consensus among the literature that suggests virtual work arrangements will continue to gain momentum and more people will be expected to work in a virtual capacity (Allen et al., 2015; Anderson, Vega, & Kaplan, 2014; Bentley et al., 2016; Davis & Cates, 2013; Maher & Bedawy, 2015). Bentley et al. (2016) credited technology as the catalyst for the increasing number of virtual workers and defined technological abilities and support as being critical elements that contribute to job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers.

To better understand how the virtual workplace affects employee well-being, Anderson et al. (2014) conducted a quantitative study among 102 participants from a large United States government agency. All of the participants worked in a virtual



environment, at least 3 days per week. Anderson et al. (2014) concluded that differences in individual personality traits and technology skills can moderate how work locations affect a worker's well-being. For instance, virtual workers who were not open to new experiences and technologies perceived themselves to be isolated and disconnected from the organization. Chen and Hew (2015) studied knowledge sharing among virtual teams and reported that an individual's job satisfaction and willingness to engage with other workers may decrease if they do not feel comfortable with technology. Chen and Hew (2015) further observed that self-efficacy is a factor that contributes to an individual's ability to grasp new ideas and develop interactive technology skills.

Researchers have ascertained that virtual workers who possess the competency of virtual media skills are more likely to adapt to changing environments and be able to incorporate new technologies into job performance (Wang & Haggerty, 2011). Wang and Haggerty (2011) defined virtual media skills as an individual's ability to navigate computer systems and use technology as a means of effective communication. In researching the trends and issues of teleworking among nine organizations, Busch et al. (2011) highlighted the role of technology in keeping virtual workers connected with the organization through electronic communication. Busch et al. (2011) cautioned that virtual workers with limited technology experience might perceive themselves to be isolated and disconnected from the organization. Davis and Cates (2013) observed significant advances in communication technologies, but maintained the impersonal aspect of electronic communication could increase the perceptions of isolation.

To better understand the isolating nature of virtual work, Day and Burbach (2014) sought the opinions of eleven corporate supervisors and nine government supervisors by conducting a qualitative case study. The study was directed toward understanding the challenges of managing virtual workers. Over half of the supervisors considered virtual workers with limited technology skills to be a predominant challenge. Six of the eleven corporate supervisors expressed concern with helping virtual workers overcome the perception of isolation and reiterated the importance of hiring virtual workers who possess strong technology and virtual social skills. Day and Burbach (2014) concluded that research should be dedicated toward developing a tool to measure technology and virtual social skills, personality attributes, the ability to adapt to isolating environments, the motivation to learn independently, and the drive to achieve expected outcomes.

Raghuram and Fang (2014) arrived at a similar conclusion after studying the relationship between management strategies and virtual work outcomes in China. In this study, managers found that when virtual workers consistently use technology to complete job tasks, they become increasingly self-sufficient and are more capable of solving problems and thinking critically. Researchers have concluded that more studies should be conducted on understanding how changes in technology can affect virtual media skills and the ability to form social relationship through electronic communication outlets (Busch et al., 2011; Day & Burbach, 2014; Greer & Payne, 2014; Maher & Bedawy, 2015; Wang & Haggerty, 2011).

### **Virtual Social Skills**

Maslow (1954) put forth that human beings possess the inherent need for socialization. Through socialization, an individual can connect to other people and establish a sense of belonging and identity (Lam & Lau, 2012). According to Koehne, Shih, and Olson (2012), the lack of socialization has been a major theme that challenges the job satisfaction of virtual workers. As virtual workers are usually geographically dispersed, socialization may occur through technological communication media, such as e-mail, phone conversations, and video chats. Fonner and Rolloff (2012) studied the connectivity of virtual workers and offered that technological knowledge and the ability to effectively communicate through technology can be indicative of the virtual worker's perception of social presence and organizational identity.

Bartel et al. (2012) contributed that changes in technology and organizational structures may have an adverse effect of the socialization of virtual workers. This is especially concerning if the virtual worker is not conversant with communication technology or lacks the competency of virtual social skills. Wang and Haggerty (2011) insisted that virtual social skills go beyond technological knowledge and the ability to navigate and use technology to perform job tasks. The competency of virtual social skills encompasses the ability to recognize and interpret emotional and social cues without the benefit of face-to-face interaction. Likewise, virtual workers possessing strong virtual social skills may experience a higher level of job satisfaction because of the ability to engage and achieve expected outcomes through the venue of effective communication and social interaction with supervisors and coworkers (Raghuram & Fang, 2014; Wang &

Haggerty, 2011). Conversely, virtual workers with limited social skills may be less inclined to ask for help or share knowledge with other workers (Golden & Schoenleber, 2014). Chen and Hew (2015) asserted that an individual's attitude toward the usefulness of communication technology and the willingness to socialize through technology can influence job satisfaction and the workers desire to develop virtual social skills.

Through a teleworking experiment conducted at a large Chinese travel agency, Bloom et al. (2013) found that socialization was a predominant challenge for organizations looking to implement virtual work arrangements. Bloom et al. (2013) posited that overall; participants liked the idea of working from home and not having to commute. However, some participants decided to return to an office setting after nine months of virtual work because they missed social interaction. Conversely, other participants wanted to continue virtual work arrangements because they felt empowered and preferred a home based environment as opposed to being subjected to noisy office distractions. Consequently, Bloom et al. (2013) argued that while working from home was directly linked to high performance and improved customer service, job satisfaction scores were lower due to reports of loneliness and the inability to socialize during and after work hours.

Koehne et al. (2012) studied remote work by conducting semi-structured telephone interviews with 17 virtual workers from a variety of industry sectors, company sizes, and job responsibilities. The majority of participants reported that limited opportunities to socialize had posed threats to their performance, motivation, and job satisfaction. In reviewing previous literature, Koehne et al. (2012) found that numerous

studies have been conducted to explore ways of enabling virtual workers through communication technology and providing managers with strategies to close the distance gap of virtual work. Given the changing nature of virtual work, Waldeck et al. (2012) put forth that researchers and managers have established that virtual social and communication competencies are relative to job satisfaction, and an individual's attitude, enthusiasm, and motivation. However, few researchers have focused on understanding the individual virtual worker and what social competencies are needed to effectively communicate in a virtual environment (Waldeck et al., 2012). As the number of virtual workers is projected to increase, Koehne et al. (2012) maintained that an exploration of the individual virtual worker's experiences could help managers understand how socialization influences job satisfaction, performance, and motivation.

Although socialization is a challenge of virtual work arrangements, Koehne et al. (2012) posited that virtual workers can establish their presence by incorporating different strategies such as reaching out to supervisors to ensure accessibility and responding promptly to e-mails and messages. Hoch and Kozlowski (2014) highlighted virtual social skills and the ability to utilize electronic communication and information technology as key contributors to the success of virtual workers. Wang and Haggerty (2011) found that individuals with a high level of virtual social skills were more likely to engage with supervisors and coworkers through e-mail, instant messaging, and video chats. Chen and Hew (2015) maintained that an individual's self-efficacy and comfort level with technology can be indicative of their willingness to embrace electronic communication platforms as a means of improving virtual social skills. In contrast, Fonner and Roloff

(2012) put forth that while electronic communication promotes increased connectivity, virtual workers should balance the exchange of electronic messages and phone calls to avoid fragmented work and interruptions. Otherwise, the advantages and autonomy of virtual work arrangements may be compromised.

Busch et al. (2011) cautioned that as social isolation is a major challenge of virtual work arrangements, organizations should develop training programs and online resources to better support social interaction among virtual workers. Maher and Bedawy (2015) observed that although some organizations have established requirements for prospective virtual workers, more emphasis should be directed toward selecting virtual workers who possess virtual competencies. Moreover, virtual workers should be motivated to independently learn new skills and develop virtual competencies. Virtual workers with strong virtual competence tend to experience a higher level of job satisfaction due to their ability to establish a social presence with supervisors and gain recognition as a valuable asset to the organization (Chen & Hew, 2015).

### **Motivation**

According to Chen and Hew (2015), the motivation to learn and the willingness to use technology has been linked to increased job performance, expertise, and improved problem solving skills among virtual workers. Motivation has been described as an instinctive perception driven by intrinsic and extrinsic forces that can affect an individual's behavior, motives, energy, and commitment to achieve specific goals (Aunger & Curtis, 2013; Toe, Murhadi, & Lin, 2013). Intrinsic forces of motivation are intangible and may include verbal recognition from others, inclusion and organizational

identity, responsibility and autonomy, gained knowledge and expertise, and increased self-efficacy. Extrinsic motivational forces have been described as things that can be assigned a monetary value and may include a home or automobile, financial compensation, awards, a promotion, or a vacation (Mafini & Dlodlo, 2014).

Toe et al. (2013) used a quantitative descriptive analysis to explore the correlation between employee motivation and job satisfaction. By choosing a descriptive analysis, Toe et al. (2013) was able to establish a correlation between extrinsic and intrinsic motivational factors and job satisfaction (Landrum & Garza, 2015; Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Toe et al. (2013) chose IBM, a prominent organization that employs over 40,000 workers, for the study. The sample size included 120 IBM employees distributed across the demographic variables of age, gender, years of work experience, and educational level. From the study, Toe et al. (2013) derived findings that could be referenced by managers such as the suggestion that highly educated workers feel more satisfied when given challenging tasks. Age was another overarching factor that affected job satisfaction as younger workers appeared to be happier and older workers experienced less job satisfaction due largely to changes within the workplace. Toe et al. (2013) also found that overall, female workers are more satisfied when they have job security and relationships with coworkers and peers. In comparison, men seemed to be affected most by the fear of failure and not being able to progress within the organization.

Aligning with Toe et al. (2013), I concluded that although extrinsic factors were important, workers cited intrinsic factors as having the most effect on job satisfaction. Upon reflection, Toe et al. (2013) established that people are motivated differently, have

varying needs, and are at different levels in life. Therefore, it makes logical sense for managers to consider theoretical approaches such as Maslow's (1943) needs theory within the virtual workplace. In studying why individuals are motivated differently, Huang and Bargh (2014) established the principles of Maslow's needs theory as the basis to evaluate how individual needs and differences, situational factors, self-efficacy, and goal attainment can affect an individual's level of motivation. Huang and Bargh (2014) posited that an individual's level of motivation is guided differently by conscious and unconscious perceptions and need attainment. Consequently, the pursuit of higher order needs such as self-esteem and self-efficacy may follow upon the attainment of basic needs; mental well being, security, and socialization. Through the attainment of needs, an individual's level of motivation may increase and lead to a positive perception of job satisfaction and goal-oriented behavior (Jerome, 2013).

According to Jerome (2013), Maslow's needs theory is applicable to organizational success and the success of individual workers. Through the application of Maslow's theory, managers can motivate workers and improve organizational outcomes. Maslow (1954) implied a high emphasis should be placed on the development of an organizational culture that supports the individual workers' development. Ultimately, managers that care about the workers' need have a higher likelihood of establishing a positive work environment regardless of location. Through the application of Maslow's needs theory, managers can expect workers to be motivated and moving toward the fulfillment of self-efficacy and job satisfaction (Jerome, 2013). Likewise, Bartel et al. (2012) posited that organizational culture is a critical motivational resource that aligns the



workers needs with those of the organization. Through the alignment of individual and organizational needs, the perception of organizational identity is recognized. As a worker begins to identify with an organization, the perception of ownership in the organization's achievements and challenges generally occurs. As a result, the individual worker may feel a sense of belonging and experience a higher level of job satisfaction and motivation.

### **Organizational Identity**

Although, described as a perceptual response, organizational identity can be outwardly expressed through attitudes, behavior, and performance. Through two field studies, Bartel et al. (2012) used a survey method to explore how working in an isolated environment can affect the organizational identity of virtual workers. In analyzing the data, Bartel et al. (2012) concluded that organizational identity is a strong motivator and found that individuals who feel connected to the organization experience a higher level of job satisfaction and motivation. As virtual work arrangements have become a common workplace structure, Bartel et al. (2012) contributed to the literature with the following implications for managers of virtual workers and suggestions for future research. Implications included the assessment in determining who is best suited to work in a virtual capacity, exploring ways to lessen virtual workplace isolation, and providing virtual workers with opportunities to establish organizational identity. Future research was suggested to explore how virtual workplace isolation affects employee behaviors and attitudes toward management, job responsibilities, and other workers.

Drawing upon current literature, Loi, Chan, and Lam (2014) hypothesized that perceptions of organizational identity and job satisfaction can be closely associated.

Through the theoretical lens' of social identity theory and leader member exchange theory, Loi et al. (2014) collected and analyzed survey data from 306 participants working in two Chinese companies within the garment industry. Findings from the study indicated that workers experience a higher level of job satisfaction when they identify with an organization. Loi et al. (2014) put forth the claim that an employee strives to establish the perception of self-worth through the process of organizational identity. In establishing self-worth, Loi et al. (2014) argued that self-efficacy and job security are enhanced, which in turn leads to job satisfaction and a sense of belonging. The implication for the field of management was for managers to explore opportunities to enhance the richness of social interaction among workers. The frequency and quality of communication exchanges between managers and workers could also be explored. Loi et al. (2014) concluded that future studies on the relationship of organizational identity and job satisfaction could be extended to other industries and workplace cultures.

As concerns regarding the social context of virtual work arrangements remain a mainstream topic in academic literature, Gajendran et al. (2014) performed a robust study by surveying a sample size of 323 full-time virtual employees and 143 supervisors from a variety of industry sectors employing a minimum of 105 employees. "Major industries represented in the sample included high technology, banking, healthcare, insurance, education, manufacturing, transportation, waste management, and social services" (p. 13). Gajendran et al. (2014) studied performance and organizational citizenship through the theoretical lens of leader member exchange and the construct of social norms within virtual work arrangements. The theory of leader member exchange was chosen

based on the premise that critical organizational outcomes such as job satisfaction, performance, and turnover rates could be linked to the quality of exchanges between managers and virtual workers (Kim, Liu, & Diefendorff, 2015). Additionally, Gajendran et al. (2014) argued that social norms within the virtual workplace can have a significant effect on the job satisfaction and performance of virtual workers. Social norms are influential factors that are shared among a group of people (Morris, Hong, Chiu, & Liu, 2015). Mission statements, processes and procedures, cultural changes, management theories, and communication exchanges are some of the factors that contribute to social norms within an organization (Moser & Axtell, 2015). Gajendran et al. (2014) maintained that within the context of organizational identity, an individual's desire to adapt and conform to an organization's culture could be the result of leader member exchange and social norms. With the appropriate balance of leader member exchanges and established social norms, virtual work arrangements can lead to richer social interaction, increased performance, positive feelings of empowerment, flexibility and autonomy, and a higher level of job satisfaction.

Other implications were for managers to establish organizational guidelines about the competencies and skills needed to be eligible for virtual work. Managers who view the autonomous nature of virtual work as a beneficial structure for both workers and the organization are likely to see increased performance and job satisfaction. Finally, Gajendran et al. (2014) encouraged researchers to study the relationship between job satisfaction and autonomy. Working in an isolated environment has been known to enhance the virtual workers' perception of autonomy because they have more control over

their work environment, their schedule, and the means of achieving work outcomes.

Gajendran et al. (2014) supported the idea that some virtual workers experience a higher level of job satisfaction and achieve work outcomes because autonomy increases motivational levels and fosters the development of self-efficacy.

### **Autonomy**

According to current literature, researchers have established a relationship between autonomy and job satisfaction among virtual workers (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014; Kossek et al., 2014; Naqvi et al., 2013). Greenhaus and Kossek (2014) suggested that more interest has been placed on understanding the dynamics of autonomous workplace structures due to changes in the economy, advances in technology, and how people use the Internet to perform job responsibilities and socially connect. When given the autonomy to work from home, some virtual workers have defined self-management and the opportunity to balance work and home as key benefits of virtual work structures (Raghuram & Fang, 2014). Anderson et al. (2014) established that an individual may consider themselves to have autonomous freedom when given the flexibility to control their schedule, make decisions, organize and prioritize tasks, and assume responsibility for work outcomes (Anderson et al., 2014).

Within the virtual workplace, researchers found the perception of autonomy to be a powerful motivator for workers with a high level of self-efficacy and discipline (Gajendran et al., 2014; Raghuram & Fang, 2014). Mulki and Jaramillo (2011) claimed that individuals possessing a high level of self-efficacy were more likely to be strong critical thinkers and capable of thriving in an autonomous environment. Gajendran et al.

(2014) explored the influence of autonomy by conducting a meta-analysis of 46 studies that involved a sample size of 12,833 participants. Responses support the claim that autonomy is an appealing job characteristic that promotes job satisfaction, lessens turnover rates, and enhances performance. In a similar analysis, De Cooman, Stynen, Van den Broeck, Sels, and De Witte (2013) chose autonomous motivation as a mediating variable between job characteristics, behavior outcomes, and work effort. A sample size of 689 anonymous participants was recruited from 12 Belgian service organizations. The participants were highly educated white-collar workers that were employed full time and had worked at the same organization for at least 15 years. In essence, the findings indicated that workers become autonomously motivated when job characteristics align with the individual worker's needs, work skills, and competencies. Moreover, findings support the idea that autonomously motivated workers are more invested in the organization's success, are more dedicated to achieving or exceeding performance goals, tend to stay with an organization longer, and experience a higher level of job satisfaction. In reviewing the literature, De Cooman et al. (2013) noted that few researchers have fully assessed the relationship between job characteristics, behavioral outcomes, and work effort through the mediating lens of autonomous motivation. Extending research to other industries and exploring how autonomy affects other job outcomes, resources, and challenges could be valuable to the field of management.

Although autonomy has been highlighted as a benefit of virtual work, the challenge of researchers is to explore the job demands of virtual work and suggest coping strategies and ideas to develop the self-management skills of virtual workers (Nurmi,

2011). Implications for managers included the finding that autonomously motivated workers experience a high level of organizational identity, engage with other workers and supervisors, and take ownership of expectations and work outcomes. Workers benefit from having the autonomy to manage their schedules in a manner that balances work, life, and family (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014; Raghuram & Fang, 2014). As technology enables job tasks to be completed from dispersed locations, organizations can achieve work outcomes by employing workers who prefer autonomous environments and possess the competencies required to work virtually unsupervised (Naqvi et al., 2013). De Cooman et al. (2013) maintained that autonomous motivation can be increased if job environments are designed around the needs of the individual worker and their level of competency and work skills.

As workplace demands evolve, the need to align job designs with the competency and need levels of individual workers will become significant theme within organizations (De Cooman et al., 2013). Finally, Pyöriä (2011) acknowledged that as with any other work structure, virtual work arrangements offer benefits and challenges. For the individual worker, the perception of autonomy has been related to job satisfaction while the perception of working in an isolated environment has been linked to a heightened sense of disconnectedness and loneliness (Bartel et al., 2012; Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014; Kossek et al., 2014; Naqvi et al., 2013). As work is a personal experience, researchers have suggested that more studies could be conducted at the individual level to better understand how virtual workplace isolation affects the job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers (Allen et al., 2015; Bartel et al., 2012; Belle et al., 2015;

Davis & Cates, 2013; Greer & Payne, 2014; Maher & Bedawy, 2015; Moriarty, 2014; Smith et al., 2015).

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented a robust literature review that includes well over 100 articles, statistical data, and at least six seminal books. Through my efforts, I found more than enough information to establish a real world problem within the virtual workplace and support the purpose of this study. While numerous studies have been performed on understanding the dynamics of the virtual workplace, most researchers agree that virtual workers may be able to provide useful information regarding the nature of virtual work. Within the literature, I found that researchers and practitioners share a common concern regarding factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers.

As I continued to review the results of previous studies, I concluded that virtual work arrangements are advantageous for both organizations and workers. However, there are significant challenges that should be addressed. For example, within Chapter 2, I highlighted some of the most prominent factors that researchers claimed affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers; the tendency for the nature of virtual work to be isolating, the competencies of the virtual workers, motivation levels, organizational identity, and autonomy.

After analyzing the data, it was interesting to see how the outcomes aligned and contrasted with the conclusions of other researchers. Overall, the outcomes of my qualitative study were consistent with themes derived from quantitative studies. However, the differentiator was the participants' emphasis on work-life balance. In

Chapter 3, I thoroughly explained the research process that led to this conclusion. First, it was important to justify my decision to conduct a qualitative phenomenological study and establish my role as the researcher. Even though, more researchers are realizing the value of electronically obtained data, I was obligated to fully evaluate and rationalize my decision to use an online questionnaire as the research instrument.

Following, I emphasized the importance of conducting a pilot study and described how I used the pilot study participants' feedback to ensure the research questions addressed the research problem, the instructions were clearly defined, and the research instrument was easy to use. I elaborated on using Babbie's (2010) snowball sampling strategy and social media outlets such as Facebook and LinkedIn to obtain a sample size of 26 participants from the target population of virtual workers. To establish transparency, I disclosed each phase of my data collection and analysis strategy. Finally, I concluded Chapter 3 by reaffirming my commitment to protect the participants' confidential information and ensure the outcomes of this study were trustworthy.



### Chapter 3: Research Method

The general problem was that organizations risk a decline in productivity and sustainability if the factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers are not thoroughly explored (Allen et al., 2015; Bartel et al., 2012; Bentley et al., 2016; Dahlstrom, 2013; Davis & Cates, 2013). The specific problem was the limited documented information regarding the factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers; therefore, the ability to successfully manage and lead virtual workers may be compromised (Maher & Bedawy, 2015). Within the literature, I found this problem to be evident as researchers maintained that most studies on the virtual workplace have been conducted at the organizational or technological level (Wan et al., 2015; Wang & Haggerty, 2011). The purpose of this study was to address the problem by exploring the lived experiences of individual virtual workers.

Within this chapter, I explain why a phenomenological design was adequate for addressing the research problem and aligned with the purpose of this study. Additionally, I discuss my role and why I chose to use a qualitative method as opposed to quantitative or mixed methods. I elaborate on my decision to use an online questionnaire as the research instrument and I emphasize the importance of conducting a pilot study. I rationalize my decision to select experienced virtual workers as the target population and disclose my plan for recruiting an appropriate sample size of participants. Finally, I outline the process for collecting and analyzing the data, and concluding this chapter with a strategy to ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study outcomes.

## **Research Design and Rationale**

From two overarching research questions, I shaped the scope of this study and used an online questionnaire to address the research problem by exploring the lived experiences of current or previous virtual workers who met the criteria of the study.

The two overarching research questions were as follows:

RQ1: What are the factors, derived from lived experiences that affect the job satisfaction of virtual workers?

RQ2: What are the factors, derived from lived experiences that affect the work outcomes of virtual workers?

The online questionnaire (Appendix A) was created and hosted through Survey Planet and consisted primarily of 16 semistructured questions derived from the two overarching research questions. I focused Questions 1 through 4 on obtaining demographic information and directed Questions 5 through 11 toward understanding the participants' virtual work history such as their tenure as a virtual worker, current employment status, virtual job type, industry sector, the primary location of virtual work, number of days worked virtually per week, and their primary virtual workplace setting. I purposely structured Questions 12 through 16 in a manner that would address both Research Questions 1 and 2.

Along with devising research questions that accurately addressed the research problem, I decided to use a qualitative methodology. After deciding which methodology was best suited for this study, I had to choose from the following qualitative research designs: grounded theory, phenomenology, narrative, case study, or ethnography. This

was more than just making a quick decision. First, I had to reflect upon the research problem and purpose of the study. As I would be exploring lived experiences, I decided to use a phenomenological design (Englander, 2012; Flood, 2010). Husserl (1970) introduced the discipline of phenomenology as the basis for deriving meaning from the individual experiences of other human beings. According to Christensen, Johnson, and Turner (2011), researchers apply a phenomenological design when seeking to reveal the essence of a phenomenon and identify similarities or differences among the participants' experiences. Much like Bandura (1977) and Maslow (1943), Moustakas (1994) hypothesized that experiences and human behavior are interconnected and bound by an inseparable relationship. Therefore, the ability to interpret and describe the participants' experiences is significant as reality is often shaped by the world in which one lives (Bandura, 1977; Lin & Niu, 2011; Maslow, 1943; Moustakas, 1994; Zimmerman, 2000).

In addition to phenomenology, I considered the principles of grounded theory, narrative, case study, and ethnographic designs. Although each design can lend significant structure to qualitative research, a phenomenological design was chosen based on the following observations. Johnson (2015) asserted that researchers may select a grounded theory design when attempting to uncover new theories by exploring the experiences of a large number of participants. As the advantages and disadvantages of the virtual workplace have been studied for a number of years, I did not expect any new theories to emerge from the study. Therefore, a grounded theoretical design was not chosen for this study.

I decided against implementing a narrative design because I did not focus the study on the biography of a single individual. Rejnö, Berg, and Danielson (2014) found that scholars often conduct narrative studies to explain a phenomenon through the emergence of stories or visual aids. As the participant sample was chosen from the target population of geographically dispersed virtual workers, I did not have the resources and available time to conduct a lengthy case study and directly observe the behaviors and actions of a particular group of people (Singh, 2015). Likewise, I did not choose an ethnographic design because this study was not directed toward understanding a particular population's ethnic or cultural background (Hampshire, Iqbal, Blell, & Simpson, 2014).

Finally, Long and Glenn (2012) considered the rapid transitions taking place in organizational structures and described the virtual workplace as fertile ground for qualitative studies that are phenomenological in nature. Long and Glenn stated, "By bringing a sharp focus to the lived experiences of virtual workers, scholars and practitioners have an opportunity to forge new knowledge about virtual work and its impact on virtual employees and the organization" (p. 249). Fonner and Roloff (2010, 2012) studied the distinct nature of virtual work for a number of years and concluded that more studies are certainly important to the field of management. On reflection, my decision to conduct a qualitative phenomenological study was justified as the participants provided rich, meaningful answers to the research questions.

### **Role of the Researcher**

According to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), qualitative researchers are concerned with deriving meaning from exploring how other human beings experience a phenomenon. Gergen et al. (2015) added that qualitative researchers must be capable of interpreting the meaning of data and presenting implications that can be used to resolve a problem and make a contribution to society. Kyvik (2012) described the role of the researcher as being a significant element in the success of academic research. Based on Kyvik's assessment, my role consisted of managing each step in the research process. Along with my role came the responsibility of bracketing my own personal biased opinions regarding the research phenomenon (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Discussed further in this chapter, these responsibilities included the practice of reflexivity, creating and maintaining an audit trail, and using the technique of member checking to ensure my interpretations aligned with the participants' intentions.

As the quality of the data depended largely on my integrity and skill as the researcher, I was aware of how disclosing my experience with the research phenomenon could have influenced the participants' responses (Patton, 2002). An example is Berger's (2013) exploration of the experiences of immigrant women. In this study, Berger illustrated how the participants' knowledge of his personal experiences with the research phenomenon held both negative and positive consequences. As Berger immigrated to the United States in 1990, his firsthand knowledge of immigration was advantageous when recruiting study participants. Berger noticed women with whom he immigrated to be helpful and accommodating. As these women were chosen as study participants, there

was a high level of comfort and they seemed to be relaxed and trusting of Berger's abilities and intentions. He credited this to sharing the same cultural background and similar immigration experience. While this commonality appeared to be beneficial, Berger faced challenges as some participants did not finish sentences because they assumed he understood their feelings. Some of the participants answered questions with unspoken body language by nodding their head or making facial gestures. In reflection, Berger had to remain mindful of how a simple expression such as raising an eyebrow or verbal tone could shape the participants' responses.

In reviewing similar qualitative studies, Berger (2013) found the challenge of completely eliminating the influence of biased opinions and experiences to be common among qualitative researchers. To overcome this challenge, Berger offered reflexivity as a control standard for ensuring the trustworthiness and credibility of qualitative research. Zitomer and Goodwin (2014) described reflexivity as a process of self-reflection and the acknowledgment of how the researcher's opinions could influence every element of a qualitative study. Darawsheh (2014) further explained that when researchers practice reflexivity, they should disclose the reasoning behind their opinions. To ensure transparency, I created and maintained an audit trail. This document was edited throughout the research process and served as a visual representation of my research strategy. Although I only performed member checking one time during the research process, I was conscious of Berger's suggestion to remind participants that I was interested in exploring and describing their individual experiences.

In reviewing the literature, I found the subjectivity of qualitative research to be a source of debate among researchers (Wertz, 2014). Cope (2014) echoed this concern and found that some researchers considered qualitative research to be inconclusive because study outcomes are not based on facts but often based on feelings and perceptions. Gergen et al. (2015) explored the value of qualitative research and, while the method does serve a purpose, questioned whether the researcher can actually separate themselves from their own preconceived notions. As I reviewed the scrutiny directed toward qualitative research, I reminded myself of Berger's (2013) suggestion to explore only the participants' experiences and not my own.

To ensure the rigor of my research strategy, I began with well-positioned research questions and I diligently took steps to ensure the credibility of the study (O'Brien et al., 2014). These steps included a clear understanding of my role as the researcher and my plans to acknowledge, document, and bracket any preconceived notions regarding the research phenomenon (Collins & Cooper, 2014; Gergen, 2014; Padilla-Diaz, 2015).

Giorgi (2009) described the practice of bracketing as the setting aside of predetermined opinions or previous experiences in order to fully embrace the opinions and experiences of others. Through the practice of reflexive bracketing, I acknowledged any biased opinions that could have influenced the study outcomes (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Finally, I was confident in my ability to conduct qualitative research by communicating with the participants in an objective manner, remaining open minded to new ideas, deriving insightful data, and presenting implications for practice and ideas for future research (Collins & Cooper, 2014).

## **Methodology**

Deciding to use a qualitative methodology was not an easy decision as researchers have successfully used all three, quantitative, mixed methods, and qualitative approaches, to learn more about the virtual workplace. Yilmaz (2013) compared the differences between quantitative and qualitative research methods and found that both serve a significant purpose in social research. According to Yilmaz, researchers conduct quantitative research when they are seeking to establish a correlation among variables by using statistical data. An example is Davis and Cates' (2013) quantitative study directed toward determining a correlation between the variables of workplace isolation and the engagement of virtual workers. Davis and Cates extended the study to determine if there was a correlation between workplace isolation and the gender of the virtual worker. By using a quantitative methodology, Davis and Cates were able to establish a correlation between workplace isolation and engagement among virtual workers. However, a correlation between workplace isolation and gender was not evident.

Within the literature, I found that researchers considered mixed methods to be instrumental in answering complex research problems, especially within the field of health sciences (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). As McCusker and Gunaydin (2015) studied the characteristics of research methodology, they found mixed methods to be well- suited to the complexity of clinical studies. They supported this notion by using an example of research conducted among cardiac care among patients. As the methodology was mixed, researchers were able to gain significant insight from first qualitatively exploring the patient's experiences with open-ended questions. Then, the scope of the



study was broadened by including a quantitative review of statistical survey data to test the accuracy of the patients' responses. Gergen (2014) maintained that researchers often use a mixed methods approach to derive qualitative insights that can be quantitatively tested for accuracy. Gergen also pointed out that by using mixed a mixed methods approach, there is a higher likelihood of presenting reliable data and trustworthy study outcomes.

Although there was plenty of literature to support using any of the three methodologies, I decided a qualitative approach was appropriate for this study. As I was seeking to explore the lived experiences of virtual workers, my choice of methodology aligned with Moustakas's (1994) conceptualization of qualitative research. According to Moustakas, researchers use qualitative methodology to explore the essence of the participants' experience, perception, feeling, or behavior. According to Bailey (2014), Lazarsfeld introduced qualitative research in the 1930s. Lazarsfeld (1972) maintained the essence of qualitative research is to go beyond statistical data by extending the opportunity for the participant to elaborate on the research topic. In turn, there is a higher likelihood for uncovering meaningful data that will enhance the richness of research studies. Finally, with time and resources being limited, I concluded that a qualitative methodology was sufficient for identifying the emergence of themes, patterns, and ideas among the participants' responses (Gergen, 2014; Watts, 2014).

### **Instrumentation**

In reviewing the literature, I found that researchers should select a data collection instrument that aligns well with the problem and the purpose of the study. For this study,

I used a qualitative phenomenological approach to obtain data that was used to resolve a real world problem within the virtual workplace. The general problem was that organizations risk a decline in productivity and sustainability if the factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers are not thoroughly explored (Allen et al., 2015; Bartel et al., 2012; Bentley et al., 2016; Dahlstrom, 2013; Davis & Cates, 2013). The specific problem was the limited documented information regarding the factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers; therefore, the ability to successfully manage and lead virtual workers may be compromised (Maher & Bedawy, 2015). As the purpose of the study was to address the problem by exploring the lived experiences of individual virtual workers, I decided to use a semistructured online questionnaire as the research instrument.

According to Englander (2012), researchers use semistructured questions as a means of directing the participants' thoughts and allowing them to elaborate on how they were affected. As the participants had personal experience with the research phenomenon, I expected their responses to contribute to resolving the research problem by describing factors that had affected their job satisfaction and work outcomes as a virtual worker. To obtain data, I decided to create an online questionnaire by using Survey Planet, which is an online research tool. This proved to be a wise decision because the participants were geographically dispersed and I had limited time and resources. At first, I had reservations about using an online questionnaire to conduct qualitative research. Therefore, I turned to the literature and found that more researchers are using Internet based research tools because of convenience, the opportunity to expand

the participant pool, and to save time and resources (Bampton et al., 2013; Cunningham et al., 2015; Hejar, 2016). However, I found the benefit to go beyond these reasons as I obtained rich, thick data from the participants. I attributed this to the convenience of e-mailing the participants a link to the questionnaire and they were able to reflect upon the research questions and complete the questionnaire at their convenience.

### **Pilot Study**

To mitigate unforeseen problems with the research instrument, questions, or instructions, I conducted a pilot study among three participants that met the study requirements (Kistin & Silverstein, 2015; Orsmond & Cohn, 2015; Palinkas et al., 2015; Rudnick, 2014; Thabane et al., 2010). As with the main study participants, the target population was virtual workers and I used Babbie's (2010) snowball strategy to gain access to pilot study referrals and volunteers. I chose this approach because I wanted to avoid the possibility of preexisting knowledge or relationships affecting the outcome of the pilot study.

As the pilot study participants were referred or volunteers, I contacted them through e-mail to formally request their participation. A Letter of Informed Consent was attached to the e-mail and a link to the online questionnaire was embedded in the body of the e-mail. As each individual agreed to participate, they were required to respond to the e-mail with the text *I consent* in the body of their e-mail. Once the consenting e-mail was received, the participants were encouraged to access the online questionnaire. Within the body of the e-mail, I asked the pilot study participants to provide feedback on whether the research instrument was easy to use and if the research questions and instructions were

clearly defined. I gave serious consideration to suggestions made by the pilot study participants and made legitimate changes.

The member checking technique was used to clarify one of the pilot study participants' responses. This consisted of brief telephone conversation to ensure my interpretation aligned with their intention. Conducting the pilot study and applying the feedback provided from the pilot study participants' clearly improved the feasibility of this study and trustworthiness of the study outcomes. The pilot study also provided an opportunity to gauge and enhance *my* abilities as a researcher and subject matter expert (Orsmond & Cohn, 2015). With a pilot study being conducted and the necessary changes made, I felt prepared to move forward with the main study.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

As I conducted a qualitative phenomenological study, I selected participants from the target population of virtual workers by using a purposive sampling strategy (Palinkas et al., 2015). Elo et al. (2014) posited that researchers commonly use purposive sampling when conducting qualitative studies. Englander (2012) surmised that researchers may decide upon a phenomenological design and purposive sampling strategy in order to obtain rich data by exploring and describing the research phenomenon from the participants' perspective (Englander, 2012). For this study, the participants were required to meet the following eligibility requirements: they had to be at least 18 years old, possess a minimum of 13 months of previous or current virtual work experience that has taken place within the past five years, and they must work or have worked in a virtual capacity at least 3 days per week during the 13 month tenure. Although Nilles (1976)

brought virtual work arrangements to the forefront of research and practice during the oil crisis of the 1970s, I chose to limit past virtual work experience to 5 years. My reasoning was twofold as first, I considered information taken from the past 5 years to be relevant to the study and secondly, I expected the participants to be capable of reflecting over the past 5 years and vividly describing how they perceived and experienced the research phenomenon.

I decided to use Babbie's (2010) snowball sampling strategy to enlist an appropriate sample size that met the study criteria. Babbie's (2010) strategy consists of gaining access to qualified participants through a referral process. As participants refer other likely candidates, the number of participants *snowballs* until the appropriate sample size is finally obtained. During the process of selecting a research topic, I mentioned my ideas to the human resource managers and organizational leaders of various companies. Most appeared eager to assist and agreed to refer likely participants for the study and allowed me to post announcements regarding the study on their social media webpage or company Intranet. An example is The Babb Group, which is an organization owned and operated by Dr. Babb and dedicated to offering job placement services to online professors. As approval was granted by Walden University, and with the permission of Dr. Babb, I posted a request for participation announcement on The Babb Group's social media webpage.

Although I found that researchers commonly use the snowball strategy, I considered and addressed the following challenges. First, I wanted to avoid all of the participants coming from the same industry sector and working the same or similar jobs.

Secondly, I wanted to avoid choosing participants that have a personal or professional relationship with me (Wheeler et al., 2014). Therefore, I took advantage of social media outlets such as Facebook and LinkedIn. Although I obtained only one volunteer from LinkedIn, Facebook was totally opposite as I quickly obtained referrals and volunteers by joining Virtual Workers of America, which is a closed Facebook group with approximately 1,000 members. I also posted an announcement on a community Facebook page and a well-known university's Facebook page. After taking these initiatives to enlist study participants, I began to receive a steady stream of referrals and volunteers.

By using social media to extend my participant outreach, the concern of the participants working in the same industry was mitigated beyond my expectations. I was able to diversify the industry sectors and job types of the participants to include steel distribution, banking and finance, publishing, business consulting, marketing and graphic design, travel, entertainment sales, and even the public school system. The participants' job titles included customer service representative, technical support, author, college professor, public school teacher, distributor, database manager, website designer, accountant, corporate relationship executive, sales representative, system analyst, and identity theft specialist.

Although I had a successful participant recruitment plan, I wanted to ensure the sample size of 26 participants was adequate. To determine how many participants were needed to ensure the quality of the study, I considered the objectives of obtaining rich, meaningful data and reaching data saturation (Englander, 2012). I found the sample size for qualitative studies varies and is based on the purpose and expected outcome of the

study, available resources, and who or what will be affected (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012; Cho & Lee, 2014; Elo et al., 2014). Fusch and Ness (2015) suggested that researchers can enhance the quality of research by selecting a sample size that is large enough to reach data saturation. Data saturation occurs when the study could be replicated and no additional coding is necessary (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). Gergen (2014) offered the sample size should be large enough to yield a cluster of underlying meanings, common themes and patterns among the participants' responses.

As the participants were referred or volunteers, I sent each individual a "request for participation" e-mail to formally introduce myself and explain the purpose of the study (Appendix C). Within the e-mail, I embedded the link to the online questionnaire, and included contact information for myself, my committee chair, and the Walden University. Realizing the importance of transparency, I attached the Letter of Informed Consent to the e-mail and requested each agreeing individual to respond with the text "I consent" in the body of the e-mail. Discussed further in the Ethical Procedures section, I placed a high emphasis on informed consent and I took precautions to ensure the participants understood that participation in the study was purely voluntary and they could withdraw at any time. According to Nunan and Yencioğlu (2013), researchers follow the informed consent process to avoid the possible emergence of ethical dilemmas. Through informed consent, the participants' had full knowledge of their privacy, their voluntary participation in the study, and my plans to protect their confidential information (Nunan & Yencioğlu, 2013). With a copy of informed consent attached to the initial "request for participation" the participants had an electronic

document that outlined the purpose of the study, the data collection and the analysis process, and my plans to destroy the data after 5 years (Goldberg & Allen, 2015).

The data collection process began as each individual participant submitted an e-mail with the text “I consent” in the body of their response. Although the research problem and purpose of the study were explained in the “request for participation” e-mail and the attached Letter of Informed Consent, I included a welcome message, instructions for participation, and my contact information on the opening page of the online questionnaire. The frequency of data collection was expected to occur one time and I expected the participants to spend no more than 30 to 45 minutes answering the questions. Although timely responses were preferred, I relied on the participants’ time management skills, the level of priority placed on the study, and the participants’ ability to focus primarily on the research questions.

Based on the quality of the data, choosing an online questionnaire to conduct qualitative research was a wise decision as the majority of participants took more time than expected and submitted their responses in a timely manner. Although, Cunningham et al. (2015) and Hejar (2016) argued that more researchers are taking advantage of Internet based research tools, I was concerned about losing the opportunity to witness body language, facial expressions, and verbal tone. Once again, I turned to the literature and reviewed Bampton et al.’s (2013) study on the concept of e-interviewing. By comparing traditionally and electronically obtained data, Bampton et al. found that emotion, tone, and visual expressions can be communicated electronically. Bampton et al. supported this argument by referencing Egan, Chenoweth, and McAuliffe’s (2006)



research on individuals with traumatic brain injuries. Upon reviewing the data, Egan et al. noticed that e-mailed responses were more reflective and insightful than responses obtained through other research methods. To express their opinions and describe experiences, the participants verbally and visually communicated through emoticons, capitalization, adjectives, and punctuation.

In reflection, I propose that using an online questionnaire gave participants time to think about their experiences and answer the research questions at a convenient time. Based on my research efforts, I agree with Bampton et al.'s (2013) claim that electronic communication is evolving into a widely accepted tool that can be used to bring researchers and participants together. I know this to be true because by using Babbie's snowball strategy, taking advantage of social media, and collecting the data electronically, I was able to connect with far more participants than if I had chosen to host traditional interviews. Moreover, after reviewing the depth and amount of information retrieved from the questionnaire, I am confident that an electronically generated and distributed questionnaire can be relied upon to derive rich and meaningful research data.

Although Bampton et al. (2013) presented a compelling argument; I had to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using an online questionnaire. An advantage was that I did not have to schedule meetings or secure a meeting location. Also, the participants had the flexibility of responding to the interview questions at their convenience (Bampton et al., 2013). Conversely, I had to depend on the participants' commitment to respond in a timely manner (James, 2015). As the participants were

experienced virtual workers, I expected them to have adequate technological skills and have no trouble accessing and navigating the questionnaire. However, Bampton et al. (2013) cautioned that technological problems such as a poor Internet connection or computer problems could alter the timeliness of collecting data. Finally, the use of an online questionnaire mitigated the necessity to transcribe the data. I only had to copy and paste the actual transcription to a Microsoft Word document.

Although I did not have the advantage of face to face interaction with the participants, the use of an online questionnaire lessened the possibility of my own bias influencing the study outcomes. Bampton et al. (2013) found that electronically conducted research can reduce bias as the researcher cannot lead the participants' responses through verbal tone, facial expressions, and body language. A disadvantage was the inability to immediately clarify the participants' responses if I did not fully understand their intention. To mitigate this issue, I decided to use the member checking technique if necessary (Reilly, 2013). For example, Lafortune, Huson, Santi, and Stolee (2015) conducted member checking by sharing the main themes derived from their study with each participant. Although the process was time intensive, the results from member checking ensured the final interpretation accurately represented the participants' experiences. Cassell and Symon (2004) suggested that a similar process should occur when electronic interviews are conducted. In order for research to be trustworthy, the researcher may have to conduct follow up telephone conversations or exchange e-mails.

As the participants of this study were geographically dispersed, I decided that a telephone conversation would be the most appropriate method for conducting member

checking. However, if a participant was not available for a telephone conversation, I could e-mail them with questions regarding any response that requires clarification. To further establish the reliability of the study, I used Microsoft Word to create an audit trail that was documented and maintained throughout the research process (Sikolia, Biros, Mason, & Weiser, 2013). In upcoming sections, I provided a thorough review of how member checking and a documented audit trail was used to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Finally, after the data was collected, analyzed, and summarized, I committed to e-mailing each participant a summary of the study outcomes. Their willingness to participate and openly share their experiences was the cornerstone that established the trustworthiness and the significance of this study.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Qualitative data analysis involves three critical elements; collecting, organizing, and analyzing the data (Elo et al., 2014). Through an extensive review of literature, I determined that other researchers consider Internet based instruments to be appropriate for distributing research questions and collecting data. As expected with the current study, the ability to communicate electronically proved to be especially helpful as the study participants were geographically dispersed and resources were limited (Bampton et al., 2013; Cunningham et al., 2015; Egan et al., 2006; Hejar, 2016). An important element of the data collection process was to ensure the participants' responses were well organized and stored in a secure location. Part of my strategy was to create a Google e-mail account used solely for this research study and to communicate with the participants. This lessened the likelihood of any correspondence from the participants being

overlooked or misplaced. By taking advantage of Survey Planet's online research tool, I had the capability of exporting the participants' responses to a Microsoft Excel file that was stored in a password protected folder housed on my external hard drive which is also password protected.

Along with collecting the data, I was responsible for protecting the participants' confidential information in accordance with the guidelines of informed consent. With informed consent, each participant received reassurance that I was the only person with access to their confidential information. To protect the participants' identity, each participant was assigned a code known only to myself. The assigned codes were the only mode of identification that connected the participants to the data. This information was saved in an Excel spreadsheet and stored within a separate password protected folder on my external hard drive which is also password protected. I am the only person that has access to any password associated with this research study.

As the participants' responses are obtained, I immediately began the analysis process by hand coding the data. Although, I could have waited until all the participants' responses are obtained, I decided to review each transcript as received and highlighted key points and terms that immediately stood out to me. During this first step of analysis, I followed Wood's (2015) suggestion of using the horizontalization technique to consider the equal value of each set of data. Padilla-Diaz (2015) posited that by using horizontalization, researchers are looking to understand what the participants' are saying and what themes appear to be equally relevant (Moustakas, 1994). Based on the fact that I have virtual work experience, I have my own assumptions and perceptions regarding the

virtual workplace. Therefore, I diligently used the technique of reflexivity to bracket any preconceived bias that could have tainted the equality of the collected data (Berger, 2013; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; Padilla-Diaz, 2015; Zitomer & Goodwin, 2014).

After the initial review was completed, I reviewed the data again and began to categorize the participants' responses. While each step in the research process was incredibly interesting, the axial coding and constant comparison analysis was the most significant. Axial coding involved reviewing all the categories that were established during the open coding phase and allowing themes to emerge naturally. As suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2015), I used the constant comparative analysis method to identify any similarities or differences that exist among the data. Introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967), researchers have found constant comparative analysis to be especially useful with grounded theory approaches. Fram (2013) further extended the application of constant comparison to other qualitative approaches used to define or describe a specific phenomenon. By using horizontalization and constant comparative analysis I quickly reached data saturation as similarities, differences, patterns, and emerging themes were highlighted throughout the analysis process. From this information, I was able to resolve the research problem by adding to the limited amount of documented information regarding factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers. As I reviewed and analyzed the data, I saw an opportunity to provide practical implications for the field of management and society. Although, I was confident that open and axial coding coupled with horizontalization and performing a constant comparison analysis

was a sufficient approach for analyzing the data, I developed a strategy to address issues of trustworthiness throughout the data collection and analysis process.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

Cassell and Symon (2004) studied the concept of using the Internet to conduct research and suggested that a series of discussions may be required to ensure accuracy. Due to the subjectivity of qualitative research, I intended to apply the technique of member checking to establish the credibility of the study outcomes (Buchbinder, 2011). Johnson (2015) described member checking as the process of giving the participants an opportunity to review and critique the interpretation of their individual responses. Harper and Cole (2012) reviewed the literature on member checking and posited that some researchers have found the process of summarizing data and then, verifying their interpretations with the actual participant to be most helpful. Harper and Cole (2012) referred to member checking as a quality control strategy often used to enhance the trustworthiness of qualitative research.

As the questionnaire was hosted online by Survey Planet and the responses were retrieved electronically, I reserved the option to perform member checking if I needed to clarify my interpretation of the participants' answers to the research questions. Conducting a pilot study prior to the main study was a necessary step that allowed me to redirect any research questions that were not clearly defined. As outlined in the letter of informed consent, I notified both the pilot study and main study participants of the possibility of follow up conversations if I did not clearly understand any of the responses.

Within the literature, I noted that member checking can be conducted while the data is being collected or after the data has been compiled (Koelsch, 2013). While it may be time consuming, I chose to conduct member checking while the data was being collected. As each participant completed the online questionnaire, I reviewed their responses carefully. While I did not have to conduct member checking with the main study, I did host a follow up telephone conversation with one of the pilot study participants. This was in regard to the revision of Question 15. My member checking plan consisted of contacting the participant through e-mail and requesting a telephone conversation. From the telephone conversation, I gained a better understanding of the pilot study participant's suggestion and changed the text accordingly and added this step to the audit trail (Appendix B). I am certain that conducting a pilot study prior to the main study prevented any obstacles from occurring during the main study research process. From the richness and depth of both the pilot study and main study participants' responses, I realized that they understood why the study was being conducted and seriously considered their role in resolving the research problem.

### **Transferability**

The possibility of transferring the outcomes of this study to practice, theory, and society was the ultimate reward for my research efforts (Ridder, Hoon, & McCandless Baluch, 2014). Moreover, as I reviewed the main study participants' responses, my decision to conduct a qualitative phenomenological study on the virtual workplace was reinforced. However, within the literature, I was reminded that transferability is measured on whether the reader can take the study outcomes back to their own workplace

environment (Goldberg & Allen, 2015; Lipscomb, 2015). Within the realm of practice, I considered the motive of the reader. The reader may be looking to improve a current situation, support a new opportunity, make a decision, or solve a problem within their own organization (O'Brien et al., 2014). As I chose virtual workers as the target population, I expected the study outcomes to be transferable to organizations that employ virtual workers. I also considered how virtual workers could reference the outcomes of the study to determine if working in a virtual capacity aligned with their professional and personal expectations. However, it is important to mention that the study was conducted among a sample size of 26 participants and may not be transferable to all organizations that employ virtual workers or all individuals considering the virtual workplace for employment (Lipscomb, 2014).

Within the realm of theoretical transferability, I maintained that the conceptual framework of this study to be applicable to the modern workplace. As discussed in the literature review, Jerome (2013) found theories such as Maslow's (1943) needs theory to be relevant to the problems that exist within the virtual workplace as managers may be challenged to understand the needs of an unseen workforce. Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory is equally transferable as virtual workers may have more autonomy than collocated workers. Therefore, the measurement of whether a worker feels confident in their abilities could affect job satisfaction and work outcomes. During my research, I found data that can be used to support Jerome's (2013) argument of relevancy in regard to performance and motivational related theories applicability to the modern workplace.



Finally, I am confident that the outcomes of this study are transferable to society because work and life are often considered synonymous for many people. With subject matter experts projecting that more organizations will be implementing virtual work arrangements and more people are seeking flexible work arrangements, the outcomes of this study could offer critical insight (Global Workplace Analytics, 2016). By conducting this study, I have explored the participants' lived experiences and presented ideas to resolve a real world problem that existed within the virtual workplace (Ridder et al., 2014). Ultimately, the reader will decide whether the study outcomes are transferable to their particular organizational problem (Goldberg & Allen, 2015).

### **Dependability**

Establishing data dependability was a critical element of my research strategy (Watts, 2014). Although, the subjectivity of qualitative research has been a source of debate among researchers, I took specific measures to ensure the data was dependable and reliable (Wertz, 2014). Elo et al. (2014) posited that data dependability can be evaluated by exploring whether other researchers would arrive at similar conclusions by replicating the data instrument and collection and analysis process. The reader of the study can arrive at their own conclusions by referencing the audit trail provided with this study (Appendix B).

Yilmaz (2013) described an audit trail as a documented list of steps that occur during the research process. A researcher's audit trail may consist of highlighted information that can be referenced or replicated. The reader may choose to critique or rationalize the authoring researcher's choice of the data collection instrument and how

they went about collecting and analyzing data obtained from their research efforts (Zitomer & Goodwin, 2014). Although the reader may not agree with the author's decisions or the study outcomes, the audit trail can serve as a reference point to support either interpretation. As I chose to use the techniques of open and axial coding, listing the steps of my research strategy ensured that I followed my proposed efforts and lessened the likelihood of my own opinions affecting the study outcomes. I found the practice of using an audit trail to be especially helpful as I eventually produced a visual guide that explained each step taken to obtain data and produce the study outcomes (Collins & Cooper, 2014).

### **Confirmability**

Cohen and Crabtree (2008) posited that confirmability of data is based on the researcher's ability to accurately interpret and report what is derived from the data collection process. For this study, I strategically initiated steps to ensure the confirmability and lessened the possible influence of my own bias (Zitomer & Goodwin, 2014). These steps consisted of practicing reflexivity, conducting member checking as necessary, purposefully selecting a sample size of participants that did not know me, using an online questionnaire that consisted primarily of semistructured questions, creating and maintaining an audit trail, and conducting a pilot study prior to moving forward with the main study.

First, I consistently practiced the technique of reflexivity as a means of eliminating the influence of my assumptions and preconceived notions (Berger, 2013). Like myself, reflexivity is often used by researchers who have a high level of interest or

experience with a research phenomenon. Secondly, I reserved the option to conduct member checking and gave specific attention to the challenge of ensuring my interpretations of the data aligned with the intentions of the participants (Reilly, 2013). Cassell and Symon (2004) pointed out that additional discussions may be needed to ensure the researcher's interpretation is accurate. Koelsch (2013) posited that member checking equates to a form of scrutiny that is performed by the researcher. For this study, I only had to conduct member checking during the pilot study and was able to gain clarity and make changes that improved the feasibility of the main study and enhanced the trustworthiness of the study outcomes.

Another strategic step was to purposefully obtain participants by using Babbie's (2010) snowball sampling method and taking advantage of social media outlets. This gave me an opportunity to select participants that did not know me professionally or personally. Therefore, the possibility of my own bias affecting their opinions and perceptions was mitigated. The decision to use an online questionnaire that consisted of semistructured questions proved to be an excellent decision for this particular study. Although conducting qualitative research by electronic means has been sharply criticized, I found that participants may openly elaborate on their experiences when given the opportunity to answer questions at their convenience and in writing (Cope, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). While at first, I had reservations about not conducting face to face interviews; my concerns subsided as I observed the richness and depth of the participants' responses (Bampton et al., 2013). Through this observation, I was able to

further establish the need to address the research problem and support the purpose of this study (Ridder et al., 2014).

Remaining vigilant with the audit trail documentation was an important element that ensured the confirmability of the study outcomes and implications. Throughout the research process, I documented each step taken to arrive at the study outcomes and implications for practice. As suggested by Yilmaz (2013), I consistently referenced the audit trail to ensure that appropriate steps were taken during the research process and any deviations from the originally proposed strategy were documented. Researchers commonly use an audit trail as a visual representation of how they conducted a study, arrived at decisions, or justify changes that occurred during the data collection and analysis process (Yilmaz, 2013). Finally, I conducted a pilot study among three participants and through their efforts, I was able to clarify the research questions, ensure the instructions were easy to follow, and rationalize why an online questionnaire was an adequate instrument for addressing the research problem (Elo et al., 2014). In reflection, the steps I took to establish the confirmability of the study were effective as I was able to address the research problem and accomplish the purpose of the study by obtaining rich data that can be referenced by other researchers and practitioners.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Vayena and Tasioulas (2013) posited that ethical procedures in research were put in place to protect the rights of research participants. Prior to conducting research, Vayena and Tasioulas (2013) explained that an institutional review board is charged with assessing the risks and benefits to the participants, ensuring the informed consent meets

ethical requirements, and confirming the competency and credibility of the researcher. Moreover, Vayena and Tasioulas (2013) cautioned that researchers risk losing permission to proceed, if their research proposal that does not align with established ethical procedures. Hallett, (2013) found ethical dilemmas in research do not stem from research designs or methodologies, but from the researchers' decisions, actions, and commitment to ensuring the data is unbiased and as trustworthy as possible. In reading Hallett's (2013) charge to researchers, I understood my responsibility to ensure ethical procedures were followed.

As participants were referred or volunteered for this study, I e-mailed each individual a formal request for participation e-mail, which included an attached copy of the Letter of Informed Consent. As the correspondence was transmitted electronically, the participants were able to reference this document to clarify the purpose of the study, the data collection procedures, and their voluntary participation in the study (Yilmaz, 2013). Within the informed consent, I was careful to highlight that participation was purely voluntary and that participants could withdraw from the study at any time with no risk of repercussion. I disclosed my plan for storing, protecting, and destroying the participants' contact information, documented responses, and e-mail correspondence after 5 years. Finally, the contact information for myself, my committee chairperson, and the university representative was provided within the body of the request for participation e-mail and within the body of the letter of informed consent.

### **Summary**

Within this chapter, I explained why I chose to conduct a qualitative study instead of using a quantitative or mixed methodology approach. I also justified why phenomenology was an appropriate design, as opposed to grounded theory, narrative, case study, or ethnographic design. I discussed my role as the researcher and highlighted virtual workers as the target population from which I purposefully selected 26 participants for the study. I emphasized why a semistructured online questionnaire was an appropriate instrument for distributing the research questions and collecting data. Finally, I highlighted the importance of conducting a pilot study and concluded this chapter by describing the data collection, organization, storage, and data analysis strategy. Moreover, I elaborated on the importance of adhering to high ethical standards and shared my plan to ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability, and the confirmability of my research strategy and the study outcomes.

## Chapter 4: Results

Through an extensive review of literature, I found that researchers have aggressively studied the virtual workplace. However, most researchers chose a quantitative approach and conducted studies from a technological or organizational perspective (Wan et al., 2015). This presented a problem as few qualitative studies have been directed toward exploring factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers from the individual virtual workers' perspective. I decided to resolve the problem by using a phenomenological design and by shaping the conceptual framework around principles of Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory and Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs theory (Bartel et al., 2012; Bentley et al., 2016; Davis & Cates, 2013; Morley et al., 2015; Wan et al., 2015). By designing an online questionnaire that consisted on semistructured questions, I was able to address the following overarching research questions:

RQ1: What are the factors, derived from lived experiences that affect the job satisfaction of virtual workers?

RQ2: What are the factors, derived from lived experiences that affect work outcomes of virtual workers?

After receiving approval to conduct research, I began the data collection process by conducting a pilot study (Appendix A).

Within this chapter, I elaborate on the steps taken to conduct a thorough pilot study and emphasize how I used the pilot study results to enhance the clarity of the research questions, ensure the instructions were easy to follow, and choose an appropriate

research instrument. I describe the presumed research setting and explain how giving the participants an opportunity to choose a familiar and comfortable setting may have influenced the depth of their responses. Subsequently, I provide the participants' demographic information and elaborate on my decision to use Babbie's (2010) snowball sampling method and social media outlets to reach a diverse population of virtual workers. Finally, I conclude this chapter by emphasizing themes that emerged naturally from the collected data. In Chapter 5, I discuss my interpretation of the study outcomes, acknowledge the limitations of the study, support recommendations for future research, and conclude this study with implications for practice, theory, and positive social change.

### **Pilot Study**

As I chose to use an online questionnaire as the research instrument, I did not have the benefit of face-to-face communication. Therefore, the pilot study was a precautionary element of my research strategy that mitigated possible weaknesses that could have negatively affected the feasibility of the study and the trustworthiness of the study outcomes (Kistin & Silverstein, 2015). According to Orsmond and Cohn (2015), pilot studies are conducted to ensure the research questions address the research problem, the instructions are easy to understand, and the research instrument is easy to use. After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Walden University on July 8, 2016 (Approval Number 07-08-16-0274561), I moved forward with the pilot study by sending a request for participation e-mail to three referrals on July 10, 2016. Within the body of the e-mail, I requested their participation and explained the purpose of the study and how their voluntary contribution would help ensure the quality of the study. I also



included the link to the questionnaire and highlighted the attached letter of informed consent. Upon agreeing to participate, I asked the pilot study referrals to respond to my e-mail with the words *I consent* within the body of their e-mail.

I received one response on July 10, one on July 11, and the final response was received on July 12, 2016. Thankfully, all three referrals agreed to participate and offered thorough suggestions in a timely manner. First, I was advised that Questions 13 and 14 were repetitive and should be condensed into one question. Secondly, I was advised to add the question numbers to the actual text within the question. For example, Question 10 now reads, “Question #10 - Where do you or did you perform the majority of your virtual job responsibilities? At home, on the road, satellite office, customer location, or some other location? If your location was not listed, please provide the location.” Finally, a revision of Question 15 was suggested. For clarity, I conducted member checking because I did not clearly understand the suggestion to revise Question 15, which asks the participant to explain how virtual work fulfills their needs as a human being. The pilot study participant suggested that I change the wording of the question to ask how virtual work *contributes* to the fulfillment of human needs and include the following examples; food, shelter, security, sense of belonging, achievement, creativity, and autonomy. Upon review, I agreed with all of the pilot study participants’ suggestions and changed the text accordingly on July 12, 2016. After making the changes, the scope of the online questionnaire was refined and I had taken appropriate steps to ensure the feasibility of the main study and the trustworthiness of the study outcomes.

### **Research Setting**

With the assistance of the pilot study participants, I was ready to move forward with the main study and began the task of enlisting participants. To achieve this projection, I sought referrals from human resource managers and industry leaders within the following industries: global automotive manufacturing, information technology, health care, and higher education. Additionally, I took advantage of social media by becoming a member of Virtual Workers of America's closed Facebook group and posting a request for participants on LinkedIn. By combining Babbie's (2010) snowball referral method and social media outreach, I quickly obtained 26 participants that met the study criteria.

More importantly, I was able to diversify the industry sectors and job types of the participants to include steel distribution, banking and finance, publishing, business consulting, marketing and graphic design, travel, entertainment sales, and even the public school system. The participants' job titles included customer service representative, technical support, author, college professor, public school teacher, distributor, database manager, website designer, accountant, corporate relationship executive, sales representative, system analyst, and identity theft specialist. With such an extended outreach for participation, I was not able to control the research setting and relied on the participants to answer the research questions in an appropriate setting and time frame.

According to Doody and Bailey (2016), the research setting is an important element that can affect study outcomes. Prior to conducting the study, I weighed the advantages and disadvantages of using an online questionnaire as the research instrument.

As time and financial resources were limited, there was no need to travel to a predetermined location and scheduling conflicts were nonexistent. The participants were given the autonomy to answer the research questions at a convenient time and setting of their choice, which, I presumed, provided an opportunity to reflect upon their lived experiences as a virtual worker in a natural setting (Barnham, 2015). Doody and Noonan (2013) maintained that answering research questions from home may allow research participants to relax in a familiar setting and focus on the depth of their responses. Based on the quality and word count of the participants' responses, I am convinced that Doody and Noonan's assessment is correct as the data far exceeded my expectations. Although I was not in the presence of the participants as with face-to-face interviews, I did not notice any personal circumstances that could have hindered their ability to answer the research questions or negatively affected my ability to interpret the data.

The majority of the participants provided a minimum of six sentences when asked to elaborate on the factors that affect or have affected their job satisfaction and work outcomes as a virtual worker. They went into detail when asked to describe their ability to use technology to accomplish work outcomes and thorough describe presumed level of self-efficacy and how working in a virtual capacity contributed to the fulfillment of human needs. Although the virtual workplace has been studied for a number of years, the depth of the participants' responses reaffirmed my decision to conduct this qualitative study as the participants were sensitive to the phenomenon of the virtual workplace and eagerly embraced the opportunity to share and describe their individual lived experiences in vivid detail.

## Demographics

This qualitative phenomenological study consisted of 26 purposefully selected research participants from a diverse population of virtual workers. As with the pilot study, I used Babbie's (2010) snowball sampling method and social media outlets to obtain participants for the main study. As each referral agreed to participate, I asked for additional referrals of individuals that shared similar work experiences (Pidilla-Diaz, 2015; Robinson, 2014). As suggested by Wheeler (2014), my sample size began to snowball, and within 1 week I had 26 participants who met the following eligibility requirements. Participants were required to be at least 18 years old, have a minimum of 13 months previous or current virtual work experience that had taken place within the past 5 years, and must currently work or have worked in a virtual capacity at least 3 days per week during the 13-month time frame. Selecting participants based on these requirements was a critical element of my research strategy as my study was directed toward exploring and describing the lived experiences of a specific population: virtual workers. I expected the chosen participants to know more about the research phenomenon and to be capable of accurately describing their perceptions and feelings (Pidilla-Diaz, 2015).

I required the study participants to be at least 18 years old because participants under the age of 18 are legally considered a minor and require parental consent. By having a minimum of 13 months of current or previous virtual work experience that has taken place in the past 5 years, I maintained that most individuals should be capable of clearly reflecting upon relevant factors that affected their job satisfaction and work

outcomes. I also required the participants to work or have worked at least 3 days per week as a virtual worker. I soon realized this was not a problematic requirement as all participants stated they worked a minimum of 5 days per week or at least 40 hours per week in a virtual capacity.

Discussed further in this chapter, working 7 days per week and not being able to walk away from work was a common theme among the participants' responses. Another important demographic that resulted from the study requirements was the number of participants that had over 5 years of virtual work experience. Out of the 26 participants, there were only eight participants who had less than 3 years of virtual work experience and four of the participants had 10 years or more of virtual work experience. Notably, the majority of participants were able to fulfill virtual job responsibilities within their home and only two participants mentioned fulfilling virtual job responsibilities at a client's location, on the road, or at a satellite office at least 3 days per week during a 13-month time frame.

My sampling strategy consisted of employing Babbie's (2010) snowball method and social media outlets such as Facebook and LinkedIn. Choosing these sampling options proved to be a wise decision as I quickly obtained an appropriate sample size from the target population of virtual workers. Much like virtual work arrangements, the most notable outcome of my sampling strategy was the opportunity to utilize technology as a means of recruiting participants outside my geographical location. However, as reflected in the demographic data outlined in Table 1, the overwhelming majority of participant referrals and volunteers were women. Discussed further in Chapter 5, the

number of women participants posed a significant limitation, as I did not intend to conduct a gender-specific study.

Table 1

*Demographic Breakdown*

Category	<i>N</i>	%
Gender		
Men	3	12
Women	23	88
Age		
25-34	2	8
35-44	8	31
45-54	9	35
55-64	7	27
Ethnic Background		
White	22	85
Black or African American	3	12
Other	1	4
Highest Level of Education		
High school/GED	1	4
Some college	5	19
2-year college degree	4	15
4-year college degree	3	12
Master's degree	6	23
Doctoral degree	7	27

### **Data Collection**

For this study, the specific problem was the limited documented information regarding the factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers; therefore, the ability to successfully manage and lead virtual workers may be compromised (Maher & Bedawy, 2015). The purpose of the data collection process was to address the research problem by obtaining answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the factors, derived from lived experiences, that affect the job satisfaction of virtual workers?

RQ2: What are the factors, derived from lived experiences that affect the work outcomes of virtual workers?

I used these questions to maintain the scope of the study and frame the online questionnaire, which consisted of 16 questions (Appendix A). With the assistance of the pilot study participants and the responses obtained from the main study participants, I am confident the research questions adequately addressed the research problem.

While waiting on the pilot study results, I used Babbie's (2010) snowball method and asked human resources managers and organizational leaders for participant referrals for the main study. Additionally, I took advantage of technology by using social media outlets such as Facebook and LinkedIn to ask for volunteers from the population of virtual workers. On Facebook, I joined three closed groups; Virtual Workers of America, How to Make a Living Teaching Online, and Walden University PhD. On LinkedIn, I shared a request for participation with 472 connections. I began the recruitment process for main study participants on July 11, 2016 and within 1 day obtained 11 referrals and 15 volunteers. As referrals and volunteers were obtained, I sent each individual a formal e-mail titled "Regina Willis – Request for Participation." Within the content of the e-mail, I explained my role as the researcher and why I was conducting the study. I shared the title of my study, clarified the research problem and the purpose of the study, and highlighted the participant criteria. I included a link to the online questionnaire generated by using Survey Planet, clearly explained the importance of reviewing the letter of

informed consent, and emphasized that participation in the study was purely voluntary and participants could withdraw at any time. I concluded the e-mail by listing my contact information, the contact information of the Walden University representative, and the IRB approval number. Finally, I asked that each participant respond with the text *I consent* in the body of their e-mail. By July 20, 2016, I had received consensual e-mails and responses to the online questionnaire from 26 participants; three on July 13, four on July 14, four on July 15, three on July 16, three on July 17, six on July 18, and three on July 19.

By using Survey Planet to create the online questionnaire and obtain responses to the research questions, I had the benefit of Survey Planet's analytical tools and was able to access the data as needed. However, I chose to save an electronic version of each participant's responses within a password-protected folder on my external hard drive, which is also password protected. I conducted this process by copying and pasting each participant's responses in an individual Microsoft Word document, which was assigned a unique title known only to myself. Afterwards, I printed out a copy of each participant's responses and saved the hard copies in a locked file cabinet located within my personal home office. In review, I was able to collect and organize the participants' responses to the research questions as described in Chapter 3 and did not observe any unusual circumstances.

### **Data Analysis**

The first step of the analysis process was to reference the Microsoft Word documents that contained each individual participant's responses to the research



questions. For this study, I decided to analyze the data by using the techniques of open and axial coding. Watts (2014) explained coding as being both descriptive and interpretive. I considered open coding to represent the descriptive phase and axial coding represented the phase of interpretation as I expected new ideas to naturally emerge (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). During the open coding phase, I was mindful of Wood's (2015) suggestion to use the technique of horizontalization and viewed all data as being equal. After open coding the data, I followed with axial coding, and used the constant comparative method to accentuate common themes among the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As a final step, I documented the perceptions and experiences that were uncommon among the data yet could be a significant reference for future studies.

Printing the participants' responses gave me an opportunity to read each individual document, make notes within the margins, and use a highlighter to note any significant terms, experiences, or opinions. As previously mentioned, the participants responded to the research questions with rich, descriptive answers. Therefore, in order to manage time efficiently and lessen the possibility of being overwhelmed with data, I chose to review the data as retrieved. This gave me an opportunity to move forward with the open coding process and focus solely on the individual participant's responses.

I began the open coding process by categorizing the data within a Microsoft Excel workbook. Within the workbook, I created three worksheets titled Open Coding, Axial Coding, and Uncommon. The workbook was also housed within the password-protected folder on my personal computer. To categorize the data, I assigned the following titles to horizontal columns of the Open Coding worksheet; Participant ID, Work Experience,

Location, Industry, Job Title, Factors, Tech Skills, Self Efficacy Rating, and Needs Fulfillment. As I highlighted the individual participants' responses and made notes, I transferred this information to the Open Coding worksheet. This helped me keep the data organized and I did not overlook any pertinent data that could affect the study outcomes.

After categorizing the data, I began the axial coding and the constant comparative process. I used the Axial Coding Excel worksheet to list common themes in numerical order, which represented the level of significance. For example, according to the participants' responses, the ability to balance work and life is the most significant factor that has affected their job satisfaction and work outcomes as a virtual worker. Therefore, I listed Work and Life Balance as Theme 1 and followed this process as each common theme emerged. After completing the axial coding and the constant comparative process, I defined eight common themes or factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers. When performing the constant comparative analysis, I referred back to studies that I highlighted in Chapter 2's literature review and I looked for correlations and arguments among the other researchers' study outcomes. For example, in the upcoming text, workplace distractions were a consistent theme among the data that either hindered virtual work outcomes or provided boundaries for virtual workers. In reviewing Bloom et al.'s (2013) study, after 9 months of virtual work, participants claimed to miss the busy atmosphere of an office environment and requested to return to a collocated environment. On the other hand, Fonner and Roloff's (2010; 2012) study resulted in participants describing virtual work as a boundary between them and unnecessary interruptions of office chatter and meetings. Although, I reached data saturation prior to analyzing all 26

data sets, I decided to analyze all of the participants' responses. I wanted to ensure that no critical information was overlooked and the purpose of the study was achieved by thoroughly exploring the research problem from the individual virtual workers' perspective.

By analyzing all of the data sets, I obtained a well-rounded description of the nature of virtual work, the necessary technological skills and support needed to succeed as a virtual worker, and how working in a virtual environment contributes to the development of self-efficacy and the fulfillment of human needs. Although, I did not conduct a face to face interview with the participants, the data I obtained by using the online questionnaire exceeded my expectations as the majority of participants went into great detail about their lived experiences and factors that have affected their job satisfaction and work outcomes as a virtual worker.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Noting sharp criticism of how the trustworthiness of qualitative research is established, Cope (2014) suggested that researchers adhere to the direction of Lincoln and Guba (1985) when seeking to establish the rigor of data collection and analysis processes. To ensure the trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that a high emphasis must be placed on ensuring the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research strategy and study outcomes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Within the upcoming sections of this chapter, I have explained the steps I took to establish the trustworthiness of the study.

## **Credibility**

According to Cassell and Symon (2004), using the Internet to conduct research may result in a series of discussions to ensure accuracy. As I chose to use an online questionnaire as the research instrument, I decided that member checking was an appropriate technique for ensuring my interpretation aligned with the participants' intentions. Therefore, I maintained the participants' e-mail addresses within a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. As with all information pertaining to this study, I stored this information in a password protected folder housed on my external hard drive which is also password protected.

Johnson (2015) described member checking as the process of giving the participants an opportunity to review and critique the interpretation of their individual responses. Harper and Cole (2012) reviewed the literature on member checking and posited that some researchers have found the process of summarizing data and then, verifying their interpretations with the actual participant to be most helpful. Harper and Cole (2012) referred to member checking as a quality control strategy often used to enhance the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Although member checking could be a time intensive exercise, I decided that I would organize and analyze the participants' responses as they were submitted and if necessary, I would follow with member checking.

As each participant completed the online questionnaire, I reviewed their responses carefully. While I did not have to conduct member checking with the main study, I did host a follow up telephone conversation with one of the pilot study participants. This was

in regard to the revision of Question 15. My member-checking plan consisted of contacting the participant through e-mail and requesting a telephone conversation. From the telephone conversation, I gained a better understanding of the pilot study participant's suggestion and changed the text accordingly and added this step to the audit trail (Appendix B). I am certain that conducting a pilot study prior to the main study prevented any obstacles from occurring during the main study research process. From the richness and depth of both the pilot study and main study participants' responses, it was obvious that they understood why the study was being conducted and seriously considered their role in resolving the research problem.

### **Transferability**

While reviewing the literature, I was reminded that transferability is measured on whether the reader can take the study outcomes back to their own workplace environment (Goldberg & Allen, 2015; Lipscomb, 2015). Within the realm of practice, I considered the motive of the reader. The reader may be looking to improve a current situation, support a new opportunity, make a decision, or solve a problem within their own organization (O'Brien et al., 2014). As I chose virtual workers as the target population, I expect the study outcomes to be transferable to organizations that employ virtual workers. Virtual workers may also benefit from my research efforts by referencing the outcomes of this study to determine if working in a virtual capacity aligned with their professional and personal expectations. However, it is important to mention that the study was conducted among a sample size of 26 participants and may not be transferable to all

organizations that employ virtual workers or all individuals considering the virtual workplace for employment (Lipscomb, 2014).

Within the realm of theoretical transferability, I maintain that the conceptual framework of this study to be applicable to the modern workplace. As discussed in the literature review, Jerome (2013) found theories such as Maslow's (1943) needs theory to be relevant to the problems that exist within the virtual workplace as managers may be challenged to understand the needs of an unseen workforce. Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory is equally transferable as virtual workers may have more autonomy than collocated workers. Therefore, the measurement of whether a worker feels confident in their abilities could affect job satisfaction and work outcomes. Based on my collected data, I can pose a compelling argument that supports Jerome's (2013) theory of relevancy in regard to performance and motivational related theories applicability to the modern workplace.

Most importantly, I am confident that the outcomes of this study are transferable to society because work and life are often considered to be synonymous for many people. With subject matter experts projecting that more organizations will be implementing virtual work arrangements and more people are seeking flexible work arrangements, the outcomes of this study could offer critical insight (Global Workplace Analytics, 2016). Within this study, I expect to explore the participants' lived experiences and present ideas to resolve a real world problem within the virtual workplace (Ridder et al., 2014). Ultimately, the reader will decide whether the study outcomes are transferable to their particular organizational problem (Goldberg & Allen, 2015).

## **Dependability**

Establishing data dependability was a critical element of my research strategy (Watts, 2014). Although, the subjectivity of qualitative research has been a source of debate among researchers, I took specific measures to ensure the data was dependable and reliable (Wertz, 2014). Elo et al. (2014) posited that data dependability can be evaluated by exploring whether other researchers would arrive at similar conclusions by replicating the data instrument and collection and analysis process. The reader of the study can arrive at their own conclusions by referencing the audit trail provided with this study (Appendix B).

Yilmaz (2013) described an audit trail as a documented list of steps that occur during the research process. A researcher's audit trail may consist of highlighted information that can be referenced or replicated. The reader may choose to critique or rationalize the authoring researcher's choice of the data collection instrument and how they went about collecting and analyzing data obtained from their research efforts (Zitomer & Goodwin, 2014). Although the reader may not agree with the author's decisions or the study outcomes, the audit trail can serve as a reference point to support either interpretation. As I chose to use the techniques of open and axial coding, listing the steps of my research strategy ensured that I followed my proposed efforts and lessened the likelihood of my own opinions affecting the study outcomes. I found the practice of using an audit trail to be especially helpful as I eventually produced a visual guide that explained each step taken to obtain data and produce the study outcomes (Collins & Cooper, 2014).

## **Confirmability**

For this study, I strategically initiated steps to ensure the confirmability and lessened the possible influence of my own bias (Zitomer & Goodwin, 2014). These steps consisted of practicing reflexivity, conducting member checking as necessary, purposefully selecting a sample size of participants that did not know me, using an online questionnaire that consisted mainly of open ended questions, creating and maintaining an audit trail, and conducting a pilot study prior to moving forward with the main study.

First, I consistently practiced the technique of reflexivity as a means of eliminating the influence of my assumptions and preconceived notions (Berger, 2013). Reflexivity is often used by researchers who have a high level of interest or experience with a research phenomenon. Secondly, I reserved the option to conduct member checking and gave specific attention to the challenge of ensuring my interpretations of the data aligned with the intentions of the participants (Reilly, 2013). For this study, I only had to conduct member checking during the pilot study and was able to gain clarity and make changes that improved the feasibility of the main study and enhanced the trustworthiness of the study outcomes.

Another strategic step was to purposefully obtain participants by using Babbie's (2010) snowball sampling method and social media outlets. These recruitment options gave me an opportunity to select participants that did not know me professionally or personally. Therefore, the possibility of my own bias affecting their opinions and perceptions was mitigated. The decision to use an online questionnaire that consisted of open ended questions proved to be an excellent decision for this particular study.



Although conducting qualitative research by electronic means has been sharply criticized, I found that participants may openly elaborate on their experiences when given the opportunity to answer questions at their convenience and in writing (Cope, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). While at first, I had reservations about not conducting face-to-face interviews; my concerns subsided as I observed the richness and depth of the participants' responses (Bampton et al., 2013).

Remaining vigilant with the audit trail documentation was an important element that was used to ensure the confirmability of the study outcomes and implications. As suggested by Yilmaz (2013), I consistently referenced the audit trail to ensure that appropriate steps were taken during the research process and I was careful to document any deviations from the originally proposed research strategy. Finally, I conducted a pilot study among three participants and through their efforts, I was able to clarify the research questions, ensure the instructions were easy to follow, and justify the research instrument as an adequate tool for addressing the research problem (Elo et al., 2014). In reflection, the steps I took to establish the confirmability of the study were effective as I was able to address the research problem and accomplish the purpose of the study by obtaining rich data that can be referenced by other researchers and practitioners.

### **Study Results**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to address the research problem by exploring the lived experiences of virtual workers. By using an online questionnaire that consisted of 16 semistructured questions, the participants were given the opportunity to reflect upon their experiences as a virtual worker and provide

meaningful responses that could be used to better explain factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers. From analyzing each individual data set and then comparing all of the data, I observed eight themes that were most significant. In Table 2, I listed each theme by order of significance and provided a definition. In Table 3, I listed each theme, the number of participants that mentioned the theme, and the number of quotes associated with the theme. Following, I explained how the online questionnaire addressed each of the two overarching research questions and how the themes emerged in response to the research questions.

Table 2

*Themes and Definitions for Research Questions 1 and 2*

Theme	Definition
Work and Life Balance	The ability to accomplish work outcomes, spend time with family, and stop working in a reasonable time frame
Training and Technical Support	The process of ongoing knowledge transfer to ensure workers are technologically equipped to accomplish work outcomes and have accessible service and support
Communication	The ability to speak with supervisors and coworkers as needed to gain clarity and solve problems
Isolation and Belonging	Both terms are associated with the perception of inclusion
Flexibility	The ability to accomplish expected work outcomes on a schedule that best suits the needs of the worker
Workplace Distractions	Anything that takes away from being able to focus on and accomplish work outcomes
Resource Efficiency	The opportunity to maximize time, use technology to reach more clients, and save money on items such as fuel, car maintenance, clothing, and food
Trust and Respect	The perception of being considered as a reliable worker and team member regardless of workplace proximity

Table 3

*Frequency of Themes for Research Questions 1 and 2*

Theme	Number of participants that mentioned theme	Number of times theme emerged
Work and Life Balance	15	18
Training and Technological Support	13	19
Communication	11	14
Isolation and Belonging	9	12
Flexibility	9	9
Workplace Distractions	8	11
Resource Efficiency	7	8
Trust and Respect	5	6

**Research Question 1**

What are the factors, derived from lived experiences that affect the job satisfaction of virtual workers? Interview Questions 12 through 16 addressed both Research Questions 1 and 2. From the participants' responses, five themes emerged in relation to factors that affect job satisfaction of virtual workers: work-life balance, isolation and belonging, flexibility, resource efficiency, and trust and respect.

**Theme 1: Work-life balance.** According to the participants' responses to questions 12 through 16, over half (58%) of the participants described the ability to balance work and life as the most significant factor that affects job satisfaction of virtual workers (Table 4). Within the data, work and life balance was mentioned at least 18 times and was referred to as the ability to accomplish work outcomes, spend time with family, and stop working at a reasonable time. P2 maintained, "I found that working at home requires a lot of discipline to stay focused on my work, but then also requires diligence when it comes to *calling it a day* and not becoming a workaholic."

Table 4

*Work and Life Balance (WLB)*

Theme	Participant #	Participant Count	Percentage
Work and Life Balance	P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P11, P12, P14, P17, P20, P21, P22, P25, P26	15	58%

Among the data, the feeling of *never being able to leave work* was prevalent and as Long (2012) surmised; the lines between work demands and personal obligations can be blurred. As expressed by P4, “I am satisfied as a whole because I set my own hours and adjust my schedule according to my own preferences and needs. Setting one’s schedule can also easily lead to working extended hours, which can be an issue.” Sharing a similar point of view, P6 conveyed, “I love having a balance between work and family life. Not having a commute allows me to have more time with my family and private appointments without having to take paid time off.” This statement aligns with Maslow’s (1943) motivational theory as job satisfaction is often associated with the fulfillment of needs. Interestingly, as demonstrated in the outcomes of this study, factors that affect job satisfaction may differentiate based on the participants’ needs. Throughout the literature, researchers have supported the correlation between the fulfillment of an individual’s needs and their ability to successfully perform job responsibilities, solve problems, adapt to changing environments, and attain a high level of personal and professional satisfaction (Kaur, 2013; Soni, 2013; Tay & Diener, 2011).

As discussed within Chapter 2, the emphasis placed on providing work-life balance for employees is one factor that has attributed to the rapid acceptance of virtual work arrangement (Allen et al., 2015; Davis & Cates, 2013; Korzynski, 2013; Raghuram & Fang, 2014). P7 concurred by responding, “The flexibility of the position was the most satisfying aspect, such as having the opportunity to step away for family or ministry needs. I also enjoyed the ability to have full access to work at odd hours.”

Kossek (2016) studied how people define work-life boundaries while working and living in a digital age. Kossek (2016) argued that while technology has mobilized work and society, there is a greater opportunity for blurred boundaries between the professional and personal aspects of life. Kossek (2016) noted that although organizations are offering flexible work arrangements, workers may be expected to work unusual hours and have less autonomy than expected. Ross and Vasantha (2014) studied the relationship between stress and work-life balance and suggested that one’s work environment affects many aspects of life, such as emotional well-being, stress levels, self-efficacy, health conditions, and job satisfaction and stability.

Based on the data, the majority of participants liked having the autonomy to adjust their schedule for work and personal obligations. P11 highlighted “planning, consistency, positive thinking, and personal strength training” as being critical elements of work-life balance. P11 went on to suggest, “I believe you need more time outs throughout your work day even if it's 5 or 10 minutes to walk around outside.” While, some participants have been challenged to establish work-life boundaries, the pressure does not always come directly from managers. Among the participants’ responses, the

pressure appears to come mainly from within the individual virtual worker, as work obligations are *always present* especially if work and home are synonymous. This assessment was evident as P17 concluded, “It is very easy with work always being there to never feel that you are off work. It is also easy to find oneself spending days and days not leaving the house.”

Based on the majority of participant responses, work-life balance is a significant factor that affects job satisfaction. The challenge faced by individual virtual workers and managers is to establish healthy boundaries that promote positive work outcomes and the opportunity to fulfill personal obligations (Long, 2012; Vasantha, 2014). According to the participants of this study, the key to establishing a healthy work-life balance begins with setting appropriate expectations, managing time effectively, and having an area that is dedicated solely to work responsibilities.

**Theme 2: Isolation and belonging.** The perception of feeling isolated was another theme that emerged from the data. At least nine (35%) of the participants described feeling isolated at times and highlighted the importance of inclusion and belonging (Table 5). As referenced in Chapter 2, Jerome (2013) studied Maslow’s (1943) needs theory in regard to how organizations can foster a sense of belonging among employees. Jerome (2013) cautioned that virtual workers may feel disconnected and isolated because of limited personal interaction with coworkers and supervisors. Therefore, Jerome (2013) found that modern organizations are using technology as a means of helping virtual workers overcome loneliness and isolation.

Table 5

*Isolation and Belonging (ISBL)*

Theme	Participant #	Participant Count	Percentage
Isolation and Belonging	P3, P9, P10, P11, P14, P17, P24, P25, P26	9	35%

Among the participants' responses, Jerome's (2013) assessment was confirmed as P3 expressed how technology helped them stay socially connected and contributed to their sense of belonging. On the other hand, P25 shared,

The biggest challenge of virtual work is isolation. It is very easy to fall into a pattern where you don't leave the house because you work from home. If you do not interact with colleagues this becomes even more challenging.

In reviewing the data, P2 commented on the social drawbacks of virtual work, but suggested the individual virtual worker's personality and abilities are key elements,

Being a virtual worker does have its drawbacks when it comes to feeling *part of the company*. However, this is where the personality of the worker needs to be such that they don't need the constant hand-holding, pat on the back, and chit-chat to get their work done.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Davis and Cates (2013) suggested that isolation is a major factor that can affect the success of virtual work arrangements. Within the literature, some virtual workers fear being overlooked for promotions or career advancement. Sharing their virtual work experience, P6 stated, "I do feel as though out of sight is sometimes out of mind and I do get passed over on new opportunities."

As the number of virtual workers is expected to increase, Davis and Cates (2013) argued that workplace isolation and the possibility for limited employee engagement are critical problems within the virtual workplace. However, much like the participants' responses, the literature offers contrasting views regarding the advantages and disadvantages of working in an isolated environment. For example, Fonner and Roloff (2010, 2012) maintained that some workers thrive when working offsite and find the autonomous nature of virtual work to be energizing and fulfilling. These workers do not see isolation as a barrier, but as a means of boundary control that lessens interruptions and distractions.

Based on an exhaustive literature review and the results of this study, it is logical to suggest that working in an isolated environment affects the job satisfaction of virtual workers in different ways. Therefore, conducting qualitative studies to explore a phenomenon from the individual participant's perspective is certainly warranted and necessary to better understand how factors may affect various levels of personal and professional fulfillment. From this study, the participants indicated that virtual work is not for the masses, but may be well suited for individuals who thrive in a flexible environment with limited face to face communication and collaboration.

**Theme 3: Flexibility.** The flexibility of virtual work was another prominent theme that emerged from the participants' responses. Based on the data, at least nine (35%) of the participants claimed that having a flexible work arrangement has affected their job satisfaction in a positive manner (Table 6). According to Maslow (1943), the ability to make decisions and solve problems can contribute heavily to an individual's



development of self-efficacy and fulfillment. This was evident in the data as most of the participants expressed that they liked having the autonomy to adjust their work schedule for childcare, a vacation, or doctor's appointments without having to miss work. Other participants elaborated on their schedule and how they liked to work in different rooms within their home.

Table 6

*Flexibility (FLEX)*

Theme	Participant #	Participant Count	Percentage
Flexibility	P1, P8, P15, P16, P17, P18, P19, P20, P22	9	35%

P8 described a *day in the life* by offering the following example of flexible work arrangements,

I work at least 6.5 days a week within my consulting business and as an artist. I get up circa 8:30 a.m., and after shower and breakfast, sit at my desk in my office and work until between 5:00 - 7:00 p.m.; then I walk downstairs to my living room and artists light table and work between 8:00-9:00 until 11:00 - 12:00 p.m. I do take breaks every hour or so, getting laundry done, wash dishes and wipe down kitchen, retrieving mail from box, vacuum about once every two weeks, and clean up grand-son's toys, etc., for about 10-20 minutes at a time.

While some of the participants listed flexibility as a significant factor that positively affected their job satisfaction, other participants found it challenging to remain focused,

especially while working at home. P14 provided the following example of such challenges,

I have to govern myself every minute of every day and find that in some aspects I do much better on my own than I did being micro-managed in person, but there are also times when it's hard to stop my mind from wandering from a high dollar claim and straight to foraging through the fridge to see what herbs I'm going to use in the Chimichurri I'm making with dinner.

According to P12, self-discipline is a critical trait of successful virtual workers. P12 elaborated further by describing the benefits of being able to work virtually, be an accessible parent to a young child, and establish a work schedule that aligned with their lifestyle,

I feel you must have a great deal of self-discipline to work from home. Being a parent of a young child provides me with the a peace of mind that I am here to get him to school and home. I also like that I can work early or late as necessary if my schedule dictates that without the drive to an office.

Based on the literature, researchers such as Wheatley (2012) have agreeably emphasized both opportunities and challenges within the virtual workplace. After conducting research, Wheatley (2012) argued that overall, virtual workers experience a higher level of job satisfaction than collocated workers. As shown in P12's statement; mothers, especially, seemed to be the most satisfied with the flexibility of working at home. However, Wheatley (2012) surmised that some virtual workers may find it difficult to

manage time effectively and remain focused on job responsibilities when working from home.

**Theme 4: Resource efficiency.** Just as organizations implement virtual work arrangements as a way to lessen financial cost, time constraints, and resources required to do business, some individuals may choose to work virtually for similar reasons. In reviewing the data, at least seven (27%) of the participants mentioned that their job satisfaction was attributed to not having to commute, not having to spend money on lunch, and not having to buy professional clothing (Table 7). According to Maslow (1943), the ability to provide basic needs such as food and shelter are critical factors that affect an individual's level of satisfaction.

Table 7

*Resource Efficiency (REFF)*

Theme	Participant #	Participant Count	Percentage
Resource Efficiency	P9, P11, P13, P18, P22, P23, P26	7	27%

Based on the participants' responses, virtual workers experience a higher level of job satisfaction when they are able to lessen the financial cost generally associated with working outside the home. As an example, P9 stated, "I save money on gas and office attire. Plus, there's no commute time." The opportunity to save resources was a common theme among the participants' responses as P23 added, "On the plus side, your commute is 60 seconds instead of 60 minutes, you save on expenses like gas and dry cleaning and you can get your laundry done during the daytime."

While most of the participants aligned resource efficiency with saving commute time and money on clothes, other participants emphasized how they were able to redirect normal commute time toward balancing work and parenting. For example, P10 shared,

I loved working at home. When I started, I was a recently divorced woman with a toddler. Since I worked virtually, I did not have to commute and was able to enroll my child in pre-school activities. Otherwise, I would not have been able to do this because commuting would have taken the time need to get her back and forth from the school. My child did not feel the effects of living in a single parent home, because I was able to spend quality time with her and work while she slept.

In regard to workplace efficiency, P11 directed their response toward increased job efficiency by asserting, “By working virtually, you can reach many more prospects. You are not limited in your searches to just the immediate area.” Additionally, P18 reflected on the efficiency of virtual work and declared “I am never late and never miss work! I don’t have to rush to work, and then rush back home afterwards. P18 continued by discussing how the efficiency of virtual work affected their health and well-being. By not feeling rushed or having to commute back and forth, P18 contributed, “Virtual work is easier on my body too.” Moreover, two of the participants elaborated on how working virtually provided an opportunity for gainful employment after sustaining significant health issues that prohibited them from commuting to a collocated environment. By offering virtual work opportunities, Linden (2014) found that organizations can extend their human resource outreach to individuals with disabilities.

In Chapter 1, I established the background of this study by emphasizing the trend toward virtual arrangements. Much of this trend is credited to technological advances and the need for organizations to increase performance, lessen the cost of doing business, and expand their global outreach and protect natural resources (Bentley et al., 2016; Lister & Harnish, 2011; Moser & Axtell, 2015; Mulki & Jaramillo, 2011). While the outcomes of this study are not transferable to every industry, the study participants have mentioned several resource efficiencies that contribute to their job satisfaction. Today, virtual work arrangements are gaining acceptance and with appropriate technology, virtual workers and managers are figuring out how to efficiently fulfill job responsibilities anywhere and at any time (Bartel et al., 2012; Belle, Burley, & Long, 2015; Bentley et al., 2016; Davis & Cates, 2013; Greer & Payne, 2014). With the trend continuing to move toward a virtualized workforce, Wan et al. (2015) posited that organizations should focus on the development of individual virtual competencies such as virtual self-efficacy, virtual media skills, and virtual social skills. In doing so, managers could increase job satisfaction and lessen harmful environment affects that stem from workers commuting to and from a collocated workplace.

**Theme 5: Trust and respect.** Maslow (1943) theorized that the human need to feel trusted and respected, is a critical factor that contributes to the development of self-efficacy and satisfaction with life in general. Although only five (19%) of the study participants referenced trust and respect as a factor that affected their job satisfaction (Table 8), researchers have argued that trust and respect are critical factors that contribute to the performance of virtual workers (Bartel et al., 2012; Boon & Biron, 2016;

Pomirleanu & Mariadoss, 2015). Boon and Biron (2016) studied the relationship between one's work environment and job satisfaction. They concluded that when workers feel trusted and respected, they are more likely to achieve performance objectives, stay with the organization, and contribute at a high level. While trust and respect are important regardless of proximity, researchers have found that virtual workers are especially vulnerable to the perception of belonging and organizational identity.

Table 8

*Trust and Respect (TAR)*

Theme	Participant #	Participant Count	Percentage
Trust and Respect	P2, P8, P18, P21, P25	5	19%

P2 elaborated on their perceptions as a virtual worker:

I think that having confidence in your abilities and a good, solid reputation with your company and clients is required to be successful as a virtual worker. Most *bosses* still maintain that, in order for you to do any work at all, you must be sitting at your desk in a cubicle where people can see you....working. Once, the trust has been established, it's equally important not to take advantage of the situation at home. In essence, be a professional and get your work done and keep your clients happy.

Within the literature, Chen and Hew (2015) studied knowledge sharing among virtual communities and found that trust and respect were strong motivators and incentives that affected the willingness of virtual workers to share problem solving

knowledge. Without trust and respect, Chen and Hew (2015) cautioned that virtual workers may guard information and not experience a high level of job satisfaction. In reviewing the data from this current study, P25 maintained,

We do not have that camaraderie that bonds us together where we can exchange ideas. If anything, not knowing each other is leading to misconceptions and competition where the other people in our department are the *enemy* rather than a valuable resource to bounce ideas around with.

As referenced in Chapter 2, several researchers emphasized the need for managers to explore opportunities to build trust and respect among virtual workers (Bailey et al., 2012). Based on the existing literature, virtual workers generally experience a higher level of organizational commitment and job satisfaction if they feel trusted and respected. Pomirleanu and Mariadoss (2015) maintained that job satisfaction can be increased by managers establishing a supportive physiological presence, yet avoiding excessive micro-management techniques which may threaten the self-efficacy and proactive behaviors of virtual workers.

### **Research Question 2**

What are the factors, derived from lived experiences that affect the work outcomes of virtual workers? Interview questions 12 through 16 addressed both Research Questions 1 and 2. From the participants' responses, three themes emerged in relation to factors that affect work outcomes of virtual workers: training and technological support, communication, and workplace distractions.

According to the data obtained through this study, at least half of the participants regarded training and technological support as being the most significant factor that affects work outcomes of virtual workers (Table 9). Based on the literature review in Chapter 2, organizational leaders have agreed and attributed successful work outcomes to the training and engagement of virtual workers. Organizations such as IBM, Aetna, and Charles Schwab have reported that effective training programs have been critical to the success and engagement of virtual workers (Busch et al., 2011). Aligning with Bandura's (1977) theory that self-efficacy can be developed by facing challenges and persistence, P23 reflected on how 12 years of virtual work experience had opened opportunities to learn and develop new skills.

I work in a team environment where learning opportunities are always available via cross training. I enjoy learning new things and look for ways to take on new tasks where they can fit into my area of responsibility and schedule. I also have access to a number of learning tools both internal and external if/when I feel the need to have more formal training.

Table 9

*Training and Technological Support (TTS)*

Theme	Participant #	Participant Count	Percentage
Training and Technological Support	P1, P4, P5, P6, P10, P13, P16, P18, P19, P22, P23, P24, P25	13	50%



In a similar response, P19 described their technological skills as being *expert* and described their ability to use technology to achieve work outcomes as being *self-sufficient*. This response could be used to support Bandura's (1977) argument that self-efficacy may be demonstrated in one's belief in their abilities and willingness to solve problems. For the most part, P19 maintained a positive attitude toward virtual work, but cautioned that achieving work outcomes can become challenging if there are computer malfunctions. Reflecting on the frustration that stems from system issues, P1 explained,

When the systems were working smoothly, I encountered no issues. However, when there were problems with the systems, frustration occurred frequently. My problem with the virtual work environment was computer system issues and the lack of communication between the supervisor and the worker.

With most of the study participants having at least 5 years of virtual work experience, there was a theme of confidence among their responses. Computer issues were highlighted as a reasonable factor that affects the job satisfaction of virtual workers and the need for assessable support was noted. As ascertained in Chapter 2, Maher and Bedawy (2015) studied how managers can increase performance and concluded that establishing networking opportunities, setting clearly defined goals, and insisting upon training contributes to developing competencies needed to succeed in a virtual environment. Additionally, the results of this study can be used to support Wan et al.'s (2015) position regarding individual virtual competencies. With virtual workers depending heavily on adequate training and technological support, there is a strong need for managers to focus attention on how well workers and support providers can use

technology to communicate, socialize, and solve problems. While the literature is rich regarding the benefits of virtual work, a stark disadvantage may be limited access to technological support. To resolve this issue, P23 discussed their self-directed path toward resolving the problem,

The deadlines **MUST** be met. You must always have a backup or emergency plan, in case of unforeseen obstacles (like a power outage). You must be ok reaching out for help or clarity. You need to have open communication with your management (expectations work both ways).

Based on the nature of virtual work, it stands to reason that training and technological support can greatly affect work outcomes. As virtual workers generally regard technology as the essential tool for completing job tasks, there is a dependency on managers to ensure adequate training and support. Yet, the participants' responses align with Allen et al.'s (2015) position that the virtual work environment is well suited for independent thinkers, problem solvers, and autonomous individuals that naturally gravitate toward challenging situations.

According to responses for questions twelve through sixteen, approximately half (46%) of the participants mentioned that communication with managers and coworkers contributed heavily to their ability to achieve work outcomes (Table 10). A few of the most consistent notations was the importance establishing clear expectations and the proficiency to use various programs and software to accomplish job responsibilities. In reflection, P23 stressed “clear expectations, knowing the deadlines, open communication, being able to contact team members and managers any time assistance or clarity is

needed” as being the most important factors that affected work outcomes. Another participant referenced the lack of communication between the worker and manager as being a frustration that affected work outcomes. However, through constant comparison, the majority of participants discussed their reliance on messaging platforms to stay in constant contact with coworkers, managers, and clients. Among the data, P5’s discussion of communication was particularly insightful,

Through a remote server, I am able to perform all job requirements just as if I were in the office. I have an *onsite assistant* that I communicate with regularly and that works as my instant access through the office. I also send her anything that needs to be filed in house.

Table 10

*Communication (COMM)*

Theme	Participant #	Participant Count	Percentage
Communication	P1, P2, P3, P4, P7, P8, P9, P11, P12, P14, P16, P20	12	46%

According to the literature, new technologies have connected workers and managers as never before, such as electronic communication tools, social networking platforms, and data transparency through cloud storage (Gilson et al., 2015). This was evident among the participants' responses as the following programs were listed as essential tools for communication and completing virtual job responsibilities: e-mail, Slack, MS Lync, Smartphone, Skype, Facebook, Google Instant Messenger, Google Docs, Google Hangout, OneNote, Sharepoint, Workfront, Trello, FaceTime,

AnyMeeting, GoToMeeting, and Secured (VPN) internal networks. With the mention of several communication tools from a limited sample size of 26 participants, the data from this study supports Wan et al.'s (2015) insistence for virtual workers to possess adequate individual virtual competencies.

Based on the participants' responses, the demand to communicate and work predominantly through technology aligns with the conceptual framework of this study. The participants elaborated on how much they liked the creative autonomy associated with the virtual workplace, but also needed the assurance of knowing that training and technological support were readily available. Bandura (1977) posited that individuals with a high level of self-efficacy are more likely to accept challenges and are often empowered by learning and hands-on experience. For example, P4 commented, "I am not fearful of 'trying out' various and new technologies in order to enhance my job performance and life." Moreover, Bandura's (1977) theoretical principles supported Wan et al.'s (2015) position that experiences and observations contribute to the development of individual virtual competencies. Therefore, through the consistent use of electronic programs and software, managers have the opportunity to increase communication, promote training and development, engage with team members, and enhance work outcomes at the same time.

At least eight (31%) of the participants conveyed that workplace distractions have affected their ability to achieve work outcomes (Table 11). Most of the participants compared the virtual workplace to collocated work environments noted that distractions such as office chatter and unnecessary meetings can lead to frustration and limit one's

ability to focus on job responsibilities. For example, P8 mentioned, “I am more productive working remotely. I do not have all the distractions that you have in an office.” A similar observation was shared by P6, “Not having daily interruptions from coworkers allows me to be more productive in any given day.” These responses support Fonner and Roloff’s (2010, 2012) suggestion that virtual work provides a boundary control for workers that lessens interruptions and distractions.

Table 11

*Workplace Distractions (WPD)*

Theme	Participant #	Participant Count	Percentage
Workplace Distractions	P4, P5, P6, P8, P12, P19, P22, P23	8	31%

On the other hand, some participants expressed concern due to distractions that exist within the virtual workplace. For example, P4 explained, “Just because you are working from home, doesn't mean you can stop and do other things. Interruptions will cost you in time, energy, and work completion.” Sharing their frustration, P8 added, “Folks, especially family members, think since I work from home, I can take a break whenever they need me to run an errand for them.” Other distractions associated with virtual work were background noises, such as television, family chatter, or dogs barking.

When considering the conceptual principles of Bandura (1977) and Maslow (1943) the atmosphere of the virtual workplace presents an interesting challenge. Bandura theorized that observation is essential for self-development and depending on the individual’s needs; social interaction is a contributing factor to fulfillment. P23 discussed

the role of personality in determining whether the virtual workplace offers a sense of boundary control or isolation from the world. To further explain their opinion, P23 shared, “I am not anti-social, and speak with all my coworkers, just not all on a daily basis; that is just my personality. A more outgoing person would likely reach out to co-workers more often just to chat.”

Based on the participants' responses, workplace distractions and interruptions tend to occur regardless of proximity (Van Yperen et al., 2014). As reflected in the data, some virtual workers thrive in a virtual environment, whereas others may miss social interaction and the ability to communicate face to face. In contrast, some virtual workers are comfortable working through issues and accomplishing job responsibilities in an autonomous environment. These perceptions align with the conceptual framework of this study and can be used to support the need for more qualitative phenomenological studies directed toward understanding factors that affect the job satisfaction and work outcomes of the individual virtual worker. While the results of such studies may not be transferable to all virtual workplace settings or all virtual workers, researchers and practitioners can use study outcomes to better understand the nature of virtual work.

### **Summary**

Twenty-six purposefully selected participants answered an online questionnaire designed to explore factors that affect the job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers. As responses were obtained, I used the techniques of open coding and horizontalization to begin the analysis process. By open coding the data, I created categories and through horizontalization, viewed all data as being equally important to

the study outcomes. Following, I began axial coding the categorized data, and conducted a constant comparative analysis. By comparing the outcomes of this study to similar studies, I was able to support my findings within the existing literature.

Among the participants' responses, I identified five themes that were related to Research Question 1. By order of significance, the themes were: work-life balance, isolation and belonging, flexibility, resource efficiency, and trust and respect. According to the majority of participants, the ability to work and fulfill personal obligations was the most important factor associated with job satisfaction. Following, some of the participants described virtual work as being socially isolating. Having the flexibility to set one's schedule according to their lifestyle along with saving time and money were other critical factors. Lastly, the participants expressed that trust and respect were factors that affect the job satisfaction of virtual workers.

In response to Research Question 2, the participants indicated three themes that affect work outcomes of virtual workers. By order of significance, the themes were: training and technological support, communication, and workplace distractions. With virtual work being conducted through technology, participants presented a reasonable argument regarding the benefits of training and technological support. Finally, communication and workplace distractions were other factors that affect work outcomes of virtual workers. In Chapter 5, I interpret the study outcomes, discuss the limitations of the study, recommend ideas for future research, suggest implications for practice and society, and support the conclusion of the study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of virtual workers. By taking a qualitative phenomenological approach, I was able to resolve the following research problem. In reviewing the literature directed toward understanding the virtual workplace, I found a limited amount of documented information regarding factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers. This presented a real-world problem within the virtual workplace because without adequate information, the ability to successfully manage and lead virtual workers may be compromised (Maher & Bedawy, 2015). By conducting a qualitative study, the participants openly described their experiences and perceptions, which resulted in rich, meaningful data. In this chapter, I include an interpretation of the findings, a review of the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, implications for practice and society, and a conclusion.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

RQ1: What are the factors, derived from lived experiences that affect the job satisfaction of virtual workers?

RQ2: What are the factors, derived from lived experiences that affect the work outcomes of virtual workers?

From these two overarching questions, I created an online questionnaire that consisted primarily of 16 semistructured questions. The questionnaire was hosted by Survey Planet, which is an online research tool. To answer the research questions, I purposefully



selected 26 participants from the population of virtual workers who met the study criteria. After analyzing the data obtained from the participants' responses, I identified five themes that addressed Research Question 1 and three themes that addressed Research Question 2. As the participants openly discussed their experiences and perceptions of virtual work, I was able to add to the limited amount of qualitative studies directed toward understanding the virtual workplace by exploring lived experiences. Within the upcoming sections of this chapter, I explain my interpretation of the data and how the outcomes of this study relate or extend previously conducted studies.

### **Work and Life Balance**

Based on the participants' responses, I defined work and life balance as the ability to accomplish work outcomes, spend time with family, and stop working in a reasonable time frame. Consistent with the literature, the majority of the participants explained that being able to balance work and personal obligations was a critical factor that affected job satisfaction. While the ability to work from home provided an opportunity to better manage childcare and set one's own schedule, the participants expressed an overwhelming concern about not being able to stop working.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Kossek (2016) studied how people define work-life boundaries while working and living in a digital age. Kossek argued that while technology has mobilized work and society, there is a greater opportunity for blurred boundaries between the professional and personal aspects of life. Kossek found that although organizations are offering flexible work arrangements, some virtual workers feel obligated to work unusual hours and have less autonomy than expected. While the

participants' responses to the current research questions do not represent all virtual workers, I questioned whether the pressure of constant accessibility was based on the virtual workers' perception or a direct order from management. This argument was evident among the data as only a few participants mentioned pressure from their organization to work unrealistic hours. Future researchers could extend this study by exploring how virtual workers feel about accessibility, boundary control, and whether there is a realistic need to compensate for being able to work from home.

### **Isolation and Belonging**

I considered Bartel et al.'s (2012) study of the relationship between physical isolation, respect, and organizational identity as a cornerstone for this study. As evident throughout this study, I turned to the research of Bartel et al. to gain a better understanding of the benefits and challenges associated with the virtual workplace. According to Bartel et al., the job satisfaction and motivation of virtual workers can be greatly affected if the worker does not feel connected to the organization. This supports the outcomes of this study as 35% of the participants mentioned feeling isolated and lonely at times. On the other hand, as Fonner and Roloff (2010, 2012) argued, other participants referred to the peacefulness of virtual work as being a boundary that allowed them to work without being interrupted by unnecessary distractions. By performing a constant comparison during the analysis process, I concluded that data from this study add to the credibility of Wang and Haggerty's (2011) assessment of individual virtual competencies.

Seeing the rapid trend toward virtualization, Wang and Haggerty (2011) noted that most research was conducted at the organizational or technological level. Like myself, Wang and Haggerty found that few qualitative studies have been directed toward understanding the most critical element of successful virtual work arrangements: the individual virtual worker. As reflected in Chapter 2, virtual work is not for the masses, but managers can reference studies such as this to lessen the threat of virtual workplace isolation and foster a sense of belonging. Future researchers may consider adding to the literature by studying the relationship between individual virtual competencies and workplace isolation.

### **Flexibility**

For this study, at least nine of the participants claimed that flexibility was a contributing factor to their job satisfaction. In Chapter 2, I referenced Anderson et al.'s (2014) conclusion that virtual workers gravitate toward opportunities where they have autonomous freedom when given the flexibility to control their schedule, make decisions, organize and prioritize tasks, and assume responsibility for work outcomes. However, the data from this study and studies referenced in Chapter 2 showed that some virtual workers find it difficult to remain focused and manage time wisely.

Although the ability to adjust one's schedule to accommodate work and personal obligations is an appealing benefit of the virtual workplace, Kossek (2016) argued that virtual workers may not have as much autonomy as expected. However, Purvanova (2014) pointed out that much depends on the individual worker's ability to manage time and remain focused on job responsibilities. Purvanova continued by describing the virtual

workplace as being well suited for individuals with a high level of self-efficacy. By working autonomously, some virtual workers may experience a high level of job satisfaction because they have the autonomy to engage in critical thinking, solve problems, and strengthen virtual competencies. Future researchers could build upon existing literature by exploring the benefits and challenges of flexible work arrangements.

### **Resource Efficiency**

The ability to save time and resources has been a consistent theme associated with the virtual workplace. Organizations consider virtual work arrangements as an effective means of achieving more with fewer resources. Noted in Chapter 2, Maher and Bedawy (2015) studied the virtual workplace and suggested that virtual work arrangements are good for the environment, organizations, and society. Although organizations are often highlighted as the beneficiary of virtual work arrangements, the individual worker stands to benefit as well. For this study, at least seven participants maintained that being able to save commute time and money on clothes, fuel, car repairs, and childcare contributed heavily to their job satisfaction.

While resource efficiency is often associated with saving money and time, I was able to explore another efficiency that could be significant for future research. During the search for supporting literature, I found Linden's (2014) study of how virtual work affects people with disabilities. This article opened my thoughts to an opportunity to support the most priceless resource—*human beings*. As I reviewed the data from my study, I found that at least one participant had suffered from a traumatic injury and was no longer able to operate a vehicle. Another participant suffered from severe anxiety and

could not work in a collocated environment. By offering virtual work arrangements, both of these individuals were able to provide for their families and contribute to society.

In line with the results of my study, Linden (2014) found that virtual work is conducive for individuals with physical, sensory, or cognitive disabilities because the need to commute to a physical location is mitigated. Linden emphasized that virtual work benefits disabled individuals who need consistent access to medical supplies. The ability to work from home can minimize barriers caused by pain-related issues and allow disabled individuals to have gainful employment. Therefore, the theme of resource efficiency is a significant contributor to job satisfaction. Moreover, future researchers could take a multifaceted approach to exploring the intrinsic benefits of virtual work.

### **Trust and Respect**

The perception of being trusted and respected by managers and coworkers appeared to be an important theme that affected the participants' job satisfaction. Within the literature, researchers concluded that managerial support, respect, and trust is often met with a high level of job satisfaction and performance because the worker feels empowered as a valued member of the organization (Jerome, 2013; Pomirleanu & Mariadoss, 2015). In reference to the conceptual framework of this study, the principles of Maslow (1943) are consistent with the participants' discussion of trust and respect.

In a prior study, Bartel et al. (2012) posited that workers tend to gauge their ability to identify with an organization on the basis of the level of perceived respect. Kossek (2016) explained that when virtual workers feel trusted, their desire to share knowledge and contribute at a high level is increased. Therefore, as the workplace

continues to evolve, researchers could engage in the study of how organizations go about establishing trust with workers that are often unseen. The outcomes of such studies could be referenced during managerial training sessions.

### **Training and Technological Support**

In response to Research Question 2, the participants expressed that training and technological support was a significant theme that affected work outcomes. Aligning with the literature, half of the participants went into detail to explain the importance of being trained on programs and software that are essential for completing job responsibilities. The participants further explained that being able to connect with technical support when needed was a critical element that affected their work outcomes.

Interestingly, only two participants discussed their personal contingency plan should computer issues occur. The ability to solve problems proactively and work through challenging issues are traits generally associated with self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) theorized that individuals develop self-efficacy through experiencing the world and observing others. For virtual workers, the ability to work through issues and solve problems appears to be an essential trait as access to face-to-face training and readily available technical support may be limited.

When analyzing the data, the participants presented a wide variety of programs used to accomplish work outcomes. The ability to learn and adapt to new technologies aligns with Wan et al.'s (2015) suggestion for organizations to place an emphasis on the following individual virtual competencies: virtual self-efficacy, virtual media skills, and virtual social skills.

Wang and Haggerty (2011) defined virtual self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their ability to solve complex problems. Within the virtual workplace, self-efficacy takes on a new dimension and often exhibited when an individual is challenged to proficiently use technology to complete job responsibilities. Virtual media skills are exemplified as an individual moves toward learning and utilizing technology to accomplish work outcomes. Virtual social skills are contingent on more than sending e-mails and instant messaging. In a virtual work setting, individuals must be socially equipped to detect emotion and build relationships without the benefit of face-to-face communication. As the world moves closer to virtualization, researchers could study how training, technological support, and individual virtual competencies relate to virtual work outcomes.

### **Communication**

Almost half of the participants established communication as a factor that affects the work outcomes of virtual workers. Based on the findings in literature, there are more communication tools than ever before, yet managers and workers may struggle to communicate clearly. Moser and Axtell (2015) surmised that even with options such as Google Hangout, AnyMeeting, and GoToMeeting, some managers and workers have found that nothing takes the place of face-to-face interaction.

While personal communication may be preferred, Wang and Haggerty (2011) found that individuals with well-developed virtual social skills are most likely to experience job satisfaction and achieve work outcomes. Soni (2013) arrived at a similar conclusion and suggested that as more organizations implement technology and virtual

work arrangements, there will be a greater need to engage employees through communication efforts. Belle et al. (2015) recognized the challenges of establishing organizational belonging among virtual workers and noted the integral relationship with engagement, productivity, and performance. Glikson and Erez (2013) studied social norms in virtual work and encouraged managers to consider the effect of computerized communication on the ability of workers to interpret and demonstrate emotion.

In review of the responses, the participants were most concerned with the manager's ability to communicate expectations and establish deadlines. As the majority of participants had five years or more virtual work experience, they did not appear to be intimidated by new technologies. Their only apprehension was the inability to communicate with managers or receive adequate training and technological support as needed. According to Chen et al.'s (2012) research, managers should give careful consideration to the level of communication exchanges that occur within virtual teams. Chen et al. (2012) argued that clear communication is essential for motivating virtual workers to share knowledge and ask for information.

### **Workplace Distractions**

Individuals may envision the virtual workplace as a place of solitude without the daily interruptions of office chatter and unnecessary meetings. However, aligning with Van Yperen et al.'s (2014) study outcomes, at least 31% of the study participants claimed that the virtual workplace is plagued with disruptions of a different nature. Some of the participants described disruptions as being family conversations, outside noises such as dogs barking, neighbors or friends dropping by to chat, or the draw of household chores.



To combat distractions and interruptions, most of the participants emphasized self-discipline as an important factor that affects work outcomes. Aligning with Fonner and Roloff (2010, 2012) some virtual workers claimed working alone allowed them to focus on job responsibilities because interruptions were minimized. Wheatley's (2012) study outcomes align with the findings of this study, as participants listed fewer distractions as one of the primary reasons they enjoyed working virtually. In conclusion, Bloom et al.'s (2013) study of how a large Chinese firm adapted to virtual work resulted in study participants wanting to continue virtual work arrangements because they felt empowered and preferred a home based environment as opposed to being subjected to noisy office distractions. Researchers could continue to study and compare the distractions of the virtual workplace as opposed to collocated environments. The results of such studies could be used to encourage positive work outcomes.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Prior to conducting this study, I acknowledged the following limitations: a relatively small sample size which resulted in 90% of the participants being women, the participants' geographical location, limited time and financial resources, the inability to host face to face interviews, my own bias, ensuring the feasibility of the study, and the subjectivity of conducting a qualitative phenomenological study. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study outcomes, I took every opportunity to acknowledge and address each limitation and in doing so, I expect the outcomes of this study to be credible, transferable to the virtual workplace, dependable, and confirmable. Within the following content, I explained my approach for addressing each limitation.

First, I originally proposed to conduct the study among 20 participants. However, after receiving referrals from organizational leaders and volunteers from social media, I was able to extend the sample size to 26 participants. With more participants, I was able to conduct the study among a sample that held virtual positions among a variety of industries and had obtained different levels of education. Although I appreciated the diversity in relation to industry and education, I noted the limitation of obtaining only a few male participants. While I did not intend for this study to be gender specific, I acknowledged the limitation that resulted from 90% of the study participants being women. As reaching data saturation was my ultimate goal, I maintained that regardless of the participants' gender, I would obtain enough data to yield a cluster of underlying meanings, themes, and patterns (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Gergen, 2014). This assessment was correct as I reached data saturation early in the analysis process. However, I chose to analyze all 26 data sets to mitigate the possibility of overlooking critical information.

The participants' geographical location posed another limitation. With time and financial resources being limited, I requested referrals and volunteers from the population of virtual workers. Therefore, I was not in control of where the participants lived and was not able to conduct face-to-face interviews. To overcome the limitation of time, financial resources, and geography, I chose an online questionnaire as the research instrument. At first, using the online questionnaire compounded the limitation as research through electronic media has been sharply criticized (Bampton et al., 2013; Cope, 2014). However, after reviewing the depth and meaningfulness of the data, I realized that geographical proximity did not limit the participants' ability and willingness to openly

discuss their experiences and express their opinions. As argued by Bampton et al. (2013), using an online questionnaire was an excellent decision for this study as the majority of participants went into great detail. Based on my observations, this limitation was mitigated by allowing the participants to choose the research setting and a convenient time to answer the research questions.

My own bias was another critical limitation that could have limited the trustworthiness of this study (Elo et al., 2014). To address this concern, I followed Berger's (2013) example and practiced reflexivity throughout the study process. Reflexivity is often used when the researcher has a personal interest in the research problem (Berger, 2013; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; Padilla-Diaz, 2015; Zitomer & Goodwin, 2014). To promote transparency, I maintained an audit trail which resulted in a visual representation of each step taken to arrive at the study outcomes (Appendix B). To further establish the feasibility and trustworthiness of the study, I conducted a pilot study among three participants (Orsmond & Cohn, 2015). With their assistance, I was able to narrow the focus of the research questions and ensure the research problem was thoroughly addressed.

Finally, I addressed the limitation of conducting a qualitative phenomenological study. According to the literature, researchers have debated the rigor and subjectivity of qualitative research (Cope, 2014; Gergen, 2014). This debate is justifiable because qualitative research does not produce solid facts as with quantitative studies (Anderson, 2010; Ramadhan, 2015). However, as with this study, researchers may chose a qualitative phenomenological approach when seeking to understand and explain experiences,

perceptions, ideas, and opinions (Ramadhan, 2015). For this study, I decided that a qualitative phenomenological approach was appropriate for addressing the research problem. I further addressed this limitation as the data were coded. First, I open coded the data and practiced the technique of horizontalization to ensure all data was viewed as being equal. Following, I used axial coding to allow themes to emerge naturally. Finally, as suggested by Fram (2013) and Levasseur (2011), I conducted a constant comparative analysis by comparing the participants' responses and referencing previously conducted qualitative studies.

### **Recommendations**

Through this study, I added to the limited amount of documented information directed toward exploring factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers. Although the data obtained from 26 purposefully selected participants addressed the research problem, I considered how researchers could build upon the study outcomes. A recommendation would be for researchers to address the research problem by conducting face to face interviews as opposed to an online questionnaire. Researchers could also follow Gibson and Webb's (2012) suggestion of applying a grounded theory design to better understand how virtual workers interpret their experiences. Gibson and Webb (2012) explained the relationship of virtual work and human reaction presents a unique research opportunity as more organizations are implementing virtual work arrangements. A consideration would be for researchers to further explore the trustworthiness of the five themes considered to affect job satisfaction and the three themes considered to affect work outcomes of virtual workers.

Additionally, researchers could extend the outcomes of the study to better understand the individual virtual worker. For example, consistent with Kossek (2016), the majority of participants found it challenging to balance work and life. With most of the work being conducted at home, the participants described feeling obligated to work unusually long hours. However, few participants expressed a sense of pressure from the organization. Instead, the pressure appeared to come from within the individual worker as some participants experienced the need to compensate for being able to work at home. Future researchers could extend this study by exploring how virtual workers and managers feel about accessibility and boundary control.

Another recommendation would be to contribute the gap in literature regarding individual virtual competencies, workplace isolation, and the sense of belonging (Bartel et al., 2012; Wan et al., 2015; Wang & Haggerty, 2011). With technology being the primary tool for virtual work environments, researchers could explore how the attainment of technological skills affects the virtual worker's sense of belonging. With more organizations offering virtual work arrangements, this could be a critical topic that affects work outcome and the willingness of virtual workers to share knowledge and engage with other workers. This study could also prompt more research on the advantages and disadvantages of flexible work arrangements.

As the majority of participants had worked at least 5 years in a virtual capacity, it would be interesting to explore how newly hired virtual workers adapt to autonomous work environments. Additionally, researchers could broaden the scope of the current study by equally diversifying the gender of the participants. As highlighted, the fact that

90% of the current sample size was women posed a significant limitation to the outcomes of this study. For example, most of the study participants were women who highlighted the flexibility to offer accessible childcare and complete household chores as being important factors that affected their job satisfaction. On the other hand, the men emphasized how feeling trusted and respected as a professional in the workplace affected their job satisfaction and work outcomes. By taking a quantitative approach, researchers could extend the current study by distinguishing the level of importance women and men place on factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers. Researchers could also gain a better understanding of how flexible work arrangements relate to the fulfillment of work and personal achievement.

As a critical contribution to society, researchers could extend Linden's (2014) study of organizations that offer virtual work opportunities to individuals with disabilities. In reviewing the data from this study, most of the participants emphasized how the ability to save time and money affected their job satisfaction. However, at least two of the participants shared how medical issues had prohibited them from operating a vehicle and working in a collocated environment. By considering virtual work arrangements, these individuals were able to work and contribute to their family and society. This discussion opens the opportunity for qualitative and quantitative studies that explore the virtual workplace performance and job satisfaction of disabled individuals.

In regard to work outcomes, the themes of training and technological support, communication, and workplace distractions were prevalent. As highlighted by Wan et al. (2015), organizations should place a high emphasis on training and measuring individual

virtual competencies. This could be a significant topic for continued research because even with today's technological advancements, some individuals lack proficiency in computer program and software specific job responsibilities. Researchers could also build on the outcomes of this study by studying the relationship between communication exchange and knowledge sharing. As noted in prior studies, successful virtual workplace communication involves far more than reading e-mails. Workers must be able to detect and interpret emotion (Bampton et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2012; Wang & Haggerty, 2011). Wang and Haggerty (2011) suggested that by basing the conceptual framework of such studies on the principles of social cognitive theory, researchers could explore how the development of virtual competencies affects the ability to adapt to changing environments.

Finally, researchers could study the relationship between workplace distractions and virtual work outcomes. In reviewing the literature and the outcomes of this study some virtual workers find the autonomy of virtual work to be a distraction. Although, different from the traditional office setting, the participants mentioned struggling with distractions such as family conversation, outside noises such as dogs barking, and household chores. For others, being able to work virtually served as a boundary that separated them from noise and office interruptions. As the results from this study align with Van Yperen et al.'s (2014) conclusion, it is recommended that researcher direct studies toward understand the variables that distract virtual workers and explore opportunities of intervention.

## **Implications**

To address a real world problem that existed within the virtual workplace, I chose to take a qualitative phenomenological approach. By exploring data obtained from 26 participants, I added to the existing literature and presented the following implications for the field of management and society. As I chose to use an online questionnaire, the study participants openly reflected on their virtual work experience by providing meaningful data. Among the data, I identified five themes that affect job satisfaction of virtual workers as being work and life balance, isolation and belonging, flexibility, resource efficiency, and trust and respect. Additionally, I found three consistent themes that affect the work outcomes of virtual workers as being training and technological support, communication, and workplace distractions. Although the sample size does not represent all virtual workers and the outcomes are not transferable to all workplace environments, the data obtained from this study aligns with the outcomes of prior studies discussed in Chapter 2. Managers could use this information to better understand the dynamic nature of the virtual workplace and may consider collecting data among their own virtual workers to determine areas of opportunity.

From a theoretical viewpoint, I explained how the principles of Bandura (1977) and Maslow (1943) were referenced as the conceptual framework for this study. Among the responses, the participants explained described how their level of self-efficacy and motivation contributed to their job satisfaction and work outcomes. Aligning with Bandura (1977), the majority of participants expressed confidence in their ability to accomplish work outcomes by solving problems, applying their creative skills, and



adjusting their schedule to accommodate work and life obligations. Consistent with Maslow (1943) most of the participants considered virtual work to be fulfilling and were motivated by the ability to balance work and life. Other strong motivators were being trusted as a valuable member of the organization, open communication, and accessibility to managers and technological support.

In Chapter 1, I addressed the significance of this study to practice, theory, and society. By following the data collection and analysis strategy presented in Chapter 4, I was able to obtain and interpret the study participants' responses and provide information that may be useful to managers seeking to improve virtual worker hiring processes, enhance training and technological support, and evaluate the importance of individual virtual competencies. In agreement with Jerome (2013), I highlighted the relevance of Bandura's self-efficacy theory and Maslow's needs theory to the modern workplace. As work becomes more geographically dispersed, there will be a greater need for managers to study performance and motivational based theories.

Through this study, I noted significant implications for society, as many people consider work and life to be synonymous; I found that virtual workers could reference the study outcomes to determine if a virtual work environment is conducive to their needs. Society can also benefit from the study outcomes as the participants highlighted that virtual work arrangements are good for the environment and saves natural resources, time, and money for both workers. Moreover, by working virtually, the majority of participants enjoyed a healthy work and life balance.

Finally, I made another contribution to society by obtaining data that supports the alignment of virtual work arrangements with the needs of disabled individuals. In accordance with Linden's (2014) research, organizations could extend virtual work opportunities to individuals with disabilities. This not only provides another talent pool but allows some disabled workers an opportunity to be self-sufficient and contribute to society. In addition to addressing the research problem, I am confident that future researchers can build upon the study outcomes by continuing to explore the dynamic nature of the virtual workplace.

### **Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of virtual workers. By taking a qualitative phenomenological approach, I addressed a real world problem within the virtual workplace. I found that although researchers have studied the virtual workplace for over 30 years, there was limited documented information regarding factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers. This presented a problem as the ability to successfully manage and lead virtual workers may be compromised (Bartel et al., 2012; Bentley et al., 2016; Davis & Cates, 2013; Greer & Payne, 2014; Maher & Bedawy, 2015; Moriarty, 2014; Smith et al., 2015). I maintained that organizations risk a decline in productivity and sustainability if this problem was not resolved (Allen et al., 2015; Bartel et al., 2012; Bentley et al., 2016; Dahlstrom, 2013; Davis & Cates, 2013).

In review of the study outcomes, five themes emerged that are considered to affect job satisfaction and three themes were significant to work outcomes of virtual

workers. While I was able to resolve the research problem by adding to existing literature, I noted several ideas for future research. First researchers could study the research problem by using a different methodology and design. Additionally, researchers could conduct the study among an equally diversified sample size of men and women. As noted within this chapter, the majority of the current study participants were women. By purposefully selecting an equal number of men and women, researchers could take a quantitative approach to distinguish the significance placed on the current emerging themes considered to affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers. Furthermore, researchers could direct studies toward understanding how virtual workers and managers feel about accessibility and boundary control. The developmental process of individual virtual competencies is another consideration for future research. Although technology continues to evolve, some researchers have questioned if the competencies of workers and managers has developed accordingly (Wan et al., 2015).

Although the virtual workplace continues to take shape, according to the data obtained from this study, a gap remains within the realm of mitigating virtual workplace isolation and instilling a sense of belonging for virtual workers. Researchers could conduct follow-up studies that address training and technological support, communication in the virtual workplace, and the effect of workplace distractions on work outcomes. As pairing virtual work and disabled individuals was not an overarching theme derived from this study, the topic is worthy of mention. From the data, at least two participants described their experience with medical issues that prevented them from commuting to a collocated environment. With virtual work arrangements as an option,

they were able to obtain gainful employment and make a contribution to society.

Researchers could certainly extend the awareness of this opportunity by performing studies among organization that have embraced this concept.

In conclusion, the study outcomes drew attention to the most valuable asset of organization and society—*the individual worker*. While most studies have been conducted at the organizational or technological level, I chose to explore the lived experiences of virtual workers. In comparison to existing literature, several of the themes aligned with the outcomes of previous studies. However, ideas emerged that could be used to explain factors that affect job satisfaction and work outcomes of virtual workers and extend the study of the modern workplace.

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## Appendix A: Questionnaire

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your ethnic background?
4. What is your highest level of education?
5. Do you have at least 13 months of virtual work experience that has taken place within the past 5 years?
6. How long have you worked or did you work in a virtual capacity?
7. Are you currently employed as a virtual worker?
8. If your response to question “7” was “yes”, what industry sector (s) do you perform virtual job responsibilities in? If your response to question “7” was “no”, what industry sector (s) did you perform virtual job responsibilities in?
9. What type of job do you perform or did you perform as a virtual worker?
10. Where do you or did you perform the majority of your virtual job responsibilities? At home, on the road, or some other location?
11. How many days per week do you or did you work in a virtual capacity?
12. Based on your lived experiences as a virtual worker, what factors affect or have affected your job satisfaction and work outcomes? Please explain your answer.
13. Please describe your knowledge, skills, and abilities to communicate, socialize, and complete virtual job responsibilities through the use of

technology. Please explain how these factors affect or have affected your job satisfaction and work outcomes.

14. Please describe your level of self-efficacy (confidence in your abilities) and how this affects or has affected your job satisfaction and work outcomes as a virtual worker.

15. As a human being, does working in a virtual capacity contribute to the fulfillment of your needs (food, shelter, security, sense of belonging, achievement, creativity, and autonomy)? Please explain how this affects or has affected your job satisfaction and work outcomes.

16. Although it is not required, feel free to provide any information that will help others understand the benefits and challenges of virtual work.

## Appendix B: Audit Trail

The purpose of this audit trail is to present a documented list of the steps that will be taken during the data collection, data management, and data analysis process. Each step will be followed to justify my choice of the research methodology and design. Moreover, by using this audit trail, there is a higher likelihood of ensuring the trustworthiness of the study outcomes.

### Reflexivity

Bracket any preconceived bias and notions that I have regarding the phenomenon and expected study outcomes. Reflexivity will be practiced throughout the study process.

### Pilot Study Data Collection

- A. Upon IRB approval, I obtained referrals and volunteers for the study.
- B. I conducted a pilot study with three participants by following the same research plan as intended for the main study participants.
  - a. Emailed “request for participation” and letter of informed consent.
  - b. Retrieved emailed responses with “I consent” in the body of the email.
- C. The pilot study participants answered the research questions and made suggestions to improve the study.
- D. I reviewed the pilot study suggestions and made changes accordingly.
- E. I conducted member checking in regard to Interview Question 15.
- F. After clarifying the pilot study participant’s intention, I agreed the change was necessary and made the suggested change.

### Main Study Data Collection

- A. As with the pilot study, I obtained referrals and volunteers for participation.
- B. The original proposal stated 20 participants. I obtained 26 referrals and volunteers and allowed all of them to participate in the study.

- C. Emailed a “request for participation” and attached the Letter of Informed Consent. The email included a link to online questionnaire created by using Survey Planet. Asked participants to respond with the text “I consent” in the body of the email.
- D. Received response emails with “I consent” in the body of the email.
- E. Checked Survey Planet daily to retrieve participant responses.
- F. Exported each participant's responses to a Microsoft Word document. Assigned each participant's document a code. Saved an electronic copy to external hard drive. Printed a copy of the responses for highlighting and coding.
- G. Ensured the electronic data was stored in a password protected folder and the printed data was stored in a locked file cabinet.

#### Data Management

- A. Reviewed each printed copy of the participants' responses. Highlighted categories and themes that stood out immediately.
- B. Reserved member checking if clarification of the participants' responses was needed. I did not have to use this technique.
- C. Began open coding the data and using horizontalization to establish equality among the data.
- D. Followed with axial coding to identify themes and patterns among the data.
- E. Performed a constant comparative analysis by comparing each participant's responses and by referring to existing literature.

#### Data Analysis

- A. Analyzed the participants' responses based on the research questions.
- B. Documented any concepts or ideas for future research. There were four uncommon ideas that were mentioned.



- C. Conducted a final review of the coded data to ensure all themes and patterns were identified.
- D. Created tables to visually represent the data.
  - a. One table listed each theme and the definition.
  - b. One table listed the number and percentage of participants that mentioned the theme and the number of quotes that occurred.
  - c. Created individual tables for each theme and included the tables within the study results.
- E. Presented study outcomes and made recommendations for future research
- F. Sent each participant a \$5.00 Starbucks card and will send each participant an electronic copy of the final approved research study.

## Appendix C: E-mail to Participants Requesting Participation in the Study

Dear Prospective Research Participant:

My name is Regina M. Willis, and I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University. As I complete the degree requirements of a PhD in Management, I will be conducting a research study on the topic of virtual work. The purpose of this study is to address the problem by exploring the lived experiences of individual virtual workers.

In order to participate in the pilot study, you must meet the following eligibility requirements: be at least 18 years old and have a minimum of 13 months of virtual work experience that has occurred within the past five years. Please know that your participation is voluntary and will consist of answering a questionnaire hosted online by Survey Planet and you may withdraw at any time without penalty or negative repercussions.

To help you make an informed decision regarding your participation, a “Letter of Informed Consent” has been included with this email. Should you decide to participate, please respond to this email with the text “I consent” in the body of your email. Upon receiving your consenting email, I will promptly send a link to the online questionnaire. As outlined in the Letter of Informed Consent, your participation in this study is confidential and your contact information will not be shared. All data will be stored in a password protected folder on my personal computer and all printed data will be stored in a locked file cabinet. All data associated with this study will be permanently deleted after 5 years.

For your convenience, I have provided my contact information below and will be happy to answer any questions. You may also contact Dr. David Gould, who serves as my committee chair, by emailing him. If you want to speak privately about your rights as a participant, you may contact Leilani Endicott. She is a representative of Walden University and can be reached via email at [IRB@waldenu.edu](mailto:IRB@waldenu.edu). In closing, I would like to thank you for considering to participate in my research study. As a token of my appreciation, I would like to extend a \$5 Starbucks gift card and upon completing the study, I will send you a summary of the study outcomes. Again, should you decide to participate, simply respond to this email with the text “I consent” in the body of the email and we will begin the research process.

Sincerely,

Regina M. Willis